

Introduction to Bibliography: Stories that Objects Tell Us / Stories We Tell About Objects

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OVERVIEW

Total Class Time: four modules of ~60 minutes each, which can be employed together or independently.

Ideal Class Size: between 15 and 30 students

Proposed Audience

Undergraduates

Description

We provide these materials as a toolkit, one which experienced instructors can adapt for their own purposes and examples. The following modules engage students in bibliographical thinking, and can be used in the following order or independently:

1. **Activity 1:** In the first module, students are asked to make spontaneous observations about an unfamiliar text. Through this process, students realize that they know more than they think they do about textual objects, and they begin to open up the possibilities of close-looking.
2. **Activity 2:** In the second module, students are provided with a scaffolded set of questions through which they encounter a textual object. Through this process, students start to focus their thinking on the kinds of questions bibliographers typically ask.
3. **Activity 3:** In the third module, students apply these scaffolded questions to a textual object of their (or of their instructor's) choice. Through this process, they continue to focus their thinking, but they also begin to understand how their questions might shift or change in response to different kinds of objects.
4. **Activity 4:** In the fourth module, students are introduced to different types of bibliographic descriptions drawn from different sources (academic, booksellers, etc.). Selecting one of these models to follow and/or push against, they develop their own description of an object. Through this process, they understand the external forces and generic expectations that shape bibliographic description, and begin to navigate those factors on their own.

The materials we have produced are intentionally broad in their approach, meaning that they can be adapted for use with any sort of textual object (not merely the literary or canonical) and within any disciplinary line of inquiry. Moreover, instructors can determine which modules to use and in what order, depending upon their course goals and student profiles.

For sample texts to use with this lesson plan, please see Appendix A.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of these sessions, students will realize that they know more than they think they do about bibliography – and encounter a framework for description that they can adopt, question, and/or expand.

More specifically, they will be able to:

1. Employ close-looking as a first step toward interpretation and analysis.
2. Consider the social dimensions of publishing, textual production, and collecting, through the lens of bibliographic descriptions.
3. Identify the varieties of bibliographic description, and begin to define their own bibliographic practice.
4. Understand the range of differences and commonalities between texts (and their means of production) across large time spans, media, and/or geographies.

PART 1: Vernacular Descriptive Bibliography -- 60 minutes

N.B. This portion of the lesson plan can be prolonged for an entire session (which will usefully extract increasingly minute observations from the students) or contracted to fit within a shorter amount of time.

Class discussion: Using a shared object, which could be drawn from Google Books or Archive.org in a digital classroom, have each student in turn make an observation about the book. You should go around the classroom at least twice, but you can prompt as many observations as time allows.

These observations may be complex, but it is also important to point students toward the simple and obvious (“this book is green”). The goal is to unveil students’ existing instincts about the textual objects and the importance of close-looking.

Depending on the focus of the course, you might point students to examine evidence of error or of the scanning process, or to consider the roles of authors and compositors of different varieties

PART 2: 20 Questions to Ask Your Textual Object [Book/Object/Manuscript/digital text] – 60 minutes

Using the same object from part 1, students will now re-encounter the object, using a predefined set of questions that will focus their interrogation on the kinds of questions bibliographers ask of textual objects. For these questions, please see Appendix B.

Introduction (10 minutes): explain the activity, and review the questions.

Small Group Work (20 minutes): Ask students to work in pairs or small groups, and attempt to answer one category of questions from the sheet (you may divide these as you wish).

Class Discussion (30 minutes): as a class, with the instructor's guidance, review each group/pair's answers, refining them in the process (and raising questions where the answers are unclear). As the conversation concludes, prompt students with the following questions:

Are there other questions you'd like to ask of this object? Are there ways you'd like to expand or continue to explore these questions?

PART 3: Students' versions – 60 minutes

Each student will bring in their own version of the text at hand, or be assigned a version provided by the instructor. The version can be a scholarly edition or a student one, a movie or a boardgame inspired by the text, or any other “textual object” with some sort of affiliation with the original text. The instructor can supplement these offerings or seed the ground by providing examples before the students make their choices -- at least some of the objects under consideration should be ephemeral or produced for popular consumption.

