

Theories of Culture

ENGL 599: Special Topic
Fall 2017
MWF 200-250
Merrifield 117

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Office Hours: MW 3:00 – 4:00 and by appt.

Course Description:

"Culture" is one of the most complicated words in the English language. This course will explore the meaning of the concept from a variety of approaches. We will begin with the disagreement between the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold who famously described culture as "the best which has been thought and said," and Raymond Williams who argued that "culture is ordinary." From there, we will survey works across the twentieth and twenty first century in the sociology of culture, the two cultures debate (the humanities and the sciences) inaugurated by C.P. Snow, and the gendered aspects of culture, cultural capital, and taste.

The second half of the course will focus on making sense of non-human culture, our complicated relationship to nature and digital culture, particularly how algorithms affect our consumption of cultural objects. Throughout, we will define the keywords of the course (culture, taste, sociology, data, algorithm, evidence) broadly so as to allow students to apply these words to their own scholarly work in ways they deem most productive.

Texts:

Required Books (available in campus bookstore and online)

Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint*, 2008.
Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*, 1993.
Finn, Ed. *What Algorithms Want*, 2017.
Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects*, 2013.
Shirky, Clay. *Cognitive Surplus*, 2011.
Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*, 1978.

Various selections available on the on the course's Blackboard site. Marked in the syllabus as BB.

Course Objectives

- Introduce students to the variety of the most important theoretical approaches to understanding literary and popular culture.
- Implore students to develop their own theoretical approach to culture which best suits their intellectual needs.
- Encourage students to tinker with new ways of visualizing arguments and conceiving evidence in scholarly writing.
- Enable students to examine the theoretical relationship between literary culture, popular culture, and digital culture.
- Permit students to explore non-human culture by interpreting data-rich problems from a discursive position.
- Survey a variety of scholarly genres (written and digital) as models for their future intellectual work.

Major Assignments

- I. Meme Tracing (15%)**
An interactive timeline of a cultural artifact's history.
Think of this as a research based born-digital narrative.
- II. Midterm: A Sketch of the Field (30%)**
A digital project mapping your sense of contemporary American culture following Pierre Bourdieu's "French Literary Field in the Second Half of the 19th Century."
- III. Final Project Pitch (15%)**
A one page justification of your interest, your possible contribution, and your goals for research.

IV. Final Project (30%)

A research project. Choices include:

- An article length academic research essay (20-25 pages), ala McGurl or Gillespie.
- A long-form book review of a relevant recent scholarly work, ala Selisker or Muecke.
- A digital composition.

Additional Grade Elements

V. Class Participation and Homework (10%)

Attendance, Class Participation & Lateness

I expect all students to be prepared for class everyday; being prepared means paying close attention to scheduled assignments, doing the homework, and *bringing relevant materials with you to class*. If you do not bring the text we are reading to class, you will be considered absent.

You are allowed **four** absences without penalty— following your fourth absence, your grade in the class will begin to drop by **a half-a-letter grade** per absence. Plan ahead if you think you might miss class for religious holidays or for other scheduled events. Just because you inform me of an absence beforehand does not mean that it does not count towards your total. ***I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences – you are allowed four absences – be they excused or unexcused – before your grade begins to decrease, unless other special arrangements have been made with me ahead of time.*** For every two days you are late to class, you will be marked for one absence. If you are more than 15 minutes late to class, you will be marked absent for that day. If you miss a class meeting, you are responsible to contact your peers or **come to my office hours** for materials and information you've missed. Finally, you are responsible for keeping track of your own absences. A sign-in sheet will be used daily and absences will be thus recorded. Please be conscientious of your class participation – make sure you get the sign-in sheet, and please don't expect me to keep a running tally of your absences!

Scholastic Dishonesty

At UND, we trust in the excellence of our students and in the integrity of our academic programs. We also trust that your good ideas become better when you test them against the ideas of others. So for this course, feel free to discuss your ideas about the major writing assignments with other students. Collaborating on question/answer homework assignments or open-book quizzes, however, is not acceptable; these types of assignments are designed for me, your instructor, to monitor how you are handling specific parts of the course materials. Blatantly taking someone else's words, ideas or concepts, and using them without citing your source is plagiarism. So is using another student's essay, or part of his or her essay, as your own. In the world of writing (academic writing especially), this is a serious crime, and is treated as such. Anyone who uses non-documented

material from another source, including online sources, will receive a **failing grade** for the entire course and will be referred to the Dean's office for possible further disciplinary action.

