

Conspiracy A-Go-Go, AKA: Source Analysis Research Paper

One of the reasons for conspiracy theories is an assumption that people in high places always know what they are doing. When they do something that makes no sense, devious reasons are imagined by conspiracy theorists, when in fact it may be due to plain old ignorance and incompetence. - Thomas Sowell

The biggest conspiracy has always been the fact that there is no conspiracy. Nobody's out to get you. Nobody gives a (darn) whether you live or die. There, you feel better now? - Dennis Miller

For this assignment, you are going to explore a particular conspiracy theory and how/why it developed. Your method will be source analysis: studying what makes for a reputable or a non-reputable source. As you examine both the official and unofficial story behind the conspiracy, you will consider where your various sources come from, how they build their reasoning and logic, and then use this information to evaluate the merit of the conspiracy.

When regarding a conspiracy of any stripe, **consider issues of power.** “Ghosts actually exist” does not qualify as a conspiracy, as there is no overarching group attempting to shape this narrative one way or another; moreover, there is nothing at stake with regard to whether we end up believing such things. **In nearly every conspiracy theory, there is a sense that the “powers that be” are manipulating, covering up, exaggerating, or otherwise puppet-mastering circumstances behind the scenes,** often in order to establish/maintain some kind of “new world order” (a phrase you’ll hear a lot) or societal hierarchy.

So, what’s the argument?

Why did this conspiracy develop and what does it say about our society? What is, as best as you can figure via the respective reliability of the sources, the “true story”? Balance source information with your own voice; you should not have huge chunks of source info plunked down into your paper. **USE DIRECT QUOTES FREQUENTLY AND JUDICIOUSLY.** And the kicker: **Always address the reliability or the sketchiness of your source material directly in the paper.** Again, this is not simply a historical report of a certain conspiracy theory; part of your structure here is to include source analysis that will then build into your final argument. *Know too that some conspiracies have been proven true—keep an eye out for when the “official” story turns out to be sketchy.*

Here’s a checklist to guide the structure of your essay:

- **Thesis** (Hint: give yourself the freedom to shift your thesis as your research progresses)
- **Cover the “official” story: support with sources.** Avoid giving a history lesson. You will need two reliable sources that corroborate one another, such major newspapers and magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Slate Magazine*, *Wall Street Journal*, etc. If you’re not sure if a source is reliable, ask me!
- **Present the conspiracy theory: support with sources.** Be sure you have your filters on high! You might be heading into some strange corners of the internet. You are on your honor to NOT linger on an inappropriate site, especially when we are at the library.
- **Address source analysis questions** such as reliability, reasoning, author ethos and credibility, logical use of information and evidence, rhetorical fallacies, and more!
- **Decide which way you lean.** Which angle and sources sway you the most and why?
- **Bring it all home!** Regardless of whether the conspiracy turns out to be or plausible, what gave rise to it? What societal factors make the theory so appealing? What does the existence of this theory illustrate about our society or human nature?

And the basic requirements...

- **Length:** 6-7 pages, not including bibliography—no less than 5 sources (see above)
- **Bibliography: proper MLA format**
- **Photocopies/printouts for each page from a source where you have drawn a quote.** The quoted material you used must be highlighted. This will be your addendum after the main paper and handed in with the final draft. I cannot accept your paper without this—don't be the one person who forgets it!

There are two possible directions your paper might travel in:

1. You will be contradicting the “official story” (because you have found reliable evidence to disprove the official story). You will analyze why the official story is told the way it is, what is being protected or managed by this altered truth, and share further insight about the implications of such a cover-up. Do not do this just for kicks.
2. (*Much more common*) You will be contradicting the conspiracy that seeks to disprove the official story. In this case, you will be providing evidence of how the conspiracy is baseless and, more importantly, conducting an analysis of where the conspiracy comes from. Based on your research, explain who is invested in this conspiracy and has something to gain from it. Give careful attention to your sources: where do they come from?

Research paper schedule:

****First up: Choose a conspiracy theory! Email me your top two choices by 5pm the Friday before class. First come, first served! If you want to choose your own topic, it must be approved by me. Have the “official story” under your belt (maybe a source or two?) by next class.****

Week 19 **FIRST RESEARCH DAY**

We will be reviewing some library tutorials & looking over the research guide.
Have at least two sources by end of class & worksheet completed to hand in.

