Research paper

One component of your grade for this course will be a research paper about the impact of computers on some specific thing that humans do. The paper will include descriptions of how that thing was done before computers, as well as how it’s been done since computers have been around, and analyse the changes (or lack thereof), so your topic shouldn’t be something that only exists in a computer context (“how we send email” wouldn’t work, for instance)—you will have to explicitly frame your idea in terms of how we did things before computers.

There are a number of intermediate deadlines listed in the syllabus, both to keep you from putting it off and to make sure your understanding of what’s expected matches with mine. Most of the intermediate stuff will be graded with a simple check/check-minus system, where you get full credit for doing it or half-credit if you turn in something but it’s way off base. (And no credit if you skip it, of course.)

The first two submissions are via email, so that I can easily respond individually and start a conversation. The rest of the submissions will be via the Canvas submission system. All submissions (email or Canvas) are due by the start of class on the due date.

Paper topic

You have to email me with the general topic you intend to cover. I may ask you to explain your idea or choose another if I don’t think it’ll work well. Submit your topic by Friday, 23 January. (Plain email is fine—no need to type it into a Word document just to send it to me.)

Paper thesis

After we’ve discussed a topic, I’ll want you to refine it into a thesis statement of the general form “The way that humans _____ was/was not fundamentally changed by the introduction of computers.” The blank should be reasonably specific (i.e. not just something like “communicate”—too broad!). For most topics, I suspect that the “was” option, claiming that computers did fundamentally change how something was done, will be easier to argue, but the “was not” option will probably make a more interesting paper, if
you can support the claim.

You don’t have to phrase your thesis statement exactly like that, but the general meaning should be the same. As with the topic, I may ask you to refine it further if I don’t think it will work well. Email me with your proposed thesis statement by Friday, 30 January.

**Paper sources**

After you’ve settled on a thesis, you’ll need to go find sources that you can use to marshal evidence for your claim. Remember that you’ll be expected to include descriptions of the pre-computer ways things worked, so make sure that some of your sources cover this. Your source list should *not* include Wikipedia or any other encyclopaedia, although you may use such resources to help you find actual sources. Your source list *may* include websites, but only if they are reliable; “some guy’s blog” would not, in general, be a good source.

Each reference in your source list should be in a format suitable for use as a References or Works Cited page. After each source, you should write a sentence or two indicating (broadly) what you will learn from that source and why it is an acceptable, reliable source. Submit your source list on Canvas by Friday, 13 February.

**Paper sample**

By spring break, you should be getting started with writing the body of the paper, but before you get too deep into it, I want to make sure you have a clear understanding of how to quote and cite sources. As such, I want to see a short sample of your writing: an excerpt of two or three sentences that includes at least one direct quote, and an excerpt of two or three sentences that includes at least one idea paraphrased from a source. (A single paragraph that includes examples of both is also acceptable.)

If you’ve written more by this point, I still only want the short sample for this assignment. Submit your paper sample by Friday, 27 February.
Paper abstract

An “abstract”, in this context, is a short summary of a paper that includes the thesis itself and an overview of each major line of argument or piece of evidence that will be used. One way to write an abstract is to write the whole paper, and then for each paragraph of the paper, write a one-sentence summary. A better way, for our purposes, is to make a list of the main points you want to make, and then write a few sentences that mention them (without going into any detail). This gives me an idea of the structure of your paper and how you’re laying things out proportionally.

Submit your abstract by Friday, 20 March.

Paper

In the end, the paper should be 6–8 pages not counting the bibliography, with the typical typographical instructions (12 point, Times or similar serif font, double spaced, one-inch margins). I don’t need a separate cover sheet.

Submit the paper by Friday, 3 April.

Paper revision

I’ll read and make comments on the paper, and return it by the 10th. In some cases I may require a revision with specific changes in order for you to receive credit, but for most students the revision will be optional: if you want to edit your paper to incorporate my comments, you can do so, and otherwise the original will stand.

If you choose to or are required to revise the paper, submit it by the start of class on Friday, 24 April.