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English Composition II

Scenarios for Comp II Research Essays

SCENARIO I: WRITING HISTORY

As part of Wichita's plans to celebrate the upcoming sesquicentennial (in 2020) of its incorporation in 1870, you have been appointed to a committee to research and write the text for plaques to be located in various places in the city that will commemorate the city's early founders. Specifically, you will be writing the text of the plaque that replaces the "Wichita Indians" plaque currently in Riverside Park with one that describes the Indians' experiences in the area during the Civil War. In the course of your research, for which you will write a historically-accurate text, you have so far found two other, online sources that cover this same period.

From the text of the current "Wichita Indians" at the Murdoch Street entrance to Riverside Park. Spellings are the plaque's own:

In 1864, about 1500 Wichita Indians, favoring the Union, returned to their ancestral lands and settled along the Little Arkansas River which offered protection from the Confederate tribes until the Civil War ended. The Wichita Indians (consisting of Wichitas, Wacos, Towacanis, Taovayas, and Kechis) are credited with the founding of Wichita. Aside from lending their name, which means "scattered lodges," it was their supply needs that brought traders and eventually settlers. Because of the war, food and supplies for the Indians were meager. This led to an illegal yet profitable cattle trade and the development of the Chisolm Trail to connect Wichita and Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). When the Civil War was over, the Indians were ordered to relocate to Oklahoma in October. They were not given ample supplies and their trek was devastating. So many died along the way that Skeleton Creek was named after them.

An excerpt from the former "Wichita History" page of the official website for the City of Wichita (link now broken); punctuations are the text's own:

The first recorded permanent settlement was a collection of grass houses built in 1863 by the Wichita Indians. Due to the tribe's pro-Union sentiment in the midst of the Civil War, the Wichita moved north from Indian Territory (Oklahoma) under the protection of the U.S. government. J. R. Mead, among others, established profitable businesses trading with the Wichita and supplying the government agency charged with their protection. When the region's native peoples were "removed" to Indian Territory in 1867 to open the area for white settlement, the trading business followed them, using the Wichita site as a base and establishing the Chisholm Trail as a route of transport.

An excerpt from the "History" page of the website of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes (<http://wichitatribe.com/history/days-of-darkness-1820-1934.aspx>):

Although a reservation and agency were established, the Wichita people were not able to remain in this land [west-central Oklahoma]. In 1863, they were forced by Confederate troops to leave their reservation and flee north to Kansas. While in Kansas from 1863 to 1867, the Wichitas had no land to farm and few friends to help them in their time of trouble. Many people starved. Others suffered from smallpox and cholera epidemics that swept through their villages. Only 822 people returned to Indian Territory in 1867.

Using these passages as your starting point, conduct research to clarify, as best you can, the discrepancies in the information you see in these sources, and learn more about James R. Mead (the man after whom Mead Street in Old

Town is named) and his dealings with the Indians in order to offer a succinct but accurate chronology and description of these years for the text of the plaque you are responsible for. Your paper will also include discussions of the sources you find and your judgment of what you learn.

SCENARIO II: “THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON LOVE”: USING SCIENCE TO MAKE VALUE JUDGMENTS ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL’S WORTH

We humans have always sought to offer “rational” explanations for all sorts of human phenomena, activities and concepts that are so engrained in us that they can seem not to have such explanations at all. Of course, what passes for “rational” has changed over millennia: we no longer explain personality via the theory of the humors or claim that Hermes is causing us to dream by standing by our heads as we sleep and whispering messages from the gods. Over the past few decades, however, as our knowledge of and ability to measure and scan the human body and its functions have grown, there has been an exponential growth in seeking and offering scientific explanations for these same activities and concepts. These range all the way from Richard Dawkins’ concept of the meme (an idea that survives and propagates and mutates and dies to the extent that people pick up on that idea and spread it), which for some people helps explain not just LOLCats but also things like the origins of systems of morality, to claims by researchers to have located not just abnormalities in the brain that make certain people susceptible to behaviors like gambling, kleptomania, and substance abuse but also to have located things like the so-called “God gene.” We now have the ability to be tested to determine whether we have genetic predispositions for certain diseases; some recent murder cases have seen the introduction of medical evidence during trial to argue that because an accused person’s brain shows him/her to have attributes held by sociopaths, s/he should not be held accountable for his/her actions; and, as in the video cited below, researchers can observe and measure brain activity to determine who can love more intensely than others.