Plagiarism, or any other form of scholastic dishonesty, is a serious offense and will be subject to official university policy and punitive action as found in the "Code of Student Life" available at <http://sos.und.edu/csl/index.php?main=1&pg=s3&subpg=3-3>.

If you have any questions, always feel free to ask me. It's been my experience that those writers who plagiarize are those who feel overwhelmed by the assignment and out of desperation, use someone else's work to stand in for their own. If you get so frustrated with an assignment that you feel like your only option is to plagiarize, come see me. My role as a teacher is to help students, not to punish them— *please* use me as a resource to help you write, brainstorm or work out your essays.

Deadlines

All written assignments must be submitted on the due date, and missing the class when the assignment is due doesn't mean your assignment isn't late. Turning in an assignment on time is part of doing the assignment, and late work will be graded down, regardless of how well it's executed.

Lateness penalties are as follows:

- Final drafts. For every day that a final draft is late, you will lose **five** points on the final grade.
- Short assignments. All late assignments may receive a maximum of **half-credit**, regardless of how late they are.

Using Recording Equipment in Class

If you need to tape or record classroom activities, you may do so for *personal* use or for all students presently enrolled in the class. However, you may not further copy, distribute, publish or otherwise use for any other purpose without my express written consent.

Technologies

This course is focused on digital writing, so I will ask you to consistently bring technology with you to class. Please get in the habit of bringing your laptops, tablets, and smart phones to class with you everyday. You will also have access to the laptops provided in our room. Whenever you like to use one, just ask. That said, I expect you to use your technology class related work only. You will receive one warning about misuse. After that, you will be marked absent for the day. I also reserve the right to alter this policy, if need be.

Learning Disability

If you have a learning disability that could impair your progress in this course, please contact Disability Services on campus (<https://und.edu/disability-services/>) We can arrange to accommodate your learning style based on DSS recommendations. Please notify me at the semester's beginning of your learning needs--do not wait until the semester becomes overwhelming to acknowledge the problem.

General Guidelines For Submitting Assignments

- Please submit all assignments via submission links on Blackboard.
- All papers, including daily assignments, must be typed, numbered, double-spaced, with 1” margins. (Note: The default spacing in MS Word is 1.25”)
- Carefully edit and proofread all texts to eliminate problems in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Any time you cite an essay, film, or book in your main essays, you will need to include a Works Cited section of your essay that provides complete and accurate bibliographic information of the material mentioned in your essay. If you’re not sure how to cite sources, ask!

Documents that do not meet these and other assignment-specific requirements will not be graded. They will be returned to you and when resubmitted will be treated as late submissions. Pay attention to these details for handing in your final drafts. Superficial errors do not necessarily signify poor thinking, but they do indicate a lack of precision and nonchalance toward the task. When you write papers for your courses within your major, your professors will expect high quality, readable prose. Use this class as a stepping stone toward that end. You’ll have to plan your writing process to make time for proofreading—printing a just-written paper 10 minutes before class time will probably not yield terrific results.

On-Campus Writing Resources

I enthusiastically encourage all students to take advantage of the Writing Center in the basement of Merrifield Hall. All students are eligible for one-on-one tutoring, but you must make an appointment. Remember, though, that tutors are not editors. It is not their job to “correct” your work or simply edit it while you go on Facebook. Think of the writing tutors as supplementary instructors for the class. They can address some issues (from the lowest-level to the highest) in much greater detail than I can since are not responsible for teaching you academic argumentation. For those of you who feel anxious about the requirements of this class, I recommend that you establish a relationship with a tutor early in the semester and rely on their expertise regularly.

Writing Center, web address: <http://und.edu/academics/writing-center/>

ESL Resource Center, Merrifield Hall, Room 112. The ESL Resource Center arranges tutoring and/or conversation partners for multilingual speakers seeking more practice with the English language. Contact Mary Monette for more information: mary.monette@UND.edu or call 701-777-3624.

