Three essay assignments

Notes at end give others a rationale or further explanation for essay assignments.

**Essay 1:** **Rhetorical Analysis of One Source**

Analyze Vannevar Bush’s “As We May Think” (1945) from *The Atlantic* in order to make an argument about how the structure of the first half of the essay relates to a larger idea or problem that is posed in the final sections. You should aim to consider the connections or the relationship between the sections, as well as some of the concrete examples the writer refers to, in order to make *your own claim* about how the writer’s decision to structure the essay in this way works to support the writer’s position in the concluding sections.

**Goals:** This essay will ask you to analyze the relationship between choices that a writer makes about structure -- both the individual parts and as a whole -- and how structure relates to a problem that the writer is engaging with. You will think about ways that examples, structure, and concepts are connected. The aim is for you to write an essay with an arguable thesis supported by evidence from the text. Support involves analysis through close reading to find, select, gather, and make use of evidence; making use of evidence includes a combination of summary, paraphrase, incorporating relevant examples or quotations, and your own commentary. It will also give you practice with key terms that will be developed further in the semester.

In this essay you will:

* Practice **close reading**, rereading, and methods of **annotation** that lead to **evidence** in support of a **thesis,** specifically a thesis made as an **argument**.
* Identify a problem by making use of concepts or **keywords** that also relate to a **claim** you make about the **structure** of Bush’s essay.
* Demonstrate **active reading** and **critical engagement** with a text through processes of **selection**, **summary**, **paraphrase**, and **methods of quotation** in your essay.
* Establish a specific problem for the essay in your introduction. Here you will answer the “Why it matters?” question, suggesting why the problem matters for Bush and, possibly, why it might still matter or be relevant for us today?
* Structuring your essay around your central claim, thinking about how the **examples** you select and what you say about them relates to **cohesion** in your own writing.

**Essay 2: Argument Analysis Using Two Sources**

In this essay you will analyze the tension between two articles from *The Atlantic* -- “As We May Think” (1945) by Vannevar Bush and Nicholas Carr’s “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” (2008) -- to develop a cohesive argument around a central concept or problem related to technology and thinking. Carr is writing 63 years after Bush, but both writers discuss thinking as it relates to reading, writing, and making use of information and they do so through the abundant use of supporting examples. Your essay should aim to consider the methods that these two writers employ to structure their ideas around a concept or problem, but you may also additionally explore or refine that concept through reference to relevant personal experience or to one of the shorter readings we have read.

**Goals:** This essay will build upon ideas from the first essay, but it will expand or complicate some of the questions or problems raised by Vannevar Bush by considering at least one other perspective. You will continue to think about rhetorical issues -- especially structure, cohesion, and development -- but this will happen in a more complex way as you work with at least two primary sources. Your essay **must** make focussed reference to a specific concept or concepts from these two writers (Bush *and* Carr), but you may also incorporate, if you would like, reference to your own experience or to one of the previous shorter readings (Linda Stone, for example) in ways that are relevant to your argument.

In this essay you will:

* Build upon the goals from the first assignment, using the **introduction** to identify a specific interpretive or intellectual problem.
* Formulate a strong **claim**, **develop** and maintain coherent **structure** around that claim, and use **evidence** fairly and persuasively.
* **Integrate** your sources with deliberation and purpose. Sources can be used to establish the intellectual conversation, provide **context** or **key terms**, make specific **connections** between different perspectives, respond to and analyze evidence to **support** your claim.
* **Document** sources using proper **in-text citation** methods.
* Have **structure**, **cohesion**, and coherence in your writing on the sentence level, on the paragraph level, and as a whole.
* Attention to the structure of **paragraphs**, including **topic sentences**, ways of working with sources, and **transitions** between sentences and between paragraphs.

**Essay 3: Researched Argument Using Multiple Sources**

In this essay you will research and use a variety of contextual, theoretical, and argument sources to produce an argument that will both build on previous writing activities but also extend into a new topic area of your choice that is related to digital technology and thinking. You will choose an article on a topic (written within the last five years) from the Internet & Technology section on the Pew Research Center website. This will serve as a starting point from which you will develop a research question for further research. (There are many topics on the Pew Research Center site, but you also have the option to propose another topic idea related to digital technology and thinking for approval by instructor.)