Week 20 **SECOND RESEARCH DAY**

Due by end of class:

- Working introduction
- Working thesis statement
- Rough outline (obviously, you will add/change it after doing more research, but you should have an idea regarding the shape of this essay)
- Working bibliography, formatted correctly

Week 21 **PEER EDITING DAY**

Submit three copies of your essay for peer editing. This draft should hit 6-8pgs!

Week 22 **FINAL DRAFT DUE**

We'll host a mini-symposium where we informally share our research and discuss the importance of source analysis, critical reading, and skepticism in the modern age.
Topical, no?

AN LENGTHY BUT BY NO MEANS EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF POPULAR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

...but before we dive in, a note: You may or may not have noticed that we are living in an age of extreme information illiteracy, rhetorical hyperbole, and scapegoating. It is more important than ever that you be able to develop (and utilize! frequently!) critical thinking and analytical skills when looking at sources. You must maintain an open mind when researching materials, and you must be acutely aware of who the Powers that Be actually are, and more importantly, who they are not.

Presidential conspiracies:

- Barack Obama citizenship
- Benghazi
- October Surprises
- Deep State
- Russian interference in 2016 election
- Pizzagate/QAnon
- Foreign interference in elections (and keep in mind, the US has been accused of being that foreign interference too! Just ask South America.)

Secret Societies: Groups vying for world domination throughout history or just a bunch of guys getting together for a drink? Discuss how a particular secret society or organization is actually shaping global policy above the edicts of sovereign governments, but explore the group's connection to *one specific news event*; your goal is NOT to explore the entire history of the group.

- Skull and Bones
- Freemasons
- The Council on Foreign Relations
- Knights Templar
- Illuminati
- Mafia ties to certain famous and/or political figures
- What about cults? These are seemingly ripe for this kind of discussion, but make sure that they actually fall under the heading of conspiracy. Avoid gawking at strange but largely insular habits. (Scientology, for example, would need to focus on a particular conspiracy re: the group and their actions.)

Old Government Cover-ups, Experiments, etc.:

- Agent Orange
- Altered casualty numbers in Vietnam, Iraq, etc.
- MIAS and POWS
- Aurora Research Program (HAARP)
- Testing mind-control drugs on prisoners and unknowing citizens
- Unreported radiation fallout from nuclear testing
- Philadelphia Project
- Gulf War Syndrome

False Flag Conspiracies: These concern events that a government has planned or atrocities they have allowed to happen on their own soil in order to facilitate new laws, political actions, or greater control over their populace.

- 9/11
- Pearl Harbor
- Mass shootings such as Sandy Hook, Newtown, Mandalay Bay, Columbine, etc.
- Oklahoma City Bombing

Cover-ups regarding renewable energies:

- Cold Fusion (supposedly discovered, but has not been allowed to be released)
- Electric cars (these made up the majority of vehicles before 1920, why did they disappear?)
- Free energy (such a machine is generally associated with Nikola Tesla, but other theories also persist)

Assassinations and Deaths:

- Malcolm X
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Marilyn Monroe
- Governor George Wallace
- Amelia Earhart
- DB Cooper
- Elvis
- Government-sponsored assassinations/cover-ups involving leaders of radical activist groups (Black Panthers, Black Lives Matter, etc.) as well as other scandals (Jeffrey Epstein, anyone?)
- SO MANY OTHERS! Notorious B.I.G., Jimi Hendrix, Princess Diana, John Lennon...the list goes on...

Odds and Ends:

- Flat Earth
- Climate change (that it is a grand hoax, or, conversely, that the true extent of climate change is being covered up by government entities)
- QAnon (word of warning: a conspiracy this fresh and still developing can be hard to write about!)
- Holocaust denial (the idea that the Holocaust itself is a hoax; connected to deeply anti-Semitic beliefs about power structures in the world)
- FEMA camps
- Chemical trails, water conspiracies, etc.—is there a plot to inject poison, mind-control substances, or other ingredients in the air we breathe and the water we drink?
- Alex Jones. Basically, anything he says or does. What's his angle?
- The Koch Brothers and dark money: What are these massive corporate donors really funding behind the scenes?
- Monsanto, the FDA, and other intersections between corporate food interests and the government. Are they really working together in the best interest of the people?

Notable exceptions:

Common conspiracies like the moon landing and JFK Assassination have been omitted from this list so that you will investigate less worn-out territory. Get creative! Go into weird places!