The focus of the course will dictate the shape of this lesson:

1. If the focus of the course is a literary one, the instructor should bear in mind that students may need time to visit a local or institutional library – or they should indicate to students that it is acceptable to supply digital surrogates of these items (or born digital ones). For an undergraduate audience, this could be a moment to build in discussion of library catalogues or online search engines.
2. If the instructor opts to use a non-literary textual object (an owner's manual, the directions for use of a particular medicine), the prompt can be more broad: students can be directed to find examples similar in kind to the object, making it more likely that they can use objects already part of their home environment.

Students will work independently to answer the same questions from Part 2 about their object.

Introduction (5 minutes): explain the exercise

Independent or Small Group Work (25 minutes): Students to work independently or in small groups to answer the questions about their objects

Class Discussion (30 minutes): Students should offer a brief introduction to their object, highlighting

- any surprising or unique facts they may have unearthed about it
- any gaps or challenges they encountered

PART 4: Bibliographic Descriptions – 60 minutes

In this segment, students will encounter sample descriptions of the text (see sample texts, below, for examples). They will first compare them to each other, in order to better understand the conventions of bibliographic description. Then, they will begin the process of writing their own description, presenting their decisions to the class.

1. Group Discussion (20 minutes): Instructor shares two distinct descriptions of the text, drawn from different sources (library or bookseller, for example). Students should be prompted to consider the following questions as they analyze the descriptions:
 - a. Are there any conventions that seem to govern them both, or that distinguish them from each other?
 - b. What do these descriptions focus on? What do they elide or omit?
 - c. What audience does the description seem to invite?
2. Independent or Group Work (20 Minutes): Either independently or in small groups, students begin to describe one object from Part 3, intentionally integrating a dialectal framing behind their choices for description.
 - a. As they write, they should consider what sort of description they wish to produce: is this an academic's description? A bookseller's? A librarian's? A combination of all of the above? What audience or audiences do they hope to reach?
 - b. NB: This exercise can be completed in class or outside of class, or a combination of both, depending on how much guidance students require.
3. Group Discussion (20 Minutes): Students share their descriptions, glossing these with an explanation of their choices. As they present, the instructor should highlight how descriptions can be flexible and open to possibilities – even as they ground themselves in traditions of scholarship, they can challenge them in constructive ways.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE TEXTS

Literary Example: Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur

Parts 1 & 2: Vernacular Description and Blind Date with a Textual Object

Google Books: [The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur](#) (This is a 1910 edition of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Southey from Caxton)

Part 3: Student/Instructor-supplied Versions

Student versions might include alternative editions of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, but also items like the boardgame *Shadows Over Camelot*, the movie *Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and even a bag of King Arthur brand flour.

Part 4: Bibliographic Descriptions

- The Bearsley *King Arthur*: A [bookseller's description](#), from Thorn Books on Biblio.com, vs. the edition held by [The Morgan](#);
- The Kelmscott Press *Syr Percyvelle of Gallys*: A [bookseller's description](#), from Christie's, vs. the edition held by [the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library](#)

Non-literary Example: A Recipe

Parts 1 & 2: Vernacular Description and Blind Date with a Textual Object

There are several examples that could be usefully employed here, depending on the focus of the class. We have supplied some ideas below, but this is just a start:

- [Good Housekeeping's Book of Recipes](#)
- "[The Best Steak Marinade in Existence](#)," from allrecipes.com (username: Kookie).
- A selection from The Library of Congress's [Community Cookbooks Collection](#), from which instructors could pick books local to their institution.
- [The Chinese-Japanese Cookbook](#): Published originally in 1914, this is the first Asian cookbook published in America, written by two sisters of Anglo-Chinese descent, and edited and introduced in 2006 by Jacqueline N. Newman.

