Common Summer Reading Program 2016 Study Guide:

Thinking like a Human: A Compilation of TED Talks and Articles

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the State University of New York at New Paltz! The Composition Program looks forward to meeting you in August, and to working with you in the coming academic year. The Common Summer Reading Program aims to provide a shared text for discussion among students, faculty, and campus and community members. As for this year’s selection, TED Talks are a fairly recent phenomenon that began in 1984 “as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged”; these brief oral presentations that are recorded and now disseminated digitally, span diverse topics—from science to business to global issues—in more than 100 languages (“About-Our Organization”). In an age of online learning, visual rhetoric, and knowledge-sharing, such a medium was bound to take root. Most TED talks offer transcripts to read for further reflection, and we’ve chosen thematically-linked articles for each talk.

The Composition Program’s mission in selecting TED Talks and corresponding articles as the Summer Reading this year is to engage our many new students of diverse backgrounds and interests. In this collection, we hope there is something for everyone from those who enjoy thinking about science, technology, social issues, and of course, communication. The thread of the collection is “Thinking like a Human”; what does it mean to uniquely perceive the world, language, power constructs, puzzles, morality, and relationships as only our species, with its specific sort of consciousness, can?

We hope that as you watch these talks over the summer and throughout the Fall 2016 semester, you will react to the speaker’s ideas, and that your reactions will spark ideas of your own worth spreading. Perhaps you will at first dismiss Kathryn Schulz’s point about being wrong, which is that in the moment it still feels right, and the type of language we inevitably use admits this. Or you might disagree with Sir Ken Robinson’s claim in “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” “that creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.” Maybe you will emphatically nod your head in agreement to the rhythm of Jamila Lyiscott’s poetic missive “Three Ways to Speak English” about the many tongues even first-language learners must navigate in rhetorical situations to effectively communicate. Respond however you naturally will at first, but as you consider how these arguments apply to familiar experiences, begin to challenge some of your initial attitudes by considering other views and widely researching these topics. As a student now part of an academic community here at SUNY New Paltz, becoming an expert of your own in conversation with these authors and various thinkers is one of your primary goals.
As part of this process you’ll be thinking alone, perhaps brainstorming aloud, organizing and composing across screen and page, and revising what you at first thought was right about these topics but may perhaps find is more complex. While this process is undoubtedly frustrating, it is essential to ask questions, make mistakes or assumptions, but to try to remain open to the many positions between for or against. With information comes such revelation, and often a shift in perspective and thesis—for what is more typically human in thinking than changing a mind, your own or someone else’s? May you do so mindfully, citing all of the great thinkers who helped you to draw your own conclusions along the way.

We wish you happy watching, reading, thinking, and writing!

*The Common Summer Reading Committee, Composition Program*

Matt Newcomb, Composition Program Coordinator; Assistant Professor
Joann Deiudicibus, Composition Program Staff Assistant; Instructor
Rachel Rigolino, Supplemental Writing Workshop Program Coordinator; Lecturer
Penny Freel, English as a Second Language Specialist; Lecturer
Steven Mihalik, Teaching Assistant
Allison Leshowitz, Teaching Assistant
Victoria Prashad, Teaching Assistant
Ashley Frazier, Teaching Assistant
Gregory Bruno, Teaching Assistant

**What’s great about a great TED talk?** As you watch the talks below, consider the following article about what makes an effective speech. This article will also help you as you prepare your own oral presentations: “The Science of a Great TED Talk: What Makes a Speech Go Viral” by Lindsay Kolowich.

**Primary Talks and Articles**

*On Being Wrong* by Kathryn Schulz; Playlist of TED talks on Failure, and “The Essay, an Exercise in Doubt” by Phillipe Lopate

