

Philosophy 408-02
Topics in Theory of Knowledge (Seminar):
Orality, Literacy, and Communications

Xavier University, Spring 2012
MWF 12:30-1:20, Schott 1010

Course wiki: <https://philosophycommunication.wikispaces.com>

Prof. Richard Polt
Hinkle Hall 238
745-3274
polt@xavier.edu
office hours: MWF 10-12 and by appointment

Since Plato, philosophers, historians, and media theorists have reflected on how the ways we communicate may affect our ways of thinking and the meaning of what we communicate. This course will explore these issues both theoretically and experientially. We will look closely at the differences between oral and written language and culture, and then consider some landmarks in the accelerating series of communication revolutions in the modern world, including printing, typewriters, audiovisual recording, radio, television, and digital communication.

Required texts

Plato, *Phaedrus* (Hackett)
Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago)
Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge)
Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto)
Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford)
Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (Norton)

Further readings will be distributed in class.

Elements of your grade

Three oral presentations (7% each = 21% of course grade)

Each oral presentation should take about 5 minutes (= 2-3 double-spaced pages) to review our recent work in the seminar, summarize the main ideas in the new material for the day, and propose some questions for discussion. Within 24 hours of your presentation, you should add a (possibly revised) version of your summary of the new material to our wiki; this is a required part of the assignment. You will be able to sign up for these presentations early in the semester.

Four communications exercises (5% each = 20% of course grade)

Complete at least four of the following exercises. (You may do a fifth for class participation.) Afterwards, write about 1-2 double-spaced pages (handwritten, typewritten, or word-processed) reflecting on your experience. Did the experience differ from your norm? Did it affect the content of what you said or thought?

1. Memorize about half a page from a reading you are discussing in an oral presentation and recite it before your presentation, without consulting notes
2. Mail a handwritten letter to a friend or family member
3. Write at least the final version of a presentation on a typewriter (you can borrow one from me)
4. Practice “digital sabbath” for at least 24 hours (no use of computers, smartphones, iPods, etc.)
5. Create a new page for our wiki on any relevant topic (not based on one of your oral presentations); it should consist of several paragraphs, including appropriate links to other pages

Term paper (25%)

A paper of 10-15 pages that explores a question raised in our readings.

Final exam (14%)

A short essay on a question involving more than one text. You may consult books and notes during the exam.

Class participation (20%)

Speaking in class, office visits, e-mails, and other evidence of engagement. This must include a good number of improvements to our wiki (corrections, clarifications, expansions, new links, etc.). Our common goal is that, by the end of the term, the wiki should reflect the most important facts, concepts, and issues we have explored over the course of the semester. I will be able to review all the contributions you have made to the site.

Calculating your grade

I give each element a letter grade, then convert it to a number on a 4-point scale (like the scale for your GPA), with pluses and minuses counting as 0.33 point. I multiply this number by the percentage the element is worth, and add all the results to get your raw grade. This raw grade is adjusted to account for absences and then rounded to the nearest letter grade to yield the course grade. For example:

Presentation 1	A	$4.00 \times 7\% =$	0.28
Presentation 2	B	$3.00 \times 7\% =$	0.21
Presentation 3	C	$2.00 \times 7\% =$	0.14
Exercise 1	A-	$3.67 \times 5\% =$	0.1835
Exercise 2	C+	$2.33 \times 5\% =$	0.1165
Exercise 3	B+	$3.33 \times 5\% =$	0.1665
Exercise 4	B	$3.00 \times 5\% =$	0.15
Term paper	B	$3.00 \times 25\% =$	0.75
Final exam	A –	$3.67 \times 14\% =$	0.5138
Participation	B	$3.00 \times 20\% =$	0.6
Raw grade			3.1103
3 absences with no makeup work			-0.3
Course grade			2.8103 = B–

Policies

Absence policy: I do not usually take roll, but I will usually notice if you are absent. You may miss a class for any reason—you do not need an excuse—but you are expected to turn in makeup work when you return. The makeup work is at least one page that summarizes the reading for the class you missed and states your own reactions to the reading. Getting someone else's class notes is a good idea, but copying them and turning them in as makeup work is not acceptable. If no reading was assigned for the day you missed, write a page of thoughts on our recent readings and discussions. If you do not turn in acceptable makeup work promptly, I may subtract up to 0.1 grade point from your course grade for each day you missed. Anyone who misses more than 6 classes may fail the course, even if makeup work is turned in.

Late assignments will be penalized by up to one letter grade for each day they are late. Extensions should be requested well in advance of the due date.

Assignments may be rewritten. A rewrite will not change your grade on an assignment, but it will count as class participation. If you rewrite an assignment, turn in the new version along with the original and my original comments. Rewrites may be turned in as late as the day of the final exam.

Plagiarism is using someone else's words or ideas, even if you rephrase them, without giving credit to the source (such as a Web site, book, article, or another student's writing). Whenever you use sources other than the assigned texts, you must cite them in footnotes or by some other standard method. To learn more, visit www.xu.edu/library/xututor/plagiarism. Any plagiarism will result in an F for the course, and your dean will be notified of the incident.

All course requirements must be completed in order to pass the course.