Student Success Center, Memorial Union, Second Floor. The Student Success Center offers advising, learning services, and specific program to help students meet their educational goals. Individualized assistance and assessments are available. <http://und.edu/student-affairs/studentservices/>

Grading Policy And Scale

- A Exceptional. Assignment criteria met with creativity, rigor, and insight. Rich theoretical, historical, and creative analysis of the objects grounded within the larger academic context. Ideas articulated with convincing detail and display careful planning. Research and writing is lucid. Errors in style in grammar are rare and never prevent easy comprehension.
- B Good work. Displays sustained analysis, concentration and effort, although mainly recapitulated from class discussion and/or directly from class sources. Minor style problems never completely obscure writer's meaning.
- C Acceptable, but uninspired. There may be a glaring conceptual or execution problems. Work mostly descriptive with little to no historical, critical, or theoretical analysis. Serious issues with validity and/or depth of research. (Note: this is the median grade in the university system)
- D Unsatisfactory work. Ideas never move beyond generalizations. No analysis of any kind. Lacking research and focus. Work displays little to no grasp of the goals of the assignment.
- F Fail. Student does not submit complete work or shows no attempt to engage the concerns of the assignment.

Expectations for Class Conduct and Devices

In order succeed in this class, you will need to actively participate in class discussions.

Much of the reading for this class will come from handouts distributed via Blackboard. You are required to closely read these articles. Furthermore, you are required to bring a version of each article to class. I prefer that you bring a printed copy, but I understand that many of you prefer to read on media devices. **I will allow you to bring copies on your devices, but with a caveat. If, at anytime in the semester, I get the feeling that people are not reading the articles or that they are using their devices for non-class related activities, I will revoke this privilege and require everyone bring printed copies of the articles to class.**

Class Participation

Class time is yours; never forget that. We need to use our time together efficiently for you to get what you deserve. Making your voice heard during class discussion and brainstorming is the best way to ensure that we accomplish this together.

In terms of logistics, your in-class participation grade falls to my discretion and can nudge a borderline grade higher or lower. When you contribute to class discussion, be sure that your comments are helpful and constructive. You should be ready to participate in general class

discussion at least once a week, and you should always be prepared to generate thoughtful input in small-group discussions and peer review work. Be sure to be supportive of your peers' ideas, even when you disagree with them.

Disagreement can be constructive - very constructive - but when you critique your peers' work, be sure to do so respectfully. Do your best by articulating your grounds for disagreeing with the text itself rather than with your peers personally. Of course, all discussion should refrain from language and tone that could be considered inappropriate or offensive.

If you have questions about the policies of this class, review the syllabus first, and then contact me.

I reserve the right to make any alterations, additions, or subtractions I see fit.



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Course Schedule

UNIT I: The Scope of the Debate.

Core concepts: culture, high/middle/low brow, sweetness and light, interpretation, philistinism, meme, the long tail, the two cultures.

Week 1

Wednesday, August 23: Introduction and course preview.

Friday, August 25: Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" (BB)

Homework: 1 page essay. "What is popular?"

Submit final paper via Blackboard by class time on Monday.

Week 2

Monday, August 28: Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" and "Culture from *Keywords*" (BB).
NOTE: These essays differ from the culture section in *Marxism and Literature*. Please read "Culture is Ordinary" first.

Wednesday, August 30: Sontag, “Against Interpretation” and “Notes on Camp.” (BB).

Friday, September 1: Dawkins, “Memes: The New Replicators” and Anderson “The Long Tail.” (BB)

Week 3

Monday, September 4: **No class; Labor Day!**

Wednesday, September 6: Snow, “The Two Cultures” (BB)
Introduce Meme Tracing Assignment.

UNIT I: High/Middle/Low-Brow – Mass/Popular/Counter Culture **Core concepts: mass culture, popular culture, culture industry, canon, class.**

Friday, September 8: Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture” (BB).

Week 4

Monday, September 11: Ohmann, “Selling Culture” (BB).

Wednesday, September 13: Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.” (BB).