A train passes through a station and there are two principle observers: a person standing on the station platform, and another seated inside the train itself. The conductor sounds the whistle. In answer to the simple query, “what sound did the train make,” the first observer resolutely claims that as the train passed, the sound of the whistle progressed from faint to louder as its proximity increased, then back to faint again as it sped further away—and, finally—that the whistle’s pitch fluctuated in accordance. The second observer, with equal resolution, claims that the whistle maintained a single intensity and pitch throughout its duration. Who is right? They both are, in a sense. But perhaps the more interesting consequence of this scenario is that despite equally legitimate claims to truth derived from verifiably ‘sound’ evidence, both observers are, in a sense, also wrong. And maybe that is not such a bad thing. Kathryn Schulz suggests as much in her TED talk, “On Being Wrong.” After all, being “right,” she tells us, and as the previous example illustrates, is unsettlingly similar to being “wrong.”
Reading Questions:
1. Why, according to Kathryn Schulz, is being right a lot like being wrong? Refer to the specific analogies she uses.
2. Think of three historical truths that have been proven false. What new truth eventually disproved them? Were they actually wrong the entire time, until someone discovered the real truth? Explain, using Schulz’s vocabulary.
3. Schulz is making an argument, and thus a kind of claim to truth. Is she, therefore, right about the rightness of being wrong? Does this seeming paradox in anyway undermine her argument? Explain why or why not.
4. Taken to its limit, one might conclude from the premise that truth is perspectival that all claims are both true and false in a sense, according to place and time. Would this mean that we should abandon the project of truth altogether, or is it necessary for progress that certain claims carry the distinct designations, “true” and “false?” Explain, grounding your explanation in examples of historical and contemporary truths and falsities.

Related Readings and Resources:
From The Independent: “Parents who see Failure as Negative Bring up Children Who Do Not believe They Can Improve, Research Suggests”
“A Princeton Psychology Professor Has Posted his CV of Failures Online”

--Steven Mihalik

“Language as a Window into Human Nature” by Steven Pinker (concentrates on the difference between innuendo and direct language in particular rhetorical situations for distinct audiences);
“Why Do Humans Need Euphemisms, And What Do They Do To Us?” by Esther Ingliss-Arkell

In his talk, Steven Pinker discusses the differences between indirect and direct language. “Indirect speech acts,” according to Pinker, are commonly used to make polite requests, to bribe, to solicit, to threaten, and to seduce. Most importantly, the use of indirect language drapes a veil over otherwise direct requests or demands, a veil that requires the listener to “read between the lines,” or to infer the speaker’s true meaning. After a detailed discussion and listing of examples (sexual, threatening, and polite requests alike), Pinker arrives at a final hypothesis for why humans may or may not rely on indirect speech acts—to achieve or to avoid “mutual knowledge.” Mutual knowledge, Pinker states, abolishes the need for inference or analysis—the “knowledge,” or the person’s feelings, demands, or desires, is “out there.”

Reading Questions:
1. Why might it be important to notice the differences between indirect and direct language? How do they inform our relationships with one another?
2. Consider Pinker’s discussion of varying relationship types. Think back to a situation where you were unsure of your relationship to someone else. What type of language did you find yourself utilizing—indirect or direct language? Why do you think you defaulted to this type of language?
3. At the end of his talk, Pinker arrives at a final analysis of our use of innuendo: he introduces the term “mutual knowledge,” a knowledge that emerges when someone does not use innuendo but rather, states their explicit meaning, eliminating the need for the listener to infer the speaker’s meaning. What does Pinker say about mutual knowledge and do you agree with his final hypothesis? Why or why not?

4. Apply your knowledge of the rhetorical situation and audience awareness to Pinker’s discussion of direct and indirect language. Create a scenario that involves a distinct speaker, listener, and purpose (why is this conversation occurring?). Consider the outcomes of both direct and indirect speech acts. Which form of language would suit the situation better and why?

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“Do Schools Kill Creativity?” by Sir Ken Robinson “How to Discover your True Talents” by Dan Schawbel, with Sir Ken Robinson

Ken Robinson’s TED Talk, “Do Schools Kill Creativity?,” pairs especially well with Kathryn Schulz’s “On Being Wrong.” Creativity, Robinson claims, is squashed by the pressure that schools place on their students to perpetually be “right.” This is because the absolute pre-assurance of rightness can only be the product of rote memorization and imitation. The possibility of being “wrong,” according to Robinson, is a natural and necessary condition of creativity. If the people who have stood out in history as “geniuses” were and are so precisely because they possess that creative impulse—the courage and capacity to be wrong—then one is inclined to wonder: what is the desired outcome of schooling in its unwavering pursual of rightness?

