English 441: Seminar in Gender & Language

Final Project Guidelines, Requirements, and Topics

Each student in English 441 will work throughout the semester on a independent project due at the end of the course. There are three options for final projects: you will choose one and develop a project of your interest within that category. You may complete a **content analysis**, or a **field project**, or a **creative project**. See the guidelines below for more information.

What is a content analysis?
Content analysis (sometimes called "meta-analysis" or "data analysis") is a review or synthesis of existing data about a specific topic. Content analysis is comprehensive and exhaustive, summarizing all the existing work other scholars have done and presenting it in a format that is accessible and informative to a general reader. At its best, a content analysis is a problem-solving exercise (answering a question like "what is the history of the use of masculine pronouns as generic in English?") Content analyses are rewarding for people who are orderly, detail-oriented, and like to work with ideas already uncovered by other scholars.

Content analyses are the easiest and most predictable kind of final project to complete.

What is a field project?
A field project involves some content analysis - about 1/3 of a field project is spent summarizing existing discoveries - but spends the other 2/3s of its time making new discoveries and presenting and explaining their significance. Field researchers design a research strategy using systematic observation and data recording (such as questionnaires) to compile new information about a subject. Field researchers systematically test (rather than prove) a hypothesis they have devised, such as "women are more likely than men to smile during unpleasant or stressful encounters." A field project is fun for people who like to think up and test new ideas, and for people who enjoy problem-solving.

Your field project should focus *either* on textual evidence or interactional evidence. "Textual evidence" is evidence you find in written texts or interactions that have already been transcribed by professional linguists. "Interactional evidence" is evidence you obtain as a participant-observer, by transcribing, videotaping, or audiotaping live interactions between individuals. Interactional projects (1) may require clearance from Fisher's Institutional Review Board and (2) may require you to master some linguistic scripting conventions. (I will help you with both issues.) The evaluation standard for interactional field projects will be slightly more lenient because interactional data-collection adds a significant element of labor to the task.

As you develop a topic for your field project, it will be necessary for you to choose between a textual or an interactional focus so that you may develop an appropriate research strategy.

Field projects require a high level of motivation, organization, and planning to complete.

What is a creative project?
A creative project allows researchers to get hands-on experience working within an existing medium such as painting, literature, video, or computer publishing. Creative projects, like field projects, require a summary of information about the medium and its implications, but most of your effort will be spent on the actual creation of a work of art. (The possibilities are wide open here; you could create an advertising campaign, a website, a one-act play, a video, a series of paintings - whatever you think will make your subject come alive for readers/viewers.) Creative projects allow people to understand the creative process from the inside out. While they can be very challenging and sometimes frustrating, they are rewarding for people who are eager to try something a little different.

The evaluation standards for creative projects will be every bit as rigorous as those for more traditional analytical assignments. Your project will need to incorporate thoughtfully what you have learned in class about gender and communication. Further, you will provide a review of existing materials in your chosen

medium and a written rationale for your project.

Creative projects require a high level of motivation, originality, and planning to complete.

How To Proceed

1.   Choose a topic, issue, or major idea about GENDER AND LANGUAGE that interests you.

      a.   View your topic as a problem-solving exercise. What mysteries still exist about this topic? What do we not know about it?

      b.   Is it a completely new topic or has it already been addressed by lots of people? What stories need to be told about it?

      c.   Do you agree with current research or work that has been done on the topic?

      d.   What is your hypothesis about it?

2.   Be systematic about pursuing information about your topic.

      a.   If you are doing fieldwork and your project involves participant observation, you may need to obtain permission from the college's Institutional Review Board. Contact me for information about how to do this, or click the link to their website on the Fisher intranet page.

      b.   Before you do anything else, conduct a thorough *literature review* - find out what other people have discovered and written or created in response to the topic. If you're doing content analysis, make sure there is enough material on that topic in Lavery library. Order the books and articles that are not available in our library through the interlibrary loan service. It may take two weeks (or longer) to receive the material.

      c.   Use online articles and articles from academic journals as well as books and chapters from anthologies. Visit museums, watch films and videos, and read stories and novels if your project requires it.   Figure out whom you will interview or observe if that is part of your project, and be sure that you secure both their permission and clearance from the Institutional Review Board if your project requires it. (See me for more information.)

      d.   Lavery Library provides access to dozens of online research databases. Use these to find sources and to create bibliographies of the most recent articles. Researcher's secret: use a relevant source's bibliography as a source for ideas about where to go next.

      e.   Make a written list the tasks you think you'll need to perform, and set yourself a timetable for completion. Procrastination is not a good strategy for long-term projects, which need to be accomplished in stages, with time allowed for mistakes, changes of focus, and contingencies. Stick to the deadlines you set for yourself.

      f.   If you can't seem to get started, or get stuck, or can't keep going, consult with me for a jump-start. We can accomplish much in a 15-minute conference in my office or over the phone.   Don't be shy or ashamed that you have not made enough progress - helping you is part of my job and I enjoy doing it! The Lavery Library reference librarians are also very helpful if you are having trouble uncovering sources. Give them an opportunity to help you.

      g.   While you are researching, write everything down. Do not succumb to the temptation to say "I'll remember this later," because you won't, and then you'll spend hours retracing your steps in search of missing information. Use a computer or a loose-leaf research notebook or old-fashioned index cards. When reading, do not mechanically underline the relevant parts of the text, but take notes in your own words. This way you will not only improve your reading comprehension, but also complete much of your writing task in advance.

3. **Get enough data or information to allow you to make an informed judgment.**

   a. Your dataset must be large enough to be representative. Talk with Dr. Jadwin about how much data will be enough to allow you to draw conclusions.

4. **If you are doing field work:**

   a. **systematic observation:**
      i. develop a list of "things to watch for" in advance. In each observation, pay attention to the same things
      ii. choose research subjects of varying types
      iii. always take notes or audio- or videotape the interaction

   b. **interviews:**
      i. do not disclose the nature or hypothesis of your study; simply tell your subjects the general area (i.e., "education" or "religion") you are studying
   c. c onstruct questions that are open-ended and will not "give away" your hypothesis
      i. ask every interviewee the same questions
      ii. choose research subjects of varying genders, ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, and convictions
      iii. take notes or audiotape your interview, with the subject's permission

5. **Drawing conclusions:**

   a. Begin your work with a hypothesis - a theory about the meaning of your data.
   b. Throughout the process, test the hypothesis. What you thought at the beginning may not be borne out by your data.
   c. Explain why your findings are significant. You must go beyond simply describing what you found; explain what it means and why it is meaningful. Dr. Jadwin can help you with this step of the process.

6. **Documentation and mechanics:**

   a. Follow proper quotation and bibliographic citation rules. Note sources as you go along - don't make the mistake of putting it off and then not being able to re-find your sources. Follow college guidelines (in the Student Handbook) about the appropriate citation of sources. You are responsible for your own academic honesty.
   b. Proofread and edit your final draft carefully. Neatness, accuracy, and formatting are important.
   c. Although the instructor may end up being the sole reader of this paper, while writing, imagine a larger audience. Ask yourself if your paper would make sense to somebody who did not take this course. Better yet, ask a friend (who has not taken this course) to read your paper and tell you what she understands.
   d. All projects, even creative ones, require a **bibliography** formatted either in APA or MLA style, *of at least 20 sources you consulted in completing your project.* You must consult a balance of internet resources, journal articles, and books; do not consult only one kind of source.

To format your research proposal (due approximately in the seventh week of the course):

a.   Choose a topic and do a systematic literature review of writings on that topic.

b.   Write a paragraph that indicates your topic and your argument (thesis). Consult people (your classmates or me) and ask them if your thesis is clear and your paragraph makes any sense. Revise it till what they understand is same as what you mean to say.

c.   Write a two-page summary (typed, double-spaced) of your project It should include the following questions: What is your topic? Why is it worth studying? Which theories and/or hypotheses are reviewed in your project? Which ones are criticized? Which ones are supported? What is your thesis/hypothesis? Is it widely supported?

d.   Now treat your summary as an outline and the paragraphs as the core of the sub-sections of your paper. To explain and clarify each paragraph, insert the literature review, quotations from other sources, your data/tables, etc.

e.   Include at the end of your proposal a bibliography listing at least ten (10) sources that you have consulted.