

Spring 2024

HSS 404-016, 018: Memes: Media, Genres, Applications

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New Jersey Institute of Technology

Humanities Senior Seminar:

Memes: Media, Genres, Applications

Catalog: HSS 404-016, Spring 2024

Instructor: Johanna Deane

Room: Tiernan Hall 113

Meeting Times: Wednesdays/Fridays 10am-11:20am

Email: jmd56@njit.edu with subject line beginning HSS 404-016:

Office hours: W/F by appointment in Cullimore 115C or via [Webex](#).

Course notes: Available via the Active Workspace.

Course Description

Memes have existed in some form since the early days of the Internet, but the modern memetic ecosystem is vast and varied, full of distinct genres of memes for purposes ranging from political to commercial to philosophical. In this course, you will gain a basic foundation in the media, genres, and rhetorical situation surrounding meme production and learn to produce effective, engaging, rhetorically sophisticated memes.

Prerequisites: Engl102 with a grade of C or higher, and 6 credits at the 300-level History and Humanities GER with a grade of C or higher; 3 credits at the 300-level may be taken concurrently as a co-requisite. Restrictions: Registration requires senior standing.

Learning Outcomes

During this course you will:

- Learn the underlying communication theory necessary for analysis of memes
- Analyze the rhetoric of memes, memetic discourse communities, and memes as ideological practice
- Learn to navigate the scholarly literature on memetics
- Study a discourse community of your choice in order to interpret its memes
- Write an analysis of a topic in memetics
- Create memes tailored for a discourse community, building on the theory you have studied

Required Texts and Materials

[Wiggins, Bradley. The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality. Routledge, 2019. ISBN 978-1-13858-840-0.](#)

Technology

You will be expected to bring an Internet-capable computing device to every class; it will be extremely difficult to access and write about memes without one.

Attendance

Participation in class activities, discussions, and workshops will contribute to your knowledge and performance. Show up on time, be prepared, and actively contribute to class discussions. Your engagement with the material will impact how much you get from the class.

You may miss up to one week of class without penalty. Every subsequent unexcused absence will result in a reduced participation grade. If you are absent for legitimate reasons (family emergency) you must provide a doctor's note or a note from your dean.

Do not come to class sick. I will excuse absences due to illness if emailed in advance.

Information about Learning Structure

We will prepare for full-class discussions with readings from our textbook. submit discussion questions at the beginning of each class meeting in the course active workspace for full participation credit, and when required, come to class with relevant memes. Be prepared to take notes and participate. You must come to every class having read the text for that class.

We will generally begin exercises during the class period to help you master and apply course concepts; you will have one week to complete them after the class in which they are initiated, and they will be graded pass/fail.

If you have questions, contact me via email. I will respond to your emails within 24 hours, except on weekends. Please plan accordingly. Remember to maintain an appropriate tone in all school-related correspondence. This means to include an appropriate SUBJECT line and your NAME in all emails. I will not respond to emails that do not include the sender's name.

NJIT University Code on Academic Integrity

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following [the NJIT academic integrity code](#).

It is my professional obligation to report academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

Accessibility Needs

If you need accommodations due to disability, please contact the Office of Accessibility Resources & Services (OARS), Kupfrian Hall 201, to discuss your specific needs. A Letter of Accommodation Eligibility from the OARS authorizing your accommodations will be required.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center (in the basement of Central King Building and online) is available for one-hour individual and group appointments with professional writing tutors. This resource is intended to help you improve your communication and writing skills. Tutors can help with planning assignments, improving your writing, refining an essay or multimedia project, or other communication-based needs.

For more information, please visit <http://humanities.njit.edu/writingcenter>.