Friday, September 15: **No class; instructor away.**
Due: Meme Tracing Assignment.

UNIT III: The Sociology of Culture

Core concepts: ideology, hegemony, determination, base and superstructure, dominant/emergent/residual, structure of feeling, field, symbolic struggle, position-taking, habitus.

Week 5

Monday, September 18: Williams, 1-75, *Marxism and Literature* (M&L)

Wednesday, September 20: Williams, 75-136. (M&L)

Friday, September 22: Bourdieu, 1-73.

Week 6

Monday, September 25: Bourdieu, 74-145.

Introduce Midterm Project.

Wednesday, September, 27: Bourdieu, 161-192.

Friday, September 29: Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture” (BB).

UNIT IV: Gender and Affect

Core concepts: women’s culture, fantasy, love, affect, sentimentality, sincerity, irony.

Week 7

Monday, October 2: Berlant, 1-33.

Wednesday, October 4: Berlant, 69-106.

Friday, October 6: Berlant, 265-281.

Week 8

Monday, October 9: Jamison, “In Defense of Saccharin(e)” (BB)

Wednesday, October 11: Wallace, “E Pluribus Unum” (BB)

Friday, October 13: Presentations on Midterm Project.

DUE: Midterm projects due by class time via Blackboard.

UNIT V: Non-Human Culture

Core concepts: anthropocene, object, hyperobject, nature, imagination, algorithm, customer experience, metrics, manipulation, post-fact.

Week 9

Monday, October 16: Morton, 1-37.

Wednesday, October 18: Morton, 99-133.

Friday, October 20: Morton, 81-98, 134-157.

Week 10

Monday, October 23: Finn, 1-56.

Wednesday, October 25: Finn, 57-86.

Friday, October 27: Finn, 87-112.

Week 11

Monday, October 30: Finn, 113-150, 181-196.

Wednesday, November 1: McGurl, "Everything and Less: American Fiction in the Age of Amazon." (BB)

Friday, November 3: Selisker, "Culture Machines" and Muecke, "Global Warming and Other Hyperobjects" (BB).

Introduce Final Project.

Week 12

Monday, November 6: Marwick and Lewis, (BB)

UNIT VI: Maker Culture

Core concepts: cognitive surplus, composition, critique, convergence culture, geek culture, post-work.

Wednesday, November 8: Shirky, TBA.

Friday, November 10: No class; Veteran's Day.

Week 13

Monday, November 13: Latour, "Has Critique Run Out Of Steam?" (BB)

Wednesday, November 15: Shirky, TBA.

Friday, November 17: Shirky, TBA.

Week 14

Monday, November 20: Gillespie, "The Politics of Platforms." (BB)

Wednesday, November 22: Work day. Come with materials and questions.

Friday, November 24: No class; Thanksgiving.

Week 15

Monday, November 27: Final Project Rough Draft Due. No class; conferences instead.

Wednesday, November 29: Jenkins, "Convergence Culture." (BB)

Friday, December 1: Thompson, "When Algorithms are Cheaper than Humans" and Lowrie, "On Algorithmic Communism." (BB).

Week 16

Monday, December 4: Reading TBA.

Wednesday, December 6: Course Evaluations. Course wrap-up.

Wednesday, December 13: Final Project Due by 2PM. Please submit via Blackboard.

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Meme Tracing

We are often told that culture today is more ephemeral than ever. But given the theoretical prospective of the thinkers we've read so far this semester, we know that historicizing cultural artifacts and concepts is one central way that scholars discover the most accurate meanings of a cultural object. This assignment challenges you to trace the history of what Dawkins has described as a meme.

Expectations

For this assignment, I want you to find something that's trending in popular culture today and construct a mini-history of it. Note that I want to define *popular culture* and *today* in broad terms. That means you don't need to pick the *most* popular example or the hottest and/or silliest microtrend, but I do want you to choose something that clearly matters to today's culture. As you shall see, your definition of what matters will drastically change the way you go about telling your story and making your argument.