Part 3: Student/Instructor-supplied Versions

Especially if you're teaching online, but even if you're teaching in-person, consider asking students to bring recipes from their home environment. This might mean their grandmother's handwritten pie recipe, or it could mean the chocolate chip cookie recipe on the back of a package of sugar. An instructor might supplement this with other kinds of recipes, like this 18th century [recipe book from the Beinecke](#), or this 15th century [ink recipe book](#) (also from the Beinecke), or this [13th century fragment of medicinal recipes](#) (also from the Beinecke).

Part 4: Bibliographic Descriptions

- Chanoyu hitorikogi (*Solo Sailing Through the Tea Ceremony*): a [bookseller's description](#), from Jonathan Hill, and a [library catalogue entry](#) from the Smithsonian Library
- Honchō chakyō (*The Classic of Tea in Our Land*): [bookseller's description](#), from Jonathan Hill, and a very limited [library catalogue entry](#) from Berkeley Library
- A medicinal recipe book: [a bookseller's description](#), from Christie's, and a comparable object in the [Folger library](#).

APPENDIX B: 20 Questions to Ask Your Textual Object

BSA teaching unit

These questions can be tweaked depending on the time period, place of production, and genre of the text you are consulting. The goal of these questions is to gain a 360° understanding of your object and be able to tell a story about it by 1) relating the material evidence to the textual evidence and 2) placing it within networks of textual production, circulation, transmission, readership, and ownership.

Before the first date, do your background check.

1. Is there a catalog record or other descriptive information for this item?
2. If so, what questions do you have after reading it? Is it detailed enough for your purposes?
3. Has it been digitized?

Hello textual object, nice to meet you!

4. Is it bound (quarto, folio, etc.) or unbound (bifolium or fragment or sheet or half sheet?) or some other format (roll, membrane, digital)?
5. If it consists of multiple leaves, how are the leaves connected to each other? What's the sewing structure or how are the leaves attached to each other?
6. Does it have a wrapper or binding as a cover? What is it, and is it original or later?
7. If it is a bound manuscript, did it start out as a pre-bound blank book or were quires gathered and bound after they were written on?
8. Does it contain more than one intellectual work?

Mind if I have a look around?

9. What is the substrate?
10. If paper, is it laid (hand-made) or woven (machine-made)? If it is old paper, can you see and identify the watermarks? Has the paper been trimmed? Can you see deckle edges? Is it made using Western or Eastern paper-making techniques? Gilt edges? Fine or ordinary? Thick or thin? If it is modern paper, is it coated or uncoated, or how else can you describe it?
11. If parchment, can you identify the animal or quality (look for imperfections, use of hair-side vs. flesh-side)? Calf, goat, sheep?
12. Is it something else?
13. Is the textual object complete? Are there any leaves missing or added or loose? Does the quiring make sense? If it is a fragment, where could the rest of it be?
14. If printed, what is the font? If a manuscript, is it autograph (in the hand of the author) or scribal (in the hand of someone other than the author), or is it in multiple hands? What is the style of handwriting?
15. Does the layout seem typical for the genre? Is there anything unique about the layout?
16. What does the text want you to do? Write in the margins? Fill out blank spaces? Read for enjoyment? Read for action?

Do you have any friends or family I might want to meet?

17. Is the textual object part of a larger collection or archive that is still intact or has since been dispersed? Is there intellectual or physical evidence for this, such as stubs, staple punctures, paper clip residue, filing holes, ownership marks, docketing, or other internal or external evidence?
18. Is it possible to locate or determine the context of its production and what else was being produced at the same time by the same producer?
19. Do any other versions of this textual object exist (hardcover or paperback versions, other editions, digital texts, drafts, fair copies, scribal copies, presentation copies)?

Any previous readers or owners? And I can't help but notice that you might have had some "work" done on you...

20. Are there any marks of ownership or signs of use or readership (shelfmarks, signatures or initials, gift inscriptions, stamps, book plates, prices, initials, bookmarks, dog-ears, marginalia, underlinings, etc.) and what can we learn from this information?
21. When and how did the institution acquire the item? If possible, check the bookseller or auction catalogue to see if related material was sold at the same time or if the description contains additional details.
22. What sort of repair work, if any, has been done to the binding or the text block or the leaf/membrane/fragment? When and why? Ask the conservation lab for additional details!