Grading

Participation: Active Discussion & Exercises (25%):

- For an A (90-100), you will be expected to attend all classes (with no more than 2 unexcused absences), fully participate in all discussions and classroom exercises, engage with your fellow students and the teacher throughout the semester, and participate in at least 90% of in-class writing exercises at a satisfactory level.
- For a B (80-89), you will be expected to attend all classes (with no more than 4 unexcused absences), participate actively in most discussions and exercises, and engage with your fellow students and the teacher for much of the semester. You will participate in at least 80% of in-class writing exercises.
- If you feel that your participation work may go unrecognized, please submit a summary of your participation throughout the semester along with any extenuating circumstances.

Presentation of Scholarship (10%):

You will need to research scholarship on memes in order to properly understand your research topic(s). You will present on at least one paper in meme studies to the class in the first half of the semester, and must upload your slides under Assignments by your scheduled presentation date.

You will be responsible for downloading, reading, glossing, and leading a fifteen-minute PowerPoint presentation of the key points of the paper. Each student will need to sign up for one presentation. Pick a paper on a topic in memetics that you are keenly curious about.

- For an A, you should make full use of all relevant analytical tools we have discussed at that point in the semester, clearly articulate the **context**, **thesis**, and **evidence** of the paper, and **break down the memes discussed in the paper using the framework provided by the author or apply the framework provided by the author to break down new memes**. You may freely disagree with their conclusions and argue your own,

but you must summarize their viewpoint first. You must provide an effective, clear, easy-to-follow visual presentation, and must show comprehension of the paper.

- For a B, you should make some use of relevant analytical tools discussed at that point in the semester, and should explain the context, thesis, and evidence of the paper reasonably well. Your presentation should be clear and easy-to-follow and should be fairly accurate.
- For a C, you should make use of analytical tools, and should explain the content, thesis, and evidence of the paper somewhat effectively. Your presentation should not be confusing or misleading.

Key Concept Tests (25%)

We will discuss all assigned readings in class, so you will be able to make sure you understand how key concepts apply to memetics. The two Key Concept Tests will test your knowledge of the concepts in memetics which we have covered, and will test your ability to apply that knowledge. They will be open-book in nature, which will help you a lot more if you do the readings.

Memetic Analysis Paper

You will write a sequence of interconnected assignments about a topic in memetics throughout the semester. You will have to do both research into the existing memetic scholarship and analysis of discourse communities and the rhetorical function of memes. Whatever topic you select, you will need to complete certain milestones as you propose, research, write, and revise it. These milestones are pass/fail events, allowing you to obtain credit as you research rather than remaining uncertain of your progress until the semester's end. These milestones are also opportunities to meet with the professor during or after class to confirm you are on the right track.

Proposal (5%) [Pass/Fail]

You will write an introduction to a topic in memetics that you are interested in surveying and analyzing. In about 500 words, identify the topic, explain your initial understanding of it, and provide a working thesis.

Examples of successful past topics include:

- An analysis of the r/marvelmemes subreddit and how it memed in response to the releases of Eternals and Spider-Man: No Way Home.
- An analysis of #NBA Twitter's use of memes both to communicate about NBA fandom and about #NBA Twitter users' lives.
- An analysis of meta-memes in the KnowYourMeme.com community as a way to comment upon and pressure the admins of the community.
- An analysis of the memes circulating among medical students on r/medschoolmemes.

Bibliography (5%) [Pass/Fail]

In preparation for your Memetic Analysis Paper, assemble a bibliography of relevant scholarship that will help you conduct your analysis effectively and ground it in the existing literature. For

each paper, chapter, or book you include in your bibliography, please provide a short annotation explaining 1) the relevance of the scholarship to your research and 2) how it will guide your memetic analysis. It may be useful to include papers that touch on the discourse communities you wish to study, papers about the platforms memes are found on, or papers about the nature of memetics.

You may use up to **four** assigned course readings as relevant works of scholarship, and should provide an initial bibliography of at least **ten** relevant works.

Memetic Analysis (5%) [Pass/Fail]

In preparation for your Memetic Analysis Paper, assemble a body of memes and contextual data. You may present the raw data as you see fit, whether in a table or spreadsheet or sprawling Google Doc full of links and copied images/text, but your raw data should record

- Image data for all memes you are analyzing in your paper
- Provenance for all those memes.
 - Where was each found?
 - What was the context?
 - When and where was it posted?
 - Who posted it?
 - Were there reactions?