For this scenario, begin by finding and watching the short film *The Love Competition* (about 15 minutes; completely safe for work—in fact, you might find it worthwhile to watch and discuss it with someone whom you love and who says s/he loves you (whether that love be romantic or familial or just good old fashioned deep friendship doesn’t matter, as you’ll see):

You can find the video on YouTube by entering “The Love Competition” in the search box; here’s the link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk81dG9t4qo>

As you watch, think about these questions: 1) Do you see any value in research like this beyond the purely scientific realm? That is, to make up a hypothetical example, what might people do if it were possible to post MRI scans of their brains on online dating sites? eHarmony, after all, has fairly elaborate inventories for personality to determine compatibility—why not also match for compatibility based on truly empirical data such as these brain scans? What if it were someday determined that people judged to be “loving” parents produced a certain kind of MRI image—could/should that information be taken into consideration when making judgments about fitness for custody, guardianship or adoption . . . or even becoming a parent in the first place? 2) The film announces a 1st-place and 2nd-place winner; what are the implications of those judgments for the other participants regarding their kind of or capacity for love? Is their “love” less genuine than that of the winners? Along these lines, think about whether or not you are surprised by the outcome, and give some thought to *why* you’re surprised.

If you come to think that having and making available to others knowledge of this sort is of value, begin to work out a protocol for using this data: Under what circumstances and to what extent should it be used, and why? Draw upon anecdote, biology, philosophy/ethics/religion, and the law to make your determinations. Alternately, if you believe it should not be used, be sure to make the case for why it shouldn’t be, drawing on the same areas of study listed in this paragraph.

(Or, if writing a protocol for MRIs of people’s brains while loving someone doesn’t appeal to you, explore and work out a protocol for using information from brain scans for other purposes, such as evidence in courts of law, as conditions for (certain kinds of) employment, etc. Do be sure to begin your thinking by watching the video and thinking about the questions I’ve asked about it, though. Also, be sure you understand what MRI scans show and—just as important—what they **do not** show.)

SCENARIO III: YOUR CIVIL WAR ANCESTORS

Your family is planning a big reunion for this coming summer. In honor of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the reunion's organizers want as many members as possible to research and write up accounts of the lives and activities of the family's ancestors during the war, whether or not they fought in either army. Find out as much information as you can about one of your ancestors and/or his/her family, including something of what life in general was like in the area in which they lived during those times, and report on what you find. Don't "novelize" your forebears' lives, but don't be afraid to speculate based on what you learn, either.

A suggestion: Sometimes, learning and thinking about what your ancestors did *after* the war (especially if they lived in the Southern states) can give you insight into what they did *during* the war, and why they did it—here is an example of what I mean regarding my great-great-grandfather (though, please note, my blog post is very informal in its organization):

<http://blogmeridian.blogspot.com/2011/07/my-own-louts-note-on-ancestor-during.html>

The goal of such speculation is not so much to be right—indeed, you may never know for certain—but just to think about these people as human beings living during a time when many, many people had to make very difficult choices, no matter (and despite) their politics or their feelings about slavery, or black people in general, or Lincoln, or their identity as Southerners or, for that matter, as citizens of a nation.

SCENARIO IV: THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN IN FILM

You are one of the curators of a series of events on Butler's El Dorado and Andover campuses that explores the rise (and acceleration) of technology as explored in the arts since the invention of the integrated circuit in 1959. You are in charge of selecting a series of films (5 to 10) made since 1959 that to your mind explores different technologies and the dynamic between technology and human beings—in other words, computers, robots, etc. in these films are more than simple plot devices. (As an example: The *Star Wars* films ultimately aren't about the technology in them or how the characters interact with it—indeed, the films seem to be arguments, via the idea of The Force, that technology is irrelevant in the end. However, the androids in *Blade Runner* are most definitely at the center of that film's concerns as well as its plot.) These films will be screened throughout the year, with discussion sessions following each screening.

To provide an organizing principle for the films you choose, begin by identifying *either* different types of technologies being examined (such as robots/artificial intelligence, medicine, computers/the Web, etc.) *or* different human-technology dynamics. Obviously, with many of the films you choose you'll end up talking about both those categories; the purpose of my suggestion is simply to provide your paper with a frame. Give some thought as well to the *order* in which you will show the films.

As for the films, be prepared to discuss not just that the films deal with the technologies or themes you've selected, but *how* they deal with them—that is, what they seem to be saying about those themes. The ideal would be to find films which have different, conflicting things to say about some of those themes. As appropriate, make connections (comparisons and contrasts) between and among the films you've selected.

Obviously, the films themselves will be your chief sources of information; however, you will also be expected to seek out and incorporate commentary from outside sources, such as reviews and discussions of the specific films, larger studies of genres (such as sci-fi films, dystopian films, etc.), and non-fiction materials dealing with the technologies themselves and the philosophical questions raised by them.

To get you started in your thinking, here are some films that I think would be appropriate for this scenario—but you are by no means limited to these titles: *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Being John Malkovic*; *Blade Runner* (director's cut); *The Conversation*; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; *Her*; *The Hunger Games*; *I, Robot*; *Koyaanisqatsi*; *The Matrix* trilogy; *Minority Report*; *My Sister's Keeper*; *Naqoyqatsi*; *Soylent Green*; *Wall-E*.

SCENARIO V: THINKING LOCALLY

The City of Wichita has adopted the revitalization plans of several neighborhood associations for inclusion into the City and County Comprehensive Plan. These plans address everything from street and sidewalk repair and zoning changes to the addition of park land and plans to attract new/different businesses and other kinds of development to their area. Look around your own neighborhood which, for the sake of argument, we'll define as a circle with a two-mile radius, your residence serving as the center. What are its strengths and weaknesses as a neighborhood? What does it have that you wish it had more/less of? What does it not have that it should have, and why should it have it? Have a look at one or more of the neighborhood plans here--

<http://www.wichita.gov/Government/Departments/Planning/NR/Pages/default.aspx> -- for ideas and inspiration, then write a research essay in which you make the case for a project in your neighborhood that, to your mind, would enhance the overall quality of life for its residents. Be **specific** with your proposal; your paper should not be a laundry list of things. Or, if your neighborhood is one of those that has submitted a plan, consider looking at it and determine whether to your mind it proposes a vision of your neighborhood that includes you and your thinking. If it doesn't, what would you change, and why?

For context, think about the broader question of what to your mind enhances a neighborhood's (or city's) livability; compare Wichita to other cities you know well as a way of beginning to think about livability.

Your paper should include maps, diagrams, charts indicating that you have done some research into costs, etc.

Related to but distinct from this scenario: The City of Wichita has developed a bicycle master plan for the city, with the implementation of its first two projects scheduled to begin in 2015. Here is the link to the webpage for this endeavor: <http://www.wichita.gov/Government/Departments/Planning/Pages/Bicycle.aspx>. In particular, be sure to look under the "Documents" tab at Chapter 5, "Bikeway Network and Priorities" and the maps in the appendices. As you do so, think about your own experiences as a user of Wichita's streets, as well as the experiences of your family and friends and acquaintances. Try to envision Wichita with streets that are more bike-friendly than they currently are. What would be some of the advantages and disadvantages of living in and moving about in such a city? (Keep in mind that such a master plan will eventually affect just about everyone who uses the city's streets, not just cyclists.) Write a research essay in which you argue in favor of or against enhancing the city's street infrastructure so that it will be more bike-friendly. If you are in favor of such a plan, be sure to describe as precisely as you can the kinds and locations of infrastructure you'd want to see in place (maps would be great, of course). If you are opposed to such a plan, be sure to explain why you are opposed; look at other cities with bicycle master plans to see how they have succeeded/failed.

SCENARIO VI: TEACHING A CONTROVERSIAL BOOK

You are the superintendent of a suburban public school district in Kansas. Several English teachers at your district's high school want to teach the 1884 edition of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; because this novel is regarded by many as controversial, they have responsibly and respectfully announced their intention to both you and to the parents of the students they will be assigning the novel to, and you have begun to hear a range of opinions from those parents, both for and against, and for various reasons. These opinions, by the way, do not cut neatly along racial lines.

You want to trust your teachers' judgment and offer your support, but you have come to recognize that to do so, you'll need to answer two important questions about *Huckleberry Finn*: 1) Is it a racist novel, and why or why not?; 2) Regardless of whether or not you think it is a racist novel, do you think it is appropriate to teach this novel at the high school level, and why or why not? You must carefully explain your thinking on these questions to your faculty: not just your answers, but your own reading and thinking, and your familiarity with the many and varied perspectives on these questions, that led you to those answers.

SCENARIO VII: “WHAT ARE WE DOING?”: TECHNOLOGY, THE IDEA OF WORK, AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANS

No doubt you have given some thought on occasion to how personal technology defines and affects your online and “real life” dealings and relationships with other people. As the article “It’s a love-hate relationship with technology” (USA Today.com 21 Aug 2011) makes clear, the jury is still out as to whether these devices ultimately help or hinder human interaction.

At a deeper level, though, it may be that the increasing digitalization of human activity has implications for the question of what activities are those that only humans can perform, or those activities are, or should be, the exclusive domain of human beings. Read and think carefully about this paragraph from the prologue to Hannah Arendt’s book, *The Human Condition* (1958).

The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society. The fulfillment of the wish, therefore, like the fulfillment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating. It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won. Within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labor’s way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew . . . What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.

Arendt is writing here about the increasing mechanization of labor once performed by humans—she says, in fact, that the idea for her book began with the deceptively-simple question you see in the title of this scenario. However, she wrote this passage a year before the invention of the integrated circuit. If anything, the issues she raises seem even more important now: since that invention, Western society has become not only more automatized and mechanized but also more digitalized, to the point that researchers are intent on building computers that can faithfully replicate, via text, human speech patterns (in the “Modules” section of your course homepage, see Brian Christian’s article “Mind vs. Machine” and Kevin Drum’s article, “Welcome, Robot Overlords. Please Don’t Fire Us?”)

So, what do you make of all this? Are human beings fated to be reduced, in many cases, to maintenance workers taking care of machines that do the “real work”—“work,” here, meaning a fair amount of intellectual work as well as physical labor—or will (or should) there always be some tasks left to or reserved for human beings to perform because machines cannot or should not do them? Or will entirely new areas of “work” emerge for human beings? Do some reading and thinking about these questions to see what others have said on the subject. (One helpful way to begin narrowing the topic would be to look at how technology is used in and/or is affecting/changing the career or area of work you are interested in pursuing.) In short: how might our understanding of human freedom become altered in a world where researchers seem intent on designing machines that perform work and even think more and more like humans do? There’s plenty of non-fictional speculation on these matters, as you might expect; however, because much science fiction has speculated on these questions for a long time, it’s perfectly appropriate to consider fictional responses to these questions as well. Do some reading, and a lot of thinking, and develop a thesis with arguments in which you argue, in essence, that machines and computers are making us more (or less) free.

SCENARIO VIII: THE “JOHN HENRY” VARIATIONS

You are a student in an interdisciplinary class (American history and sociology) titled “Machines and Manual Labor in Early 20th-Century America,” a class which requires a research project. Over the course of the semester, you have come across mention of the folk legend of John Henry, which began to appear during the period you are studying. A sign of its widespread popularity, you learn, is that the folk song “John Henry” exists in dozens of different recordings dating from the earliest days of recorded music, made by white and black musicians from throughout the Southeast, differing from each other in terms of lyrics—that is, certain small details and which episodes from the folk tale are included or excluded. (For what it may be worth, it’s not always mentioned in the songs, but no matter who sings “John Henry,” when it is mentioned, John Henry is African American.) You approach your instructors with the idea of doing something involving the song, and here is what they suggest to you as a research project:

Find **at least 10** different recordings of “John Henry” **dating from before World War II**. Transcribe the lyrics, make note of the ethnicity of the performers and where in the U.S. they come from. Do you note any correlation(s) between the ethnicity of the performers and the specific details of the verses they sing? Assuming that there are differences, how would you account for them?

Along these lines, the sheer number of early recordings tells you that the central story in this song was immensely popular in the early decades of the 20th century; the story also inspired songs that served as commentaries on the John Henry legend, such as “Spike Driver Blues” and “Nine-Pound Hammer’s Too Heavy.” How do you account for that popularity?

Note: As you pursue your research, you’ll find considerable discussion of the historical event(s) that gave rise to the John Henry legend and songs. You’re more than welcome to read and think about that information, but keep in mind that the goal in this scenario is **not** to decide whether the central story is true or where it took place. Your goal is to engage in some speculation about why the legend and songs were so popular for so long in this country.

SCENARIO IX: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT MACHINES THAT THINK?

Every year, Edge, which is a consortium of scientists, researchers, and other thinkers, poses an Annual Question to its members and to others. Edge.org posts their responses every January. The question for January of 2015 was, “What Do You Think about Machines that Think?” and the website has published the 186 responses it received. Your psychology or ethics professor (choose **one**) has asked you to write a response to this same question, one that both addresses some of those 186 responses (needless to say, you don’t have to read all of them, just some of those that touch on the question(s) you want to explore in your paper) and incorporates your reading and thinking about the readings on AI that we will be discussing in class, as well as other readings (non-fiction as well as fiction) and films you have found on your own.

As you can see, this is a very open-ended prompt, so here are some questions from which to choose one in order to focus your research and thinking and direct your writing**:

- 1) Is it even possible to build a thinking machine?
- 2) Assuming it is possible to build a thinking machine, is it wise to do so? Why or why not?
- 3) Should robots have protections that are equivalent to human rights?
- 4) Can machines have emotions? Should they?
- 5) How might people’s interactions with intelligent machines affect people’s interactions with each other?

**Keep in mind that some of these will also require you to do some thinking (and writing) about the meanings of words such as “intelligence” and “thinking” as used by people in AI research, as well as your own understanding of those terms.

In addition to the essays at Edge.org, the assigned readings and videos for our class module on Artificial Intelligence, and our watching and discussion of *WALL-E*, here are some other places to look (which you are by no means restricted to): Keith Frankish and William H. Ramsey, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*; Ray Kurzweil, *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed*, and *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*; Shelly Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*; Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Mind*; and Stuart Armstrong, *Smarter Than Us: The Rise of Machine Intelligence*. You’ll also find lots of material online; two good websites to look at for thorough (and usually balanced) discussions of recent research and the questions it raises are Wired.com and Vice.com’s channel *Motherboard* (be certain that you follow the links in those articles, too, as they will take you to the actual write-ups of that research). Finally, in addition to *WALL-E*, numerous films dramatize these same issues that you are welcome to watch and include as part of your discussion.