**Goals:** This last essay will build upon previous writing strategies -- including making use of sources, finding evidence, and developing a thesis -- but in ways that are more complex through work with multiple kinds of sources. You will practice new research methods. The aim is to first identify a research question or problem (one which may change during the research and writing process) and then develop it in ways that are not simple or reductive. There will be several due dates for individual steps in the process. The goal is to produce a paper that is in conversation with relevant research on your topic.

In this essay, you will:

* Continue to work on goals from the first two assignments, but in more complex ways as you work with multiple sources: use the **introduction** to orient the reader and identify an intellectual **problem** or a **research question**; formulate a **thesis** in the form of a claim, an argument, or a position; **develop** of an idea through cohesive writing and structure; organize **support** of your thesis with forms of **evidence**; find and use a **variety of sources**; integrate, explain, and respond to your sources; offer an informative and relevant **title**.
* Convey the results of your **research process**, as well as demonstrate your understanding and **analysis** of your sources through reading strategies, annotation, and **relevant selection**.
* **Show understanding** of the differences between definition, summary, context, evaluation, explanation, argument, and interpretation.
* **Reflect** on and **complicate** your argument: consider counterevidence, counterarguments, complications, implications, or further questions.
* Produce **organized writing** with **clarity** and proper **documentation** as a result of **revision**.

**Notes:**

**Essay 1 Rationale:** I think that Vannevar Bush’s “As We May Think” (1945), though it is old, raises central questions or problems, including some terms, ideas, and concepts, that carry into the second essay and that can also extend towards final projects (on very different topics) that I imagine students doing research on. I have taught this essay in the past. It is strange in ways that make it obviously dated (especially in the first half), but large parts of it read as remarkably contemporary and students pick up on this connection pretty quickly.

The assignment asks students to analyze rhetorical choices, including why it is organized in the way that is is, how examples used relate to the overall argument or conclusion, and why he might be using some of the words and concepts that he is using, especially towards the beginning and end of the essay. It requires close reading and is built around questions of structure and organization.

**Essay 2 Rationale:** This essay will ask students to think about the tension between Vannevar Bush’s 1945 essay “As We May Think” in relation to Nicholas Carr’s 2008 essay “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” In both essays, there are arguments about the distinctions between information and knowledge, as well as views about thinking happens in relation to technology. This will extend further, or become more complicated, through research topics in the third essay assignment.

Carr’s article is directly related to Vannevar Bush, but raises additional questions, including a focus on the writing process a bit more explicitly. It requires a bit of work to think between these two essays I think, but it’s very doable and connected. It’s challenging, but very accessible. Parts of Carr’s concerns might read as a bit ridiculous to some students, I think, but many students can also relate to some of the central questions or problems (albeit in slightly different ways relative to their own experiences with other things besides Google - which leads into the third research project). It’s not a big leap from Bush to Carr and the fundamental questions, problems or concepts are similar. The intention also is to have developed a vocabulary -- a set of concepts, terms, questions, problems -- that students will extend into other areas in their third essay.

**Essay 3 Rationale:**

This researched argument essay is intended to recursively build on writing strategies learned so far and to have students transfer these methods of inquiry to an assignment that is somewhat more open and complex. Students will be able to choose a topic and develop a research question that they are interested in exploring -- one that is still related to or within the frame of the course. The final result can be a written essay, but presentation of research can happen instead or additionally through some digital form as well.

I suggested articles from the Pew Research Center because they are are brief, supported by credible research, and they are meant for a general audience. They can also quickly expose students to a range of topics or data in different formats (publications, presentations, interactives). Instructors might also consider having students look at Wikipedia articles (especially the Talk page of an article), short videos, or more popular and accessible forms of writing on technology (*New York Times* articles, for example).

This is a starting point through which students might be exposed to or enter existing intellectual conversations and give them some grounding from which they can develop a particular research question -- one that they are curious about or one that might be relevant to their experience. The intention here is to have a framework for an assignment that is adaptable to other instructors. Specific topics or debates about digital technology and thinking can sometimes become quickly dated. Instructors might want the range for exploration to be somewhat open, with students doing an initial search for ideas, or it can also be focussed in very particular ways (by having the entire class focus on one or two articles or topics -- a specific Pew Research Center article, for example). Questions around audience might be foregrounded, as well.

Some examples of potential topics related to digital technology and thinking might include critical discussion (contextual, theoretical, argument-driven) around: truth and misinformation online (fake new); search engines and bias; censorship; net neutrality; automation; video games and learning; education and technology; attention studies; Wikipedia; social networks and emotions; and more.