Next, define a method or methods of analysis. For example, you might wish to do a rhetorical analysis of the use of tone, or a narrative analysis of the partial stories told by the roles taken on by characters in the memes, or a social analysis of the kinds of speech-acts that memes are being used to enact. Whatever mode of analysis you wish to do, define the method you will use.

For example, if you want to determine quantitatively whether memes are more likely to exaggerate if they're being used to insult a member of an outgroup, your method might determine whether a meme refers to a member of an outgroup, whether it shows key signs of trash-talking like diminution, and which Gricean maxims each meme violates, followed by a search for patterns in the dataset. Similarly, if you wish to write detailed exegeses of a small set of memes in their social context to show the way sexist memes operate in a discourse community, explain how you will structure your qualitative literary analysis.

Finally, submit the methodology and a sample of memes analyzed using that methodology. If your method is highly qualitative and produces a substantial amount of analysis per meme, you will want to analyze at least 5 memes. If your method is highly quantitative and the analysis requires a large number of memes to say anything substantive, you should analyze at least 20 (and consider presenting the analysis in a table for ease of reading).

Finished Memetic Analysis Paper (25%)

This paper is a semester-long research project on a topic in memetics; the finished paper will be between 15 and 25 pages in length, not including bibliography (about 3750-6250 words), will draw on at least ten scholarly sources (you may use Bradley Wiggins' textbook and other course

readings as no more than five of your sources), and will take one of three forms: primary research and documentation of the memetics of a discourse community, analysis of a meme developing and propagating across discourse communities, or discussion of a topic in memetics.

Examples of successful research paper topics include:

- An analysis of the r/marvelmemes subreddit and how it memed in response to the releases of Eternals and Spider-Man: No Way Home.
- An analysis of #NBA Twitter's use of memes both to communicate about NBA fandom and about #NBA Twitter users' lives.
- An analysis of meta-memes in the KnowYourMeme.com community as a way to comment upon and pressure the admins of the community.
- A history of the development of Ironic Doge memes from 2010 to 2020.
- An analysis of the memes circulating among medical students on r/medschoolmemes.
- An overview of recent meme-based advertising campaigns.

You will be expected to document your examples and case studies using permanent links. Remember to cite and explain the scholarship you use to analyze and explain the discourse community's behavior and memetics. You will draw upon existing scholarship to meaningfully analyze the topic or community, providing rigorous and systematic analysis of the topic or community, explaining relevant discursive communities in terms of their online infrastructure, their digital culture, their demographics and social patterns and hierarchies, their rules and patterns of behavior, subcommunities within the community, tensions and faultlines and patterns of disagreement, etc.

You will explain how agents meme (the role memetics play in their discourse, patterns of meme use, specific memes and syntaxes common to the community, how their use of memes interacts with other discourses and memetic ecosystems, etcetera) and will explicitly analyze memes from the community or relating to the topic, contextualize them, break them down, and explicitly discuss their discursive role.

You will advance a clear and meaningful thesis supported by an argument that draws on well-founded and explicit evidence. Your paper must be organized in a meaningful and logical way, providing background and relevant analytical tools, performing analysis, and coming to an evidence-supported conclusion.

Assignment Submission and Revision

All assignments must be submitted on Canvas. I will not accept emailed work. Specific formatting guidelines will vary according to each assignment, so please follow the explicit guidelines found on individual assignment sheets. Assignments are due at the beginning of class. Late class work and homework will only be accepted if your absence is excused.

Every assignment will either come with a rubric or be graded pass/fail on the basis of clear requirements; pass/fail assignments are worth the full amount, while graded assignments are worth 50-100%. Nonsubmission is worth 0%. You will frequently work on projects during class

time and receive feedback during the writing process. If an assignment has a specified due date for credit, you must upload it by that time and be prepared to discuss it that day in class.

