

# **Course ENG 122, Composition II**

## **(2nd-Semester Freshman Composition/Literature Course)**

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### **Content Research and Analysis Using Full-Text Word Searches**

#### **Course**

Composition II, ENG 122, (3 semester hours) is designed to further the work begun in Composition I by giving students more experience as writers and readers with various purposes in different contexts. Students write analytical, research, and other advanced papers based on sources from literature and other texts. *Prerequisite: ENG 121*

#### **Description**

This exercise is designed to provide an auxiliary and self-engaging way for students to explore, research, and document traditional literary works in entirely new ways using electronic “filters.”

Using downloadable text files and a few common “find” functions of a typical word processing program, students can perform a variety of quick, easy, and often insightful word searches into a literary work in ways that would be prohibitively time-consuming to perform manually. The ultimate educational purpose of this electronic exploration is to help generate new insights about a literary work for class discussion and debate, which, in the end, will hopefully result in expanding a student’s understanding and enjoyment of a literary work. Other applications of this module might include key word searches of a student’s own papers to assess whether or not he or she sufficiently stayed “on topic.” The value and versatility of this module lies in the imaginative flexibility users have to determine what word(s) they want to find, having a clear reason for finding those words, and being able to determine whether there is significance to any patterns that may or may not emerge from the search results.

The ability to electronically search an entire literary work and instantly find every reoccurrence of a given specific word would allow teachers and students to perform dynamic research and analysis in such areas as literary themes, writing structure, symbolism, and reoccurring motifs.

By using the Internet to download a full-text literary work, such as a novel, play, short story, or epic poem, students can research and analyze that work in a variety of innovative ways by using common word processing program functions. For example, let’s say a teacher wanted to explore the theme of revenge in Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*. The traditional approach—and there’s no substitute for this—would probably center on discussing such things as cause and effect, justification, moral issues, behavioral motivation, character strengths, and weaknesses, and so on. What if we used a computer to instantly find where and how often Shakespeare uses the word *revenge* in his play? By using a common word processor function, the “find” command, we can easily and quickly find and highlight each of the 31 times in which Shakespeare does indeed use the word *revenge* in this play.

Once each occurrence is identified the class might explore which characters are talking about revenge, in what context, what adjectives and adverbs help define *revenge*, and whether or not the concept of revenge plays a central theme within the story. Other potential themes, tentatively identified by specific words, might also be explored and discussed. For example, outlined below is a sample list of central or sub themes students might ascribe to *Titus Andronicus* along with

the number of times these words are actually found in the play itself (again, using the “find” command of a typical word processing program).

<i>power</i>	<b>6</b>
<i>lust</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>greed</i>	<b>0</b>
<i>desire</i>	<b>6</b>
<i>vanity</i>	<b>0</b>
<i>virtue</i>	<b>8</b>
<i>innocence</i>	<b>0</b>
<i>love</i>	<b>24</b>
<i>honour</i>	<b>24</b>

Lower occurrence values for the words above might suggest, for example, that the concepts of power, greed, desire, virtue, and vanity are not strong themes in this play, while the principles of love and honor, by numerical contrast, might be stronger candidates. These numerical differences can give rise to various class discussions and insights that wouldn’t be available through traditional instructional methods.

A logical extension of this exercise might be to expand this approach and explore how multiple word use might provide further insights. For example, students might want to analyze the idea of how often and in what context the concepts of *love*, *honour*, and *revenge* actually occur together. Using various options in *Microsoft Word’s* “Find” command, students can easily highlight each of these words in different boldface colors for quick identification and further exploration either on screen or on a color-printed hard copy.

While this exercise provides a previously unavailable type of quantitative analysis approach to literary analysis, it by no means should or can substitute for the traditional forms of qualitative analysis. In this case, technology simply affords us yet another method to view a literary work in new and hopefully more productive ways.

\* Sample website sources are provided at the end of this document.

### **Transferability**

A large factor in the transferability of this approach to other composition courses and academic disciplines relies largely, of course, on the availability of full-text sources; however, full-text works are beginning to increase dramatically from two sources: (1) the availability of older, no-longer-copy-protected works via Internet sources has risen sharply over the past several years, and (2) more recent works, both on the commercial and academic fronts, are being made available, albeit for a price, in several formats such as web page archives, traditional text, and the new “e-book” formats.

### **Faculty Technology Skill**

- Beginning level ability to input and access a World Wide Web address (URL)
- Ability to download and save files (web sources usually provide detailed directions.)
- Beginning level familiarity with *Microsoft Word*
- Ability to run a typical classroom projector and/or PC-TV monitor

**Note:** An obvious option here is for the teacher to download the file and simply make copies available to his or her students. That’s the simplest and perhaps the most time-saving approach to this exercise. The downside, however, is to deny students the knowledge of these sites and the actual experience of downloading the material for themselves. For these reasons, we believe that the “get-it-yourself” approach far outweighs the “have-it-all-laid-out-for-them-already” method.

### **Student Technology Skill**

- Requirements are essentially the same as above, or.

### **Faculty Equipment**

- Internet access
- Personal computer loaded with *Microsoft Word*
- Projector and wall screen (or large TV monitor) to show PC output

### **Student Equipment**

- Internet access (if doing individual research in class)
- Individual PC with *Microsoft Word*
- Printer, b/w or color (optional)

### **Improves on Teaching and Learning**

The ability to use a word processing program to find reoccurring words and developing patterns provides teachers and students with a powerful and unique research tool to explore literary works in an entirely new way. Again, this method of exploring literary content is an “add on” method of analysis and not a substitute for traditional processes. It offers a way to see something old in a new light, much like one might see a visual object quite differently through the filter of an ultra violet or infra-red light. As such, this research offers several strengths. In summary, it . . .

