

Fall 2024

HSS 404-029-047: Memes: Rhetoric, Genres, Applications

Johanna Deane

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New Jersey Institute of Technology
Humanities Senior Seminar:
Memes: Media, Genres, Applications

Catalog: HSS 404-029, Fall 2024

Class Meetings: Wednesday & Friday 10:00am-11:20am
Central King Building 219

Instructor: Johanna Deane

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

Office hours: By appointment in Cullimore 115C or **via Zoom.**

Course notes: Available via the Course 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: Eng1102 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 have to use an Internet-capable computing device to successfully complete this class, obviously. You will be evaluated based on research, original thought, and soundness of arguments, so it is unlikely that generative AI can help you much beyond ensuring that your paragraphs follow the general norms of standard academic English.

Attendance

However, you are expected to attend class fully prepared, having read the key readings and familiarized yourself with the secondary readings. Participation in class activities and discussions is mandatory and will contribute to your knowledge and performance.

Information about Learning Structure

Questions about the material, as well as examples, notes, and thoughts, can be submitted at any point in the week via the Course Active Workspace. Please also feel free to email me. 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.

Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Model Policy

ChatGPT cannot read for you, cannot think for you, and can only vaguely write for you.

As a student in this class, you are responsible for reading both the readings and any research you do for your paper, analyzing the materials and any research, forming your own conclusions, and presenting those conclusions. While large language models and so-called “artificial intelligence” have their place (particularly for putting already-complete ideas and research into a standard academic English presentation), if you use them to think for you, you will produce trivial ideas, laundered plagiarism, or pure nonsense.

To succeed in this class, you must think critically and actively engage with scholarship. By your continued participation, you pledge not to outsource any part of your thought or communication in this course to machine learning algorithms or AI.

All AI violations will be referred immediately to the Dean of Students.

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.

Grading

Participation: Exercises and Class Discussions (25%):

For an A (90-100), you will fully participate in all class discussions and complete all Exercises in timely fashion.

Presentation of Scholarship (10%):

You will need to research scholarship on memes in order to properly understand your research topic(s). You will find at least one paper in meme studies that helps meaningfully answer your central research question in the first half of the term, and must present on it mid-semester.

You will be responsible for downloading, reading, glossing, and presenting a fifteen-minute presentation of the key points of the paper. 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 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 term. 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.

Ongoing Bibliographic and Analytical Portfolio (10%) [Pass/Fail]

As you research and develop your paper, you will keep a shared portfolio where you identify research questions, gather and annotate relevant scholarship, and derive answers to your research questions. 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 will also want to assemble a body of memes and contextual data that your paper can help explain and analyze. 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.

In the end, your paper will need to document your 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 which will generally 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 extended discussion of a topic in memetics. Sample papers from past terms will be provided.

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 examples and case studies with 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.

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%.

Final Grade Calculations

Because all unsubmitted work will receive a 0, while all good-faith attempted work cannot receive a lower grade than 50%, you should 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

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS A MEME?

Wed Sep 4 **Lesson 0. Syllabus review and semester overview.** This document

Fri Sep 6 **Lesson 1. What is a meme?** Social practice, ideological practice, mimema/enthymeme, Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of*

Dawkinsian and Internet memes, longevity/fidelity/fecundity, remix, iteration, content/form/stance

Memes in Digital Culture, Chapter 1: Dawkins Revisited: A Brief History of the Term Meme and Its Function

Assignment: Proposal

Exercise 1: Applying the Shifman typology to a meme

WEEK TWO: MEMES AND MEANING

Wed Sep 11 **Lesson 2. How do memes carry meaning? Semiotics.** Semiotics, sign/signifier/signified, encoding/transmitting/decoding, sender/message/receiver, dominant/oppositional/negotiated decoding

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 2: The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture

Exercise 2: Negotiated decoding of a meme

Fri Sep 13 **Lesson 3. How do memes carry meaning? Intertextuality.** Text and context, intertextuality, discourse and discourse communities, discursive practice

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 2: The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture

Exercise 3: Overview of a discourse community

WEEK THREE: IDEOLOGY, DISCOURSE, IDENTITY

Wed Sep 18 **Lesson 4. How do memes carry meaning? Ideology.** Ideology, collective social understanding, material conditions, ideological practice, interpellation, false consciousness, imagined audience

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 2: The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture

Exercise 4: Imagined audiences in the discourse community

Fri Sep 20 **Lesson 5. How does discourse shape groups and identity?** Essentialism and constructivism, instability and construction of identity, affective resonance, ingroup and outgroup construction

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 7: Identity
Dickerson and Hodler, 'Real Men Stand for Our Nation': Constructions of

Exercise 5: Identity and norms in the discourse community

an American Nation and Anti-Kaepernick Memes”
Dundes, ‘even More than That, Men Love Cars’: ‘Car Guy’ Memes and Hegemonic Masculinity
Zeng and Chen, ‘Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss’: Memefied Femininities and Disidentification in Tiktok Youth Cultures

WEEK FOUR: REVIEW, RESEARCH CHECK-IN

Wed Sep 25 **Presentation session 1 (4x)**
Schedule **Presentation session 2**

Fri Sep 27 **Review on memes, discourse, and groups. Checking on with students on research for paper.**

Sep 27-29, **Test 1: Memes, Discourse, and Groups**
asynchronous

WEEK FIVE: PLATFORM EFFECTS

Wed Oct 2 **Lesson 6. How do platforms affect the way we meme?** Platforms, social media, participatory and digital culture, affordances, platform effects