Schedule

Jan. 9	M	Introduction to the course
<i>Plato: Rhetoric, Writing, Love</i>		
Jan. 11	W	Dueling speeches: for today, read Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> , 227a-242b (pp. 1-24) Sign up for presentations
Jan. 13	F	Socrates' second speech: Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> , 242c-257b (24-49)
Jan. 16	M	No class—Martin Luther King Day
Jan. 18	W	Rhetoric: Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> , 257c-274b (49-77)
Jan. 20	F	Writing: Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> , 274b-end (78-86)
Jan. 23	M	Plato as writer: <i>Seventh Letter</i> Before our meeting today, please take some time to review our wiki so far and contribute to it. You should also plan to do one of the communications exercises soon.
<i>Derrida: Against the Hegemony of Speech</i>		
Jan. 25	W	Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in <i>Dissemination</i> , pp. 63-75
Jan. 27	F	Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 75-94
Jan. 30	M	Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 95-119
Feb. 1	W	Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 120-142
Feb. 3	F	Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 142-171
<i>Ong: Orality and Literacy</i>		
Feb. 6	M	Oral culture: Ong, Introduction and chaps. 1-2 (pp. 1-30)
Feb. 8	W	Psychodynamics of orality: Ong, chap. 3 (pp. 31-76)
Feb. 10	F	The literate psyche: Ong, chap. 4 (pp. 77-114)
Feb. 13	M	Printed writing: Ong, chap. 5 (pp. 115-135) Have you contributed to our wiki recently?
Feb. 15	W	Oral narrative: Ong, chap. 6 (pp. 136-152)
Feb. 17	F	Ong's theorems: Ong, chap. 7 (pp. 153-176)

The printed word

Feb. 20	M	Handwritten and printed texts: From Johannes Trithemius, <i>In Praise of Scribes</i> Video: Edward Tenner, “Handwriting after Gutenberg: John Milton to Steve Jobs” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE0uocHFsb8
Feb. 22	W	McLuhan, <i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> , pp. lxii and 1-61, esp. lxii, 1-11, 21-33, 36-38, 47-51 <i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> is written as a “mosaic” of short chapters heavy on quotations (see pg. lxii, just before Prologue, p. 1). The chapters begin with “glosses” that are printed in large type and listed in an index at the end of the book. Read all the glosses, and read or skim the contents of the chapters as you wish, but pay special attention to the chapters in the pages I mark “esp.”
Feb. 24	F	<i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> , pp. 61-120, esp. 61-4, 81-4, 86-8, 96-103, 112-114
Feb. 27	M	<i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> , pp. 120-180, esp. 126-31, 142-6, 149-54, 161-4, 177-180
Feb. 29	W	<i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> , pp. 180-241, esp. 180-89, 203-5, 217-20, 230-35
March 1	F	<i>The Gutenberg Galaxy</i> , pp. 241-315, esp. 241-2, 263-5, 271-280, 314-15
March 5-9		No class—Spring break

Sound and motion recording

March 12	M	Kittler, <i>Gramophone, Film, Typewriter</i> , Preface and Introduction By now you should have completed at least two communications exercises.
March 14	W	Kittler, “Gramophone” chapter, approx. first half
March 16	F	Kittler, finish “Gramophone” chapter
March 19	M	Kittler, “Film” chapter, approx. first half
March 21	W	Kittler, finish “Film” chapter

The writing machine

March 23	F	Typewriter history; hands-on examples Kittler, “Typewriter” chapter, approx. first half
March 26	M	Kittler, finish “Typewriter” chapter
March 28	W	Darren Wershler-Henry, “Typewriting After the Typewriter,” from <i>The Iron Whim</i>

Broadcasting

- March 30 F McLuhan on “hot” and “cool” media and on radio, from *Understanding Media*
- April 2 M McLuhan on television, from *Understanding Media*
Handout: term paper assignment

Digital communication

- April 4 W Computer history; the concepts of information and cybernetics
From Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*
By now you should have completed 3 or 4 communications exercises.
- April 6 F **No class—Easter holiday**
- April 9 M Word processing
Jennifer Schuessler, “The Muses of Insert, Delete and Execute” (*The New York Times*, Dec. 25, 2011)
From Michael Heim, *Electric Language*
Term paper topic paragraph due.
- April 11 W Fred Woodworth (ed.), *The Match!* issue 100 (Summer 2003)
pp. 17-19 (What’s Happening in Libraries)
pp. 19-22 (Computer & Technology Report)
pp. 70-75 (A Trip to Hell and A Technical Afterword)
plus further material by Woodworth
- April 13 F Carr, *The Shallows*, 1-57
- April 16 M Carr, *The Shallows*, 58-98
- April 18 W Carr, *The Shallows*, 99-148
- April 20 F Carr, *The Shallows*, 149-197
- April 23 M e-books: Lev Grossman, “From Scroll to Screen”
(*The New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2011)
Term paper due. Be prepared to discuss it in class.
- April 25 W Carr, *The Shallows*, 198-228
- April 27 F Course review and evaluations
Today is the last day to turn in communications exercises.
- May 2 W **Final exam**, 1:00-2:50