- is quick, simple, and easy to learn.
- is individually engaging—students control and direct their own research.
- provides a way to get immediate research data and a permanent record of a student’s work.
- is highly flexible and customizable, allowing students to explore new ideas as quickly and easily as they can input new search parameters.
- offers entirely new insights into and avenues for discussing a literary work.

### **Nontechnology Comparison**

Manually searching for and finding reoccurring words and patterns in a literary work would be such a time-intensive task that it would approach a level of practical infeasibility—and certainly one that wouldn’t be conducive to classroom demonstration. It would be work best described as difficult, dull, lengthy, linear, inflexible, and prone to error. In short, the results simply wouldn’t be worth the effort.

The ability of a computer to search—in seconds—a lengthy literary work and find potentially meaningful word patterns makes this method suddenly both interesting and feasible, and the same speedy output of the original results may also encourage students to generate additional ideas and approaches to their individual or collective class research. Unproductive results could lead to quality insights and class discussions as easily as more productive outcomes. The primary strengths of this method of conceptual exploration include its ease, speed, flexibility, its capacity

to personally engage students, and its ability to provide immediate word processing files for further study or integration into later classroom writing projects.

### **Pertinent Issues**

There are few—if any—serious issues related to this approach, but teachers would need to be aware of such things as . . .

- possible copyright violations,(i.e., limitations on what you and your students may or may not be able to do with copyrighted commercial works)
- the considerably wide range of text-available Internet sites, both free and fee sources
- built-in limitations of older word processing programs and printers

### **How to Use in the Classroom**

Again, one of the primary features of this approach lies in its flexibility; indeed, what you can do with this methodology is essentially limited only by your imagination. For a “get acquainted” exercise, however, the approach outlined below will do nicely. To do this exercise, let’s make the following assumptions.

You and your students have . . .

- Internet-connected computers.
- a common word processing program such as *Microsoft Word*.
- printers (color is best, but b/w will do almost as well).
- the ability to save your work either on a hard drive or removable disk.

A week or so before doing the exercise, assign a specific literary work that you and your students will analyze and discuss. Here, practicality demands two things: (1) that students read the work in a traditional print format and (2) that the target work be available and downloadable from an Internet source. Let students know your primary purpose and focus for discussing the work (e.g., to examine the work’s central themes, symbols, motifs, structural organization, or perhaps an all-element overview of the entire work).

Then, with your students having read the work and obtained a working familiarity with it, start with a traditional classroom presentation that might include a background lecture, critical and public reactions to the work, and specific issues raised by the work itself. Allow students to offer their own reactions to, and interpretations of, the work as well. Then, announce that you and they are going to explore the work electronically, the purpose being to potentially generate new insights into the work, insights perhaps backed up with demonstrable research results.

On “computer day,” (and we’re assuming here a full-participation session), do the following:

1. Have students first open their word processing program. Depending on how you decide to transfer the text, you may want to have them open up a blank document page.
2. Next, give them the URL (web address) where they can access the site that provides the work’s downloadable text or file.
3. Download the file and save it to the hard drive . . . or, as an option, and if you can, open the work on the website itself; highlight the entire work (use the Windows’ “Select All” command available within the Windows’ “Edit” menu bar); then copy and paste the work directly into the word processor’s blank document page and save it as a new file.

Each student should now have the entire work saved and open on his or her computer. Proceed first with an open discussion of some aspect of the work itself, such as its major themes. Have students condense theme ideas into one word (e.g., *love, patriotism, power, loneliness, despair, honor, war, hope, spirituality*, and so on). Then, suggest that they use their word processor to explore whether the author actually used those or similar words in the work itself (and if so, how many times).

Before starting, it's obviously a wise thing to suggest that finding the presence of "evidence" is not in and of itself positive proof of anything, nor is the absence of any words proof of an idea's nonexistence in the work. Here might be a perfect time to remind them of how authors often approach a serious theme obliquely through the use of metaphor and symbolism.

Having laid out the caveats, have them start with a search for their one-word theme ideas using the word processor's "Find" command (in *Microsoft Word*, they can access that area by pressing the CNTRL-F key combination). Have them note the number of times the word occurs. Next, have them repeat the search using synonyms for that word; again, note the results.

For later ease of word identification and location, have them use the program's "Find and Replace" function to highlight their results in boldface or color. You can do that by simply "finding" the original word text and "replacing" it with the same word designated to be shown in just about any manner you choose (boldface, color, italics, blinking, underlined, and so on; your choices here are limited only by your word processing program).

Once the words are highlighted, it will make it easier for students to discuss and reference such issues as word (or synonym) frequency, plot or character context, and adjectives or adverbs, which might be modifying (or used to evolve) a theme word. As the discussion progresses, you might want to have them conduct further searches to generate new insights or provide research "evidence" for the competing theses that may begin to emerge. One of the central powers of this approach is that any new ideas or insights can be instantly explored, documented, and discussed.

### **Sample Full-Text Websites**

- <http://www.gutenberg.net/>  
Wonderful full-text source for many literary, philosophical, and religious texts – all free
- <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moa.new/>  
A library of primary sources in American history from the antebellum era through reconstruction
- <http://www.ulib.org/>  
Access, query, and print any book, magazine, newspaper, video, data item, or reference document (Carnegie Mellon University)
- <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/search.html>  
Meta search site for books
- <http://amazon.com>  
World's largest commercial Web-based bookstore (excellent "e-book" source)
- <http://www.barnesandnoble.com>

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A second-semester college-level composition-literature course