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 6: Audience

Exercise 6: Citation of memes

Fri Oct 4 **Presentation Session 2 (4x)**
Schedule **Presentation session 3**

WEEK SIX: MEMETICS AS GENRE

Wed Oct 9 **Lesson 7. How do memes spread across social networks?** Network graphs, memory traces, the medium is the message, genre, duality of structure and structuration, maintenance/elaboration/modification, the fraction of selection

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 3: Memes as Genre

Exercise 7: Affordances and platform effects on the discourse community

[Johann and Bülow, One Does Not Simply Create a Meme: Conditions for the Diffusion of Internet Memes](#)

[Barnes, Riesenmy, Trinh et al, Dank or not? Analyzing and predicting the popularity of memes on Reddit](#)

[Weng, Menczer, and Ahn. Predicting Successful Memes Using Network and Community Structure](#)

Fri Oct 11 **Presentation Session 3 (4x)**
Schedule **Presentation session 4**

WEEK SEVEN: MEMETICS IN SOCIETY

Wed Oct 16 **Lesson 8. What are the economics of internet memes?** Memes in copyright law, memetic marketing

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 5: Commercially Motivated Strategic Messaging and Memes

[Matalon, Modern problems require modern solutions: Internet memes and copyright](#)

[Malodia, Meme marketing: How can marketers drive better engagement using viral memes?](#)

[Yang and Hayashi, Exploring the Effects of Internet Memes in Social Media Marketing through A/B Testing](#)

Fri Oct 18 **Lesson 9. What are memes doing to our reality?** Simulation and simulacrum, hyperreality and the death of the real, pastiche, Dada, surrealism, alienation, disillusionment, the readymade, shitposting, the politics of eternity

Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 4: Political Memes and Chapter 8: Memes as ... art?

[Olofsson, \\$GME to the Moon: Mapping Memetic Discourse as Discursive Strategy in Reddit Trading Community](#)
[r/WallStreetBets during the GameStop Short Squeeze Saga](#)
[Woods, Shitposting as Public Pedagogy](#)
[Contreras, Memes against the Machine: A Rhetorical Analysis of Resistance and Parody Use in Internet Memes and Online Comments on Instagram](#)

WEEK EIGHT: REVIEW, RESEARCH

Wed Oct 23 **Presentation Session 4 (4x)**
Schedule **Presentation session 5**

Fri Oct 25 Ongoing **Bibliographic and Analytical Portfolio** check-ins. Test review.

Oct 25-27, **Test 2: The Network and the Platform**
asynchronous

WEEK NINE: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Wed Oct 30 **Lesson 10. How do we analyze the stories memes tell?** Trash talk, narrative analysis, partial stories, role-based analysis.

Exercise 8: Role-based meme analysis: Internet memes as partial stories

[De Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, and Literat, Internet memes as partial stories: Identifying political narratives in coronavirus memes](#)
[Kassing, “Messi hanging laundry at the Bernabéu: The production and consumption of Internet sports memes as trash talk”](#)

- Fri Nov 1 **Lesson 11. How do we analyze the messages memes send?** Propaganda techniques, memetic warfare analysis
- Exercise 9: Meme analysis through propaganda techniques**
- [Dimitrov et al., “Detecting Propaganda Techniques in Memes”](#)
[Volkovskaia, “Memes, Language, and Identity During the Russo-Ukrainian War”](#)

WEEK TEN: PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

- Wed Nov 6 **Lesson 12. Can memes be actions?** Speech acts, locution/illocution/perlocution, speech act theory-based analysis
- Exercise 10: Meme analysis through speech act theory**
- [Grundlingh, Memes as speech acts](#)
[Kariko and Anasih, Laughing at one’s Self: A study of self-reflective internet memes](#)
- Fri Nov 8 **Lesson 13. How can we pinpoint the way memes distort communication, and what can we do with that?** The cooperative principle, Gricean maxims of quantity/quality/manner/relevance
- Exercise 11: Meme analysis through violation of Gricean maxims**
- [Wiruma et al., “Invisible Meaning on Spongebob Meme”](#)

WEEK ELEVEN: APPLIED ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

- Wed Nov 13 **Presentation Session 5 (4x)**
Schedule **Presentation session 6 (Final)**
- Fri Nov 15 Ongoing **Bibliographic and Analytical Portfolio** check-ins focused on determining which blend of analytical methods (including developing new methods for your paper).
Test review.
- Nov 15-17, **Test 3: Memetic Analysis**
asynchronous

WEEK TWELVE: COMPLETING THE ANALYSIS

- Wed Nov 20 **Completing the Bibliographic and Analytical Portfolio** in a general workshop session with the instructor

Fri Nov 22 Reviewing final paper outlines with the instructor

WEEK THIRTEEN: COMPLETING THE ANALYSIS

Wed Nov 27 **Presentation Session 6 (4x)**
Reviewing final paper outlines with the instructor and scheduling one-on-one revision meetings with instructor.

WEEK FOURTEEN: REVISING THE PAPER

Wed Dec 4 **Memetic Analysis Paper** due. Class meetings canceled to allow one-on-one revision meetings with instructor.

Fri Dec 6 Class meetings canceled to allow one-on-one revision meetings with instructor.

WEEK FIFTEEN: DEBRIEFING, REVISIONS DUE

Wed Dec 11 All revisions for **Memetic Analysis Paper** due
Final discussion of class, happy holidays, etc