Want to tackle something not on this list? **You know what to do: email me for approval!**

***“Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore
powerful...”:***
Frankenstein Unit Essay

Time for our very last unit essay together! Since this will be our final big analysis assignment, I will expect you to bring the full force of your literary analysis to this essay. Get deep! Get specific! Quote the heck out of the text and show me the complexity of your understanding, how the novel operates in the context of its time, other literary movements, and our contemporary consciousness.

****Regular unit essay rules apply: 5 full pages minimum, double-spaced,
12 pt Times New Roman, creative title.****

What’s this? An extra challenge? You bet! This essay will require at least 3 outside scholarly sources, AKA sources not *Frankenstein*, what we refer to as “secondary sources.” Figure out what will be most helpful for your chosen topic, and use those search terms to find out what other smart, learned people have dreamt up in their analysis of this long-read novel. **This means you gotta get back on those good old library databases, especially the ones focusing on literature and the humanities like JSTOR and ProQuest.** These are the databases that I use, and the ones that most easily yield *free* articles from scholarly, literary journals (if you log in with your WMU account, as you should). I highly suggest avoiding Google Scholar, as the good stuff just isn’t there and is often stuck behind a paywall/excerpted from longer, unavailable works.

Your process:

- **Title!** Remember to locate your project. Mentioning the novel or adding “...in *Frankenstein*” at the end of your title is a good rule of thumb.
- **Thesis!** Avoid “water is wet” statements. Your thesis should make clear why this particular topic/perspective on *Frankenstein* is worthy of our analysis and our attention. What does the combination of the text + your particular lens/perspective illuminate, highlight, or reveal? (Hint: these are great verbs in integrate into your thesis!)
- **Quoting!** Aim for frequent but concise quotes, both direct and indirect; if you have a long quote (block or otherwise), you must think really hard on whether it’s justified to quote the entire thing. Focus on the good stuff, what will most succinctly illustrate your points. Otherwise, paraphrase strongly! Always follow up quotes with your own analysis, summary, and contextualizing.
- **Structure / Flow!** Are your points in the best order? Did you create an outline? After you draft, should you do a reverse outline? Is there a sense of accumulation, that the essay is leading us somewhere over the course of its five pages? When we get to that conclusion, are you doing more than just summarizing your previous points?

TOPIC IDEAS

(These are just to get you started. If you have another idea or project in mind, run it by me!)

- 1) **Explore the themes of loneliness, individuality, isolation, and community in *Frankenstein*, in both the creature and Victor.** What do they learn about themselves via their singular “aloneness”? Aside from his obvious grief at the deaths of those he loves, how does Victor change as his world of companions (aka his community) shrinks? What does the novel show us about the way we move through life in isolation or community? Is togetherness a natural part of the human experience more or less than isolation? And what about the monster’s central wish? How significant is that?
- 2) **Explore the concept of gender in novel, especially as it relates to science, nature, and creation.** Pay attention to the gender of the characters and their descriptions, interests, action, plot devices. Can you “map” gender in the novel in any particular way? You can consider Shelley’s background here as well — female writer, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), young writer surrounded by extremely intellectual/passionate men.
- 3) **Explore the concept of voice in the novel.** The novel is an interesting mix of frame narrative, epistolary, story-within-a-story. What function does it serve to hear so many different voices telling one story? What’s significant about who we hear from and who we don’t? What information is left out because of this structure? How do the voices differ in tone, timbre, word choice, diction? Focus on a few scenes in particular for your analysis, and remember to quote directly from the text often.
- 4) **Other ideas?** How about images of wildness vs. domestication (what kinds of events take place in what kinds of settings)? How about the concept of protagonists and antagonists (which is Victor and which is the monster)? Keep your critical lenses close to mind: you can employ any of those to create a unique and nuanced thesis for this complex literary text.

Hint: With all of these topics, ask yourself, “What scenes best illustrate these concepts?” *Frankenstein* is a dense novel and a LOT happens, so you’ll do well to map your topic onto the plot of the novel and focus on what best fits your project so you don’t get overwhelmed. Remember that a DEEP DIVE INTO DETAILS is what we want; show me that you read the novel carefully and that you are analyzing these scenes, paragraphs, and sentences with a keen eye and critical awareness.

OUTLINE / PLAN DUE WEEK 29

ROUGH DRAFT/PEER REVIEW/CONFERENCES WEEK 30

FINAL DRAFT DUE WEEK 31

Beyond Language: Creative Deconstructionist Project

"The limits of language are the limits of my world."
- Ludwig Wittgenstein

"...When you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed."
- Tim O'Brien

For this project, you are going to deconstruct, through the creative means and methods of your choosing, one of the texts we have read for class this year. The goal to engage in a conversation with that particular text and/or author, using the tools of both language and visual art/rhetoric, in order to show the contemporary relevance and application of your chosen work. This is your opportunity to really play with canonical authors and apply your sharpened tools of literary understanding.

The precise form this process takes is up to you. **However, you are required to add or incorporate a visual element to accompany your deconstruction exercise.** Remember that one of deconstruction's core elements is pushing, exploring, and naming the limitations of language. How are you augmenting, adding to, or continuing the conversation this text begins through your chosen medium? What artistic or aesthetic adaptations will help you "break" the text open?

Your main object, as always, is to find your angle. It can be an explicit critical theory or a more subtle combination of multiple lenses. Remember how granular we get with our discussion of texts like *Frankenstein* and *Maus*? **Apply that same level of rigor here: what can you engage with in your chosen text and subsequently craft that builds a greater picture, offers specific emotional resonance, and expresses implicit thesis statements?** No wrong answers here—we're looking for deep analysis, careful attention to detail, and creative, impactful conclusions.

And so, ze Big Bad Question:

How can we use the tools of deconstructionism to engage in rich, critical, creative conversations with canonical texts and authors in an artistic, multimedia format?

Two important logistical notes:

- You may work either solo or in partners, i.e. groups of two.
- You will also craft and submit a 1-2 page critical reflection/metacognitive writing to accompany your creative work (more instructions on this below).

Genre options available to you:

- Erasure
- Collage
- Powerpoint or Prezi presentation
- Short film (if you have the tools/know-how available to you!)
- Spoken word performance (can either be performed in class or filmed)
- Illuminated manuscript
- Comic strip adaptation
- *Have something wild that's not listed here? Let's chat about it!*

Questions to ask yourself as you dive in and choose your text and your angle:

- What are the broad themes that we've returned to over and over again this year?
- What commonalities have you noticed between texts?
- Review your notebook; what subjects have held your attention and made you think the most?
- What text has stuck with you the most? Bothered you the most? Remained on your mind?
- Which text are you most interested in returning to / exploring / breaking down / making something new out of? Which one do you feel like our discussions didn't quite finish for you?

Note: This is an open-ended project by design! We are giving you creative leeway at the end of the year to exercise all your analytical and creative muscles in a single project. You may run ideas by me for approval or to work out the finer points, but be encouraged to take risks! As always, what I'm looking for is thoughtful intention, evidence of effort, and creativity. The deconstructionists were all about play and pleasure and creation, not about destruction. Let's embody that spirit here as well.

Project Specifics:

- **Your creative piece** must engage with a text we have read in class this year. Anything is up for grabs; if you choose a longer work (such as one of our novels), you may focus on a particular excerpt or scene.
- **Quote, liberally, from your chosen text.** It should be obvious what text you are working with and why you chose it.
- **Length** will vary depending on your chosen genre. That might be 4-5 pages of erasure work, ~8 powerpoint slides, ~3-4 minutes of short film, etc. I'll try to touch base with each team once your topic proposals are in to make sure you understand the appropriate scope of what you're trying to do, but strict length matters less than your approach, analysis, and creativity.
- **Strike a balance** in your approach to the chosen text. Take it seriously, show it respect (even if it's an antagonistic/disobedient respect!), and engage with it in a robust fashion.
 - *Don't choose a piece you hate!* Instead, choose a piece you want to go toe to toe with. Remember that this is not about demolishing the old guard, it's about making something new out of the art and, most importantly, continuing the conversation it began.
- **The critical piece** (~2 pages, double-spaced) must elucidate, elaborate upon, and analyze your creative project within a critical context. Explain your thought process, why you chose this piece to engage with, how you crafted your approach, what literary/visual tools you used and why, etc. This critical piece will require you to pull in at least 2 secondary sources, i.e. texts from this unit as scaffolding.

Due Dates:

- **Week 32: Outline & topic proposal due.** Lay out your ideas, materials needed, and a plan for completion over the next two weeks. If you have any questions or pieces of this project that you're unsure about in this stage, make sure you note that as well.
- **Week 33: Rough draft (of some sort!) due.** This will vary depending on your project, but I would like to see some evidence of a significant portion of the project completed.
- **Week 34: Last week of class & final projects are due.** We will present our works in class and likely also eat food and high five and bid farewell to this wonderful year!