Reading Questions:

1. Consider Robinson’s comparison of education to religion and money, as something deep within people. Do you believe education is innate? Use examples where education happens outside of school from family, mentors, and friends. How is that different from education and school? Why is education not as valued in the United States as money and religion are?

2. Robinson links the importance of education to the shaping of the future in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability. Robinson notes that schools instill fear into students about being wrong. Fear, apprehension, is a natural response to unpredictability and uncertainty. How can education exist without confronting fear of change, uncertainty and the future? Is this confrontation of fear necessarily a bad thing? How does creativity fit into this discussion?

3. Do you believe Robinson’s assertion that the purpose of education is to produce university professors? If so, why? If not, what do you believe is the purpose of education as it is now? What should the purpose of education be?
4. Robinson asserts that education meets the needs of industrialism. Can education simultaneously benefit the personal growth of individuals and the growth of the economy? Or are these aspects inherently at odds?

--Gregory Bruno

“The Uniqueness of Humans” by Robert Sapolsky (Note: this presentation contains two graphic images); “This Is Your Brain on Metaphors” by Robert Sapolsky

In his TED Talk, “The Uniqueness of Humans,” Robert Sapolsky discusses ways in which humans are not quite as different from other animals as we have historically thought. Sapolsky, too, suggest ways in which humans are ultimately different, though he guards this suggestion with the idea that we are mostly different in degree not quality.

Excerpt from Beinghuman.org:
Robert Sapolsky Neuroscientist, Professor of Biological Sciences, Neurology, Neurological Sciences, and Neurosurgery, Stanford University

“Robert Sapolsky is one of the world's leading neuroscientists, and has been called ‘one of the finest natural history writers around’ by The New York Times. In studying wild baboon populations, Sapolsky examined how prolonged stress can cause physical and mental afflications. His lab was among the first to document that stress can damage the neurons of the hippocampus. Sapolsky has shown, in both human and baboon societies, that low social status is a major contributor to stress and stress-related illness. He boils down the contemporary human's relationship with stress as follows: ‘We are not getting our ulcers being chased by Saber-tooth tigers, we're inventing our social stressors—and if some baboons are good at dealing with this, we should be able to as well. Insofar as we're smart enough to have invented this stuff and stupid enough to fall for it, we have the potential to be wise enough to keep [these stressors] in perspective.’ Sapolsky’s study of stress in non-human primates has offered fascinating insight into how human beings relate to this universal pressure.”

Reading Questions:
1. What do you think Sapolsky’s main argument is within his TED Talk? Does he believe in human uniqueness or not so much?
2. When discussing how animals go about giving other animals rewards, he utilizes the following dialogue.
   “Beat me,” said the masochist.
   “No,” said the sadist.
   What point is Sapolsky attempting to make?
3. In his example of the stickleback fish and mirror, in which he suggests that animals follow the tit for tat approach to treating other animals well (or not so well), Sapolsky also says the following when describing the actions of the fish: “So of course, he’s immediately lunging at it and all of that and saving the territory and all that nationalism and this territorial waters and that kind of stuff and fighting off this invader…”
   Within the quotation, why does he use the term “all that nationalism and this territorial waters…stuff?”
what way does the quoted material help to support or disprove his point of humans’ lack of uniqueness from other animals?

4. How does Sapolsky organize his argument? Do you think his argument is executed well? If so, what strategies do you notice he uses? If not, what could he have done better?

5. In what ways are humans and other animals similar? Give at least two examples from this speech.

6. What are some ways that you think humans differ from other animals? Give at least two examples from this speech.

7. What do you make of the recurrent phrase, “my baboons,” which Sapolsky uses when relating observations he has had of their behavior? Do you think that this concept of ownership is one shared among other animals in the animal kingdom? If so, what examples can you think of?

