

Philosophy 217J
The Trivium
Stephen Whittaker

The Field Notebook

What cannot language do? The ancient Celts believed that a curse well made might stop someone's heart or transform them into a bird. Modern Christians believe that a correct formulation of words has the power to command the God of heaven descend. Shakespeare wrote that the poet's pen "gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." Marianne Moore said that poetry cultivates "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Thomas Jefferson seemed to think that a declaration might justify bloody revolution. A century before Plato lived, the Greek poet Sappho wondered at the marvel that words, though only breath, could not die, yet bowed to her command. Contemporary psychologists find that language frames the very architecture of our brains, while philosophers of language assert that what we cannot say, we cannot even think. George Orwell argued that together the health of language and the health of civilization form a kind of feedback loop, reenforcing or undercutting each other as the case may be. Indeed, the framers of our constitution believed that our system of civil life would depend absolutely on our free use of language. Or as a citizen of this remarkable democracy might put it two hundred years later, "language, you know, wow, it's like totally cool and stuff."

You swim in a sea of language. It shapes your every thought, perhaps even your every perception. It delivers your education, makes possible your social life, feeds your main hope for a career, for life, and for love (both sex and that deeper thing that sex, usually within the chrysalis of language, can metamorphose into). Why, without language you cannot even order beer.

This sea of language reaches miles deep and thousands of miles wide. Its variety encompasses lightless depths and teems with every sort of mystery. Its denizens offer every shape the wile of nature can speak. Storms of unimaginable violence stir its political tropics. Sheets of apparently immovable iciness gird its great books. Humans, predictably enough, flock to its tepid shallows, where alas, they often spill their offal and their oil. Because you swim the English channel (not to be confused with Empty-V), it behooves you to become expert in its ways, to become a connoisseur of its nuance, a scientist of its specific, peculiar, particulars.

To this end, you will keep a sewn lab-style field notebook in which every day you will collect, document, and annotate a new specimen of the interesting use of language, whether spoken or written. Each specimen should illustrate some grammatical, logical, or rhetorical forte or foible, or perhaps several. Each entry should bear a date, a number indicating its place in the entire sequence, as well as clear and thorough indication of the specimen's provenience. If you use a notebook containing 100 leaves, you should be able to give each entry its own page. Feel free to include original or xeroxed copies of print specimens. Tape these copies neatly into the notebook in such a way that they can be easily examined and, when folded in, do not extend beyond the edges of the notebook. All valid entries will be hand written.

Each entry which includes an interesting and valid specimen, precisely documented and thoroughly annotated, will receive one point. Entries incomplete in any respect will not receive credit. Entries which I cannot easily read do not exist. Each entry should be headed with the date of collection and given a consecutive number. **If you complete one entry each day during the semester you can accumulate about 100 entries your journal grade will be a 100, which is an A+.** You cannot score more than 100 on the project, which counts one seventh of your course grade. You can, however, score less than zero, in that omission of the project will result in failure of the course.

Your analysis should tell explicitly why the specimen is interesting and analyze precisely how it works.

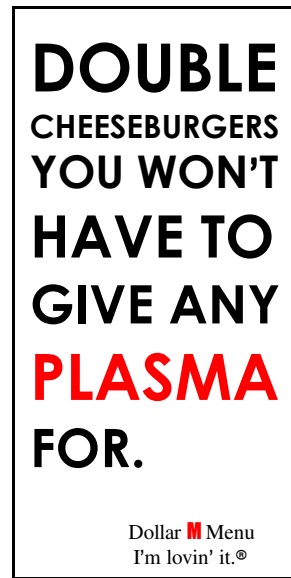
Document all print, recorded, or cyberspace sources according to the guidelines in Hacker. Document all spoken or broadcast sources on analogy with those guidelines. Your reader should never be in doubt as to precisely where and when you collected a specimen.

Collect your specimens everywhere: the more variety the better. Sift the speech of friends, acquaintances, strangers, professors, public officials. Cull interesting phrases from your reading, whether homework assignments, magazines and newspapers, or bill boards. CD's, radio, movies, and television offer limitless material. But remember, you construct a field notebook, not a report of other people's research. Many publications, such as *Newsweek* and *Consumer Reports*, include lists of notable, odd, or ironic speech. A gleaning of other people's collections has no value and constitutes at best omission of the project and at worst plagiarism. Likewise, some programming offers collections of linguistic oddities in the form of a story. Don't use more than one or two specimens from such sources as *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld*. In fact, don't use any source more than four times. Furthermore, all specimens taken from periodical sources (such as newspapers, magazines, and TV shows) must be taken from *current* issues.

This project aims quietly to transform you into a connoisseur of your native tongue. To have this effect, the project must be pursued steadily, daily, throughout the semester. If you, like a glutton, cram in the feast at closing time, you defeat the entire purpose of this part of your education, and you digest very little. Do not do this. Work steadily and consider it my prerogative to have a look at your effort at any old time during the semester and to pro-rate your grade accordingly. **Indeed, expect this.**

In the end you should have produced nearly one hundred analyzed instances of English at its best and worst, its most intellectually powerful and most unconsciously ludicrous. Naturally, as we progress in our review of the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—I expect to see these perspectives inform your analyses.

Entry # 1. [example]
27 January 2006



This sign appears in a display case at the entry to the food court on the third floor of Gunster. In the original the word “Plasma” and the McDonald’s M are both in red.

This sign stands out for several reasons. Because of the red “Plasma” I first thought it a poster for a Red Cross Blood drive. But of course those are whole blood drives. When I recognized the sign as an advertisement, my first thought was disgust. I wondered: why do we post whorish advertisements for junk food right outside the food court? We appear to have sold out our students.

Grammatically, the period makes the main message an incomplete sentence, one featuring contractions and ending with a colloquial final preposition. The small print similarly disregards the niceties of standard English.

Logically, the poster emphasizes the cheapness of McDonald’s Burgers and, though it sports the corporate logo, the corporate name does not appear. The thought moves as follows: you probably want a cheeseburger; you cannot afford one; you sometimes sell your blood for food; now you don’t have to. The phrase “I’m lovin’ it,” thus suggests both the deliciousness of the transmissible spongiform encephalopathy vector, but also the wonderfulness of the McDonald’s “Dollar Menu”.

Rhetorically, the poster speaks street to proverbially short-of-cash college students who might ordinarily be tempted to exchange blood for beef. Perhaps this explains why the University of Scranton displays the advertisement. After all, it doesn’t seem logical to try to sell even cheap food to people on mean plans, the normal foot traffic of this corridor. But the religious subtext explains a lot; the poster offers a kind of salvation. The sacrificial bovine blood will replace one’s own. Note in this regard the emphasis on “Give” rather than the more accurate “sell”. Even the color and typography suggest Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. ☺