Please use Raymond Williams's *Keywords* as a model for the intellectual goals of this assignment. The problem with that remarkable work is that it is quite dry, even boring. Thus I'd like you to create a narrative history of your chosen trend. More, I'd like you to have the option of including more kinds of digital culture, particularly multimedia content and social media conversations to make your narrative more accessible. That said, don't feel pressured towards presentism. If your interests lie in older forms of culture, feel free to focus your timeline on those moments. All I ask is that you historicize their current relevance.

The key to this assignment is finding an artifact that is niche enough that you can tell a complete story while still finding something broad enough to connect with a scholarly public audience. It is also worth noting that I think of this project as research-*heavy* and writing-*light*. Your job is to share as comprehensive a story as possible as succinctly as possible. Yet, this is a piece of scholarly writing, so you need to find a way to assert a sense of authority. How you do this is up to you, but think about how other scholars accomplish this goal in writing (footnotes, bibliographies, strong sources, etc.) and in presentations (embedded questions, lists, etc.).

You will use TimelineJS, a narrative timeline building tool that transcodes data you enter in a spreadsheet into a multimedia timeline via the JSON scripting language. I like this interface because it is only semi-technical. It requires you to "get behind the hood" just a little bit without requiring you to learn an entire coding or scripting language for this assignment.

You can find a link to TimelineJS on the Blackboard page and detailed instructions on how to use the tool on its homepage and a video [here](#).

I expect:

- A multimodal narrative history of your chosen cultural artifact, object, or trend.
- A history that asserts its scholarly authority while still appealing to non-specialists.
- Succinct analysis of each moment in your history with no more than one short paragraph of text on each slide.
- A captivating introduction slide that entices the reader to move forward
- A final slide that sums up what you've the reader should have learned from viewing your narrative history
- Inclusion of at least **two moments** in the history that occur in a different country than the rest of your slides.
- At least two "groups" of moments.
- **No more than twenty** total slides.
- Clear credit to the creators of any images, videos, or music you choose to include.
- Clearly attributed references from at least **five** scholarly sources.

Final draft due Monday, September 18 by 2PM. Submit "the link to preview" to your project via e-mail.

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A Sketch of the Field

Now that you have traced the history of a cultural trend, it is time for you to stop the progression of time and analyze. It's hard to deny that Pierre Bourdieu's notion of fields have fundamentally affected the study of aesthetics and culture; his diagram "The French Literary Field in the Second Half of the Nineteenth-Century" is arguably the most important visual argument in all of cultural studies. For this assignment, I'd like you to try and emulate it. Think of this as an exercise in visualizing judgment, a cross section of a particular field at a particular moment.

Expectations

First off, you need to specify a field of cultural production that interests you. Notice that Bourdieu limits himself to a fifty-year period of literature in one country in order to make his argument and create this visualization in this section of *The Field of Cultural Production*. It seems to me that the challenge of this kind of argument has only gotten more difficult since the emergence of what Chris Anderson calls the "long tail." I'd suggest you find a field and a time-period that is limited to a twenty-five year period and a small variety of genres. Of course, Bourdieu reminds us that we also need to consider the entire history of that field in order to truly understand it, thus, I encourage you to find ways to historicize your claims within a larger narrative while pushing yourself toward specificity and accuracy.

Like the first assignment, I imagine this as a research-heavy/writing-light assignment. That said, I do expect you to supplement your chart with argument and analytical, thick description. I want you to think about culture sociologically and empirically without neglecting the sense of critical judgment that is so essential to the work we do. I *strongly recommend* trying to find data (sales, viewership data, reviews, downloads, citations) to supplement your argument.

I will ask you to produce an interactive chart created in MS Word that links each node of the chart to the text that supports that decision. (see the Approval Matrix by *New York* magazine for a clear example). I will show you how to create pop-up bubbles that will describe the relevance of each node. I imagine that all told you will produce 3-5 pages of writing to explain the decisions you make to populate and organize your analytical chart.

You can feel free to analyze the cultural field from which the meme on your timeline emerged, or you can choose a new topic; it's up to you.