Related Readings and Resources:
“The Empathic Civilization” by Jeremy Rifkin
“Moral Behavior in Animals” by Frans de Waal
“Deep Thoughts on What Makes Humans Special” by Jeremy Hsu
(An article that summarizes Sapolsky’s main points within his TED Talk)

--Victoria Prashad

“Three Ways to Speak English” by Jamila Lyiscott; “Hearing Skin Color” by Nic Subtirelu;
“Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions” by Sendhil Mullainathan

Jamila Lyiscott as a “Tri-Lingual Orator,” uses poetry as a way to explore the intricate history of language and its correlation to identity. Lyiscott uses the languages she speaks to unpack what it means to be “articulate.” Lyiscott’s poem creates a space that reflects and engages language with cultures through the use of code-switching.

Code-switching occurs when a speaker or writer alternates between one or more languages in a conversation or written text. Code-switching is all around us; from President Obama’s anger translator to the reimagining of one of America’s founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton into a Hip-Hop musical complete with rap battles. We all code switch in some form or fashion, adjusting the way we speak and write, depending on whom we’re speaking or writing to and what the situation calls for. The study of code-switching brings to the forefront the often ignored cultures and languages spoken around the world and integrates them into the common language. The ability to code-switch effectively brings about a new understanding of culture (your own and others) and the need for proper representation of those cultures in mainstream society.

Reading Questions:
1. Lyiscott’s poem speaks about articulation, how does the venue of a TED Talk and the genre of a poem help her to get her point across? Would the poem be received differently if it was read rather than spoken? Why or why not?
2. How is Lyiscott’s interactions different? In what ways does language change with each interaction?
3. Is it important to note the flexibility of language when it comes to code-switching? If so, why? Why not?
4. In what ways are race and culture affected through the flexibility of language?
5. Does translation or the need for translation play a role when code-switching? Is translation necessary when it comes to telling one’s own story?

Writing Prompts/Discussion Ideas:
1. Write a literacy narrative about learning how to speak or write, or how to use multiple languages or tongues, as Lyiscott mentions. Focus on one moment or a few well-chosen and well-developed scenes (with dialogue, imagery, and detail) that represent your education in communicating and translating your ideas. You may also decide to begin by describing a time when you were made to feel like an outsider and lost your words. How did this affect you, and later influence your relationship with language?

Related Readings and Resources:
“The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (TED Talk)
NPR Code Switch
“How Code-Switching Explains the World” by Gene Demby
“Writers of Color Flock to Social Media for New Way to Use Language” by Kima Jones
“If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” by James Baldwin

--Ashley Frazier

Alternate Talks and Articles

“How Social Media Can Make History” by Clay Shirky; “Connected but Alone” by Sherry Turkle; “Social Media’s Small, Positive Role in Human Relationships” by Zeynep Tufekci

“Gaming Can Make a Better World” or “The Game that Can Give You Ten Extra Years of Life” by Jane McGonigal; New York Times review of her game Super Better; “She’s Playing Games With Your Lives” by Bruce Feiler

“How Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are” by Amy Cuddy
In her TED Talk “Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are” Amy Cuddy stresses the importance of nonverbal communication in all aspects of our daily life. According to her, our “nonverbals govern how other people think and feel about us.” Cuddy firmly believes that with some “power posing” practice—people will begin to see and feel a difference in how they see themselves.

Excerpt from Harvard Business School Faculty Page:
Amy J.C. Cuddy, Associate Professor of Business Administration, Hellman Faculty Fellow
Social psychologist Amy Cuddy, Associate Professor at Harvard Business School, uses experimental methods to investigate how people judge and influence each other and themselves. Her research suggests that judgments along two critical trait dimensions – warmth/trustworthiness and competence/power – shape social interactions, determining such outcomes as who gets hired and who doesn’t, when we are more or less likely to take risks, why we admire, envy, or disparage certain people, elect politicians, or even target minority groups for genocide.

Cuddy’s work focuses on how we embody and express competence and warmth, linking our body language to our feelings, physiology, and behavior. Her latest research illuminates how adopting body postures that convey competence and power can prepare us to be present and cope well in stressful situations. In short, as David Brooks summarized the findings, “If you act powerfully, you will begin to think powerfully.” Ultimately, Cuddy's research suggests that when people feel personally powerful, they become more present: better connected with their own thoughts and feelings, which helps them to better connect with the thoughts and feelings of others. Presence -- characterized by enthusiasm, confidence, engagement, and the ability to connect with and even captivate an audience -- boosts people's performance in a wide range of domains.

