## English 102 KU Common Book Activities***[[1]](#footnote-1)***

Note: The following activities are based on Wanda Diaz-Merced’s “How a Blind Astronomer Found a Way to Hear the Stars,” in *Disability Visibility*; however, teachers could choose other selections from the book and adapt many of these activities accordingly.

## Reading Journal Option #1: Summary of Diaz-Merced piece

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| Summary of the Text: |
| For Instructors: Remember to explain to students how to write a summary. Students should be made aware that a summary is a shorter, objective version of the original text – they should leave their personal impressions and the smaller details of the text out of this box. Have students keep their summary to a single paragraph but manage your expectations when it comes to them being objective, especially without feedback. Instructors may also consider working through this option with students during the first reading, so students have a better understanding when they begin to complete them on their own. Instructors may even want to use this Reading Journal option together with option 2, in order to help students organize their thoughts ahead of time. While this assignment sheet is organized to provide instructions for instructors and students, this text can be removed to provide students with a form to follow for their journals.  For Students: Your summary should be about 1 paragraph. To the best of your abilities, try to follow these guidelines:   1. The first sentence of your summary should introduce the genre, author, title, and a brief overview of the entire text. 2. Keep notes as you read, write a sentence for every paragraph and tie them all together. 3. Avoid tiny details, anecdotes, extended examples, etc. (ex. Diaz-Merced mentions the frogs at her home while her audience listens for the gamma ray burst. Or you could choose to condense the illustration of the magnetar from the beginning into 1 sentence). 4. When it makes sense, you should try to combine and connect ideas that are closely related (ex. Diaz-Merced determines that access to information allows people with disabilities to grow and contribute to the scientific community, as displayed in her work with the Athlone School for the Blind.) |

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| Public Contexts: | Institutional Contexts: | Historical Contexts: |
| Public Context asks students to consider the implications behind a work being shared with a wide audience of people. What does it mean for a work to be shared with a certain audience? What are the key elements for this kind of audience? How do these elements change when the audience or genre changes? What are some connections you can see between the author and their purpose in sharing their message in a specific way? (ex. Diaz-Merced’s entry in our book is a transcript of her TedTalk. As such, we see not only “cues” for things like applause and audience laughter, but also some of her wording indicates references to things we cannot see or hear while reading the text. This might have the added effect of helping readers to empathize Diaz-Merced as she discusses her blindness.) | Institutional Context implies connections to organizations, foundations, establishments, societies, etc., the spaces they occupy, and the resources they have/are given. What connections (whether clearly stated or implied) do you see between the text and an institution? Where do you see those connections most? Does the author seem to be speaking to, against, or alongside the institution? (ex. Diaz-Merced discusses the scientific community and the ablism she was confronted with there. While she was shut out of her chosen field in a number of other countries, she works with the South African Astronomical Observatory and the Athlone Schools for the Blind to provide the students access to tools they can use to conduct scientific research. On a deeper level, references Diaz-Merced has made to “we” suggest that she had partners working with her also interested in studying sonification, despite naysayers insisting this method of research had no place in the field.) | Historical Context suggests a connection between the text and time – past, present, or future. This section may be difficult for students to connect with in a way that is different than the others, since not all texts will be explicit in their connections to historical patterns. What sort of long-term patterns, traditions, or norms can you connect to the text? Does the author make these connections themselves? Why do you think these connections are important? What could a historical understanding add to the text? (ex. Historically, astronomy has been conducted with the eye – through the naked eye or telescopes observing the sky, reading, and interpreting data, through and communicating new information. This tradition manifests itself in ablism, even though the kind of research Diaz-Merced discusses (radio astronomy) is common in the field, with many telescopes being radio-based. However, Diaz-Merced is mostly looking forward in time with the “titanic burst” at the end of her speech referencing more than just the sound of stars, but also the inclusion and contributions of people with disabilities in the sciences.) |
| Questions After Reading the Text: |  |  |

Students might have 2-3 questions after reading about the text or even about the journaling process. It is up to the instructor to determine what kind of questions students should ask, but open-ended questions that could inspire discussion might be most helpful, both to prepare students for in-class work, but also to help them practice a different kind of inquiry than what is expected of them for the first major assignment.