Your finished Memetic Analysis Paper will be graded during a one-on-one meeting, whether in-person in class time or office hours, or remotely to accommodate flexible schedules. You will receive a rubric-based grade at the beginning of the grading meeting, and then we will discuss the most efficient ways you can improve your grade by revision.

Please contact your classmates for missed work.

Final Grade Calculations

Because all unsubmitted work will receive a 0, while all good-faith attempted work cannot receive a lower grade than 50%, it is in your best interest to submit every assignment on time, even if your submissions are flawed. At the end of the term, your total work will be evaluated according to the university's grading scale.

A = 100-90

B+ = 89-87

B = 86-80

C+ = 79-77

C = 76-70

D = 69-60

F = 59-0

Incompletes will only be given under considerable extenuating circumstances (physical/mental health absences, military service, child care needs, etc.).

Schedule of Classes

Week 1: Introduction to Memetics: Semiotics, Ideology, Intertextuality

Key readings:

- Wiggins, *Chapter 1: Dawkins Revisited: A Brief History of the Term Meme and Its Function*

Topics: Dawkinsian memes vs Internet memes, spreadable media, virality, reproducibility, remixing, semiotics, ideology, intertextuality

January 17 Introduction to course

January 19 Lecture and discussion of memetic analysis

Week 2: Discourse Communities and Digital Cultures

Key readings:

- Topics:** Discourse, discourse community, memory traces, digital culture, participatory culture, ideology vs material conditions, false consciousness, collective social understanding, ideological practice, signs, the medium is the message, intertextuality and remix

Week 3: Memes and the Uses of Identity

- Wiggins, *Chapter 7: Identity*
- [Miltner, “‘Real Men Stand for Our Nation’: Constructions of an American Nation and Anti-Kaepernick Memes”](#)
- [De Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, and Literat, “Internet memes as partial stories: Identifying political narratives in coronavirus memes”](#)

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- | | |
|------------|---|
| January 31 | Lecture: memes and identity
Begin Exercise 2: Identity and norms in the discourse community
Student presentation of scholarship #1 |
| February 2 | Lecture: Rhetorical analysis of memes and partial stories
Begin Exercise 3: Role-based analysis: Internet memes as partial stories
Student presentation of scholarship #2
Student presentation of scholarship #3 |

Week 4: Collect Memetic Sample and Scholarship for Paper

- Do initial scholarly research for Bibliography for Memetic Analysis Paper
- Gather sample of memes in context from discourse community (at least 20, plus context and replies, with permanent links); this will be useful for Memetic Analysis Paper, Exercises 4, 5, Memetic Analysis for Memetic Analysis Paper

February 7 Class does not meet

February 9 Class does not meet

Week 5: Memes: Genre and Audience

Key readings:

- Wiggins, *Chapter 3: Memes As Genre*
- Wiggins, *Chapter 6: Audience*

Topics: genre, duality of structure, structuration, maintenance - elaboration – modification, imagined audience, fraction of selection, dominant/negotiated/oppositional decoding (ask me about fanfiction), self-writing, media narrative

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- De Seta, “Pepe Goes To China, or, the Post-Global Circulation of Memes” in [Bown and Bristow, Post Memes](#)
- [Zeng and Chen, ‘Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss’: Memefied Femininities and Disidentification in Tiktok Youth Cultures](#)
- [Foster and Baker, “Muscles, Makeup, and Femboys: Analyzing Tiktok's ‘Radical’ Masculinities”](#)

February 14 Student presentation of scholarship #4
Begin Exercise 4: Imagined audiences in the discourse community

February 16 Student presentation of scholarship #5
Student presentation of scholarship #6

Week 6: Review and Test 1

February 21 Review session for Test 1

February 23 Test 1

Week 7: The Meme Economy

Key readings:

- [Matalon, “Modern problems require modern solutions: Internet memes and copyright”](#)
- Wiggins, *Chapter 5: Commercially Motivated Strategic Messaging and Memes*

