

## Unit Three Essay Assignment

### *What Is It About the Computer?*

Write an essay about some phenomenon related to the computer. Choose a cyber-social phenomenon (examples: teens and IM, MUDs/MOOs, on-line romance), computer-related activity (web design, hacking, home video editing), hot-button computer issue (Macs versus Windows, security and cyber-terrorism, media convergence, open source software), or any other aspect of the way computers are a part of the human world. Then, in your essay, explore this phenomenon in an attempt to draw some *general conclusions about its meaning* for our culture, for human nature, for technology, or for computing.

Your essay should make use of at least two different kinds of texts. First and most significantly, you should work with texts that offer an “untheorized” account of your phenomenon. (In academic discourse, a *text* is not necessarily made of words but could also be film, sound, still image, TV program, recorded conversation, correspondence, website, fiction writing, etc.) So, if you choose to work on IM, you might use transcripts of IM conversations as untheorized texts. Or you might use newspaper articles about the IM craze. Or you might even study the various implementations of IM software, to see what sorts of possibilities they open and limitations they impose on the conversation. If you choose to study media convergence, then you might look at TV ads for new technologies, or *white papers* that Sony puts out to describe its media convergence strategies, or the history of standardized ports for connecting machines to each other. In general, the untheorized or popular text(s) will serve as raw material for your analysis. Ideally, this raw material will not only provide evidence for your claims but will reveal something to close inspection that is not immediately available at a first glance. You might think of this raw material as a set of clues, and your job is to figure out what they point to.

The second kind of text that you should work with in your essay is theoretical. The exact role that such texts play in your essay is up to you. They are available to you as sources of ideas and models for your thinking. *This essay is not primarily a research paper in which you summarize or synthesize other texts.* Rather, your job is to think about the broad *meanings* of a phenomenon or behavior, to consider the *significance* of computers or of something that people do with them. Theoretical sources might help spur your thinking in this direction of breadth. You might argue against, agree with, refine, or take another stance with regard to the ideas of one or more theorists. Stretching the analogy a bit too far, if the raw material is a set of clues, then the theoretical texts are methodologies for your investigation, or magnifying glasses that help to reveal what is amiss among the seemingly mundane clues. Some essays might rely heavily on theoretical texts, while others will mention such a text only in passing. For help finding appropriate theoretical texts, consult the instructor or, even better, an expert librarian.

*Challenges:* The most difficult aspect of this essay will probably be the openness of the assignment. In effect, you are being asked nothing more specific than to write an essay about computers. I anticipate a further challenge: once again, you must negotiate a

problem of particular and general, connect the particular phenomenon you choose to study with *general questions about culture or technology*. You may feel as though you lack the expertise to make such connections. To overcome this difficulty, I recommend that you allow yourself to think (and write) freely, writing down any ideas or interpretations of your phenomenon that come to mind, no matter how wild or far-fetched. (Perhaps IM reminds you of the telegraph. Perhaps newspaper websites all tend to look unnecessarily like paper newspapers. Perhaps the way people talk about open source software reminds you of the way they talk about political party candidates.) Then, choose the most promising of these thoughts and examine them critically. (What about IM seems like telegraphy? Why would these two technologies resemble each other? Does this say anything about the future of IM?) This process of free thinking followed by critical editing is one way to produce original and incisive writing, and will likely serve you well in all your writing projects.

For this essay, you can assume that your audience has only a passing familiarity with your topic. You should describe the phenomenon you are analyzing, supporting your description with appropriate citations. However, the bulk of your essay will be an analysis of the computing phenomenon you are focusing on, so keep your descriptive passages as concise as possible, including only the information your reader needs to follow your argument. Though not primarily a research paper, this essay will involve some research. Please take the opportunity to show off your citation skills, including proper formats and a full bibliography.

The length of the essay should be appropriate to the subject matter. I am imagining essays of six to eight pages, but YMMV, as they say on the chat boards.

This time for real, please append a paragraph or two to both draft and revision in which you offer some self-critique.

Drafts are due at noon on Wednesday, November 9, at 3pm, by e-mail. Revisions are due at the start of class on Tuesday, November 29, again by e-mail.