**Reading Questions:**
1. What is power posing? According to Cuddy, why should we practice this?
2. What examples does Cuddy give of nonverbal expressions of power and dominance? What examples does she give of nonverbal expressions of powerlessness?
3. Explain what Cuddy means when she states “power is also about how you react to stress.”

**Writing Suggestions/Discussion Ideas:**
1. Explain the following statement by Cuddy: *And so I want to say to you, don’t fake it till you make it. Fake it till you become it.*
   Most of us have experienced a time when we needed to fake confidence. In a reflective essay, write about a particular time that you employed this strategy of faking confidence and forced yourself to accomplish a goal. What did you learn from this experience?
2. Construct an analysis of two popular characters (stay true to a genre; for example, a crime drama, or a comedy, or a romance, etc., from a television series or movie). Examine the similarities and/or differences in nonverbal communication, showing how the actors use this strategy to help create their specific character.
3. Examine logos, pathos, and ethos as well as purpose, audience, and voice in Cuddy’s presentation. What is her strongest appeal centered on? Is her argument convincing? Explain why or why not by providing specific examples from her speech to support your claim. Would you consider taking her advice on “power posing?”
4. Watch Cuddy’s presentation again, this time focusing on her nonverbal communication. In what way(s) does she make good on her own advice?

**Related Readings and Resources:**
“Every Body’s Talking” by Joe Navarro
“The Puzzle of Motivation” by Dan Pink (A TED Talk)

“What Makes Employees Work Harder: Punishment or Pampering?” by Derek Thompson

What motivates us to perform well? On one level, the answer seems obvious: rewards. But what type of rewards? In Dan Pink’s TED talk, he claims that extrinsic rewards—such as money—often cause people to underperform, which seems counterintuitive. According to social scientists, offering workers bonuses for being more productive is usually not effective. Why? (You have to listen to the TED talk to discover what the research says!)

Derek Thompson looks at different data and comes up with what seems to be somewhat contradictory findings. The fear of punishment works to motivate workers, especially if the job market is tight (i.e. high unemployment). In other words, people who are afraid of losing their jobs work harder.

Reading Questions:

1. If you had after-school or summer jobs, think about what factors motivated you to work hard at them. Make a list and then determine which factors were extrinsic and which were intrinsic. Are your findings more in line with Pink or Thompson?
2. Do you think that these findings about business can be applied to academics? For example, what motivates you to succeed academically? Do you see any parallels between your own experiences as a student and the scenarios mentioned in the TED Talk and article?
3. Is there a way to reconcile the theses of both Pink’s TED Talk and Thompson’s article? How can both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation serve to improve employee performance?

Writing Suggestions/Discussion Ideas:

1. Pink’s TED Talk is focused mainly on white collar employees. Pretend that you are a manager at McDonald's or another fast food restaurant. Come up with a plan to incorporate Pink’s concepts of Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose. Think creatively!
2. How might high schools use the findings Pink discusses? Pretend that you are the principal of a high school. How would you design the curriculum and school day in order to provide students with a sense of autonomy? Are there ways to foster in students a desire to truly master subjects?
What about finding purpose in what they are learning? Again, be creative. (Note: Would teachers still give grades at your school?)

--Rachel Rigolino

**More Resources & Talks of Interest:**

TED Ed concentrates on educational videos and presentations, including some that focus on grammar like this one, the *Comma Story*!

Other types of presentations our instructors have assigned include the Pecha Kucha (first performed in Tokyo Japan), which requires a particular number of images or slides that are shown at even intervals throughout the presentation.

TED Talk Playlist on Poverty   TED Talk Playlist on Writing

“For Argument’s Sake” by Daniel H. Cohen and the following article on argument: “The ‘Other Side’ Is Not Dumb” by Sean Blanda

“Are We Happier When We Have More Options?” by Barry Schwartz

**TED Radio Hour from NPR (themed playlists with TED Talk excerpts)**

What Is Original?
What We Fear
How Things Spread
Growing Up
On Millennials