I expect:

- A visualization of a particular field of cultural or intellectual production that blends visual and verbal argumentation.
- A detailed, but concise analysis that authoritatively informs the reader about your sense of the “rules” and “strategies” that comprise a specific field of cultural production.
- The axes of this graph are up to you, but you can feel free to use either Bourdieu’s “autonomy/heteronomy + high consecration/low consecration” or *New York’s* more straightforward despicable/brilliant + highbrow/lowbrow” if you find them useful to your argument.
- A caption and title that encapsulates your argument about the composition of the field and a suggestion of why that should interest scholars of that field.
- Ten to twenty plots on your graph. These can be specific products, producers, texts, or paratexts such as reviews, interviews, legislation, what have you. But I want to encourage you to think about the field broadly and include examples of schools, publishers, networks, formations, institutions, and academies like both Bourdieu and Williams define as a core component of the sociology of culture.
- Including three to five symbols or markers that add arguments about how the field functions. (e.g. Bourdieu’s confusing arrows and dotted lines).
- A legend describing the meaning of each symbol or marker. (So that you can be more specific than Bourdieu.
- You are permitted, but not required, to include multimodal examples such as video or audio clips.
- Clear credit to the creators of any data, images, videos, or music you choose to include.
- Clearly attributed references from at least **five** credible sources.

Final draft due Monday, October 16 by 2PM. Submit project via submission link on Blackboard.

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Final Project

As I have said throughout this semester, I want to help you produce the kind of academic work that best fits with your future goals. There are more acceptable academic genres than ever before, and thus, I feel like it's only right to give you a choice of genre for your final project.

Choices

A) "Traditional" Article-Length Research Essay

6,000 to 9,000 words advancing an original argument that pertains to culture, broadly defined. I think of McGurl as a model for this, but, of course, you could also alternatively consult single chapters of the works we've read this semester. Topic and method are open to you, but I expect your essays to conform to MLA Citation Style include 10 to 20 academic sources. If you choose this option I ask that you cite at least two of our in-class readings.

B) Longform Book Review

2500-4000 words. Selisker and Mucke are your models, albeit different ones. In this paper you should respond to recent scholarly/literary book in an engaging and thoughtful way. You must advance an argument about what the book means and why it's important. Remember that scholarly book reviews *are not about* whether someone should buy the book. Your analysis should also highlight some of the book's shortcomings, even if it's just because the author didn't have enough space to cover something you find relevant. As is customary in academic journals/websites you can pick scholarly books up to three years old. There's more room for personal narrative in this genre, but that *doesn't mean* that this essay can be all about you. If you want to include yourself, make sure that you are only doing so to advance your argument or add examples that prove the status of the book in question. If appropriate, you can also consider putting two recent books into conversation in your review.

C) Digital/Hybrid Project

This choice is a wild card and will require some negotiation. *If you'd like to choose this option you are required to meet with me to discuss it before November 10.* That said, if you are interested in this choice, I ask you to look for models that you would like to respond to with your work. Obviously, there is great room for creativity in this project, but I want to make sure that we find ways to ensure scholarly relevance. The best way I can think

of doing that is agreeing upon an example of something already out there in the world that you want to try and expand upon it and make it your own.

Recommendations

As with your other projects, you are welcome to expand upon your previous work from this class.

No matter what option you choose, I strongly recommend:

- Picking one or two theoretical models we've read in class that best explain your take on culture.
- Using those models to inform your argument. I would like to see citations that back that up if you choose A or C, but it can be implied or briefly referenced in B.
- Picking a unified cultural object to focus your analysis (A or C) or add examples in (B). I'd be happy to talk through what constitutes a manageable object during office hours.
- That you touch on **at least 2-3** of the big concepts we've covered in class: middlebrow, adaptation, the long tail, the two cultures, algorithms, affect, what have you. Responding to ideas with established scholarly relevance will help raise the stakes of your contribution.
- That you meet with me to discuss your project. I'm going to require conferences after the rough drafts, but since I've given you so much freedom for this project, I'd suggest that you informally pitch me an idea and a method for bringing that idea to life.
- That your submitted rough draft is as close to complete as possible. The more complete the draft I receive, the more useful my feedback will be for you.

Rough Drafts due by 2pm November 27. Submit project via submission link on Blackboard, or, if applicable, e-mail.

Final drafts due by 2pm Wednesday, December 13 via Blackboard or e-mail depending on project type.