Topics: copyright law, economics of internet memes

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- Granata, “Meme Dankness: Floating Glittery Trash for an Economic Heresy” in [Bown and Bristow, Post Memes](#)
- [Olofsson, “\\$GME to the Moon: Mapping Memetic Discourse as Discursive Strategy in Reddit Trading Community r/WallStreetBets during the GameStop Short Squeeze Saga”](#)
- [Yang and Hayashi, “Exploring the Effects of Internet Memes in Social Media Marketing through A/B Testing”](#)
- [Malodia, “Meme marketing: How can marketers drive better engagement using viral memes?”](#)

February 28 Due: Bibliography for Memetic Analysis Paper
Begin Exercise 5: Citation of memes

March 1 Lecture: Copyright and the economics of memes
Student presentation of scholarship #7
Student presentation of scholarship #8

Week 8: Memes as Communication**Key readings:**

- [Wiruma et al., “Invisible Meaning on Spongebob Meme”](#)
- [Grundlingh, “Memes as speech acts”](#)

Topics: the cooperative principle, maxims of quantity/quality/manner/relevance, rhetorical analysis of memes, speech act theory, locution/illocution/perlocution

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- [Kariko and Anasih, “Laughing at one’s Self: A study of self-reflective internet memes”](#)
- [Guzman, Zhang, and Ahmed, “Understanding a Football Club’s Social Media Network: An Exploratory Case Study of Manchester United”](#)

March 6 Pragmatics, Gricean maxims, and memetic analysis
Begin Exercise 6: Meme analysis through violation of Gricean maxims
Student presentation of scholarship #9

March 8 Speech act theory and memetic analysis
Begin Exercise 7: Meme analysis using speech act theory
Student presentation of scholarship #10

Week 9: Spring Recess

March 10- Spring Recess
March 16 Classes do not meet

Week 10: Memes and Politics

Key readings:

- Wiggins, *Chapter 4: Political Memes*
- [Dimitrov et al., "Detecting Propaganda Techniques in Memes"](#)

Topics: Death of the real, hyperreal, simulation and simulacrum

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- Bianchino, "Simulation and Dissimulation: Esoteric Memes Pages at the Edge of Irony" in [Bown and Bristow, Post Memes](#)
- [Woods, "Shitposting as Public Pedagogy"](#)

March 20 Due: Memetic Analysis for Memetic Analysis Paper
Lecture: Internet memes and art

March 22 Student presentation of scholarship #11
Student presentation of scholarship #12
Discussion

Week 11: Memes As Art

Key readings:

- Wiggins, *Chapter 8: Internet Memes as a Form of ... Art?*

Topics: pastiche, Dada, surrealism, alienation, disillusionment, the readymade

Supplementary readings (you can present on them):

- Hobson and Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining" in [Bown and Bristow, Post Memes](#)
- [Contreras, "Memes against the Machine: A Rhetorical Analysis of Resistance and Parody Use in Internet Memes and Online Comments on Instagram"](#)
- [Volkovskaia, "Memes, Language, and Identity During the Russo-Ukrainian War"](#)

March 27 Student presentation of scholarship #13

March 29 Student presentation of scholarship #14
Student presentation of scholarship #15
Student presentation of scholarship #16

Week 12: Test 2

April 3 Review session for Test 2

April 5 Test 2

Week 13: Final Presentations and Drafting

April 10	Student presentation of scholarship #17 Student presentation of scholarship #18 Student presentation of scholarship #19 Paper drafting support
April 12	Student presentation of scholarship #20 Student presentation of scholarship #21 Student presentation of scholarship #22 Paper drafting support

Week 14: Class Meetings Canceled for Student-Instructor Grading Conferences

April 17	Meetings in classroom and office hours
April 19	Meetings in classroom and office hours

Week 15: Group Workshops for Memetic Paper Revision

April 24	Group workshop
April 26	Group workshop

**ALL REVISIONS ARE DUE BY APRIL 30.
LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.**