## **Reading Journal Option #2: Annotation of Diaz-Merced piece**

For instructors: Students almost always struggle to engage with the readings, not only because some of them can be a little difficult, longer than, or different from what they are used to reading, but also because students can be distracted from what they see as a less interesting or less relevant reading by the work they must complete for other classes. This option also has the benefit of being less formal than the previous option.

For Students: Annotation is the action of adding meaning by way of comment or explanation. This skill is a useful one for students at all levels and on all paths of their academic careers. While some of you may be familiar with the “Annotated Bibliography” in which a writer cites a source and then writes a brief paragraph summarizing the source, connecting it to their own work, and discussing its relevance, many of you will not be familiar with the practice of annotating a text on its own. Annotation in a text can serve a similar purpose as annotating a bibliography might – to help you better remember and process the connections you see in a text and to help you make connections between texts.

Annotation works best when you can write in the margins, but for those of you using digital or rented copies, or for those of you who just aren’t comfortable writing in a book, I recommend following a cross-reference style format as you keep track of your annotations on a separate page (ex. “pp. 172, paragraph 2, line 9: What is “radio astronomy?”).

## **Journal Guidelines:**

For each paragraph (or every 2-3 paragraphs for those that are less than 5 sentences long), you will write one of three things:

* **A question:** these might be questions you have about the text, the author, the topic, or what is implied by what you have read. (ex. When did Diaz-Merced present on this topic, since radio astronomy is relatively common? Or How do people who become disabled later in life adapt to a sudden change in their circumstances?)
* **A summary:** Write a 1 sentence summary of the ideas presented in this paragraph.
* **Connections:** If you read something that makes you think of something else – whether it’s something we’ve covered in class, or something that you are familiar with from personal experience or another class, you should provide that context here. Make sure you don’t just draw a symbol (! Or \*\*, etc.) or fall into the pattern of “this reminds me of that one time…”

**Special Terms:** Any time you see a word you are not familiar with (whether you don’t know the definition or understand what it means in the context of the reading) you should take some time to research possible definitions. Write out the definition of these special terms in your own words.

**Main Idea:** Underline the sections where you think the author is referencing their main idea.

**Points of Interest:** Highlight quotes that you find interesting or important. Try to avoid highlighting entire paragraphs. Make a note of why you find that quote interesting.

**Reflection:**

For instructors: Since these annotations would be difficult to grade on their own, a reflection portion becomes helpful if instructors plan on including Reading Journals as one of the activities students complete for a grade.

For Students: Once you have annotated the reading, briefly reflect on the following questions:

1. What was the author’s main idea? How do you know?
2. What was the author’s purpose in sharing this message? Why do you think they chose to share their message in this way? What do you think this had on the audience?
3. What was the most compelling (interesting or important) part of the text? Why?
4. What did you find most confusing? How do you think the author could clarify this point? Why do you think they chose not to clarify in the text?
5. Do you agree with what they were saying? Why or why not?

## **General Discussion Questions for Disability Visibility for a Unit on Researched Inquiry**

### For instructors: These questions have been taken from two sources – the first from a previous worksheet that helps students brainstorm about their objects, here specifically tailored to help them reflect on Diaz-Merced’s text in Disability Visibility. The second group of questions comes unchanged from Naomi Ortiz’s discussion guide on the book. These questions can be used throughout the unit as discussion questions for the class to consider as a whole or in groups or could be taken as another option for reading journals throughout the unit.

### **Questions to ask about “How a Blind Astronomer Found a Way to Hear the Stars” by Wanda Diaz-Merced:**

* What “object” is Diaz-Merced speaking about in this reading?
* Previous inquiry units asked students to choose an object they could see and touch. How does Diaz-Merced interact with her object?
* What can we learn from asking questions (inquiring) about objects that we interact with in different ways?
* How does Diaz-Merced’s inquiry invite thinking about larger ideas and meanings? What larger ideas or meanings does she include in this reading?
* What different kinds of information does Diaz-Merced use in her inquiry? Historical/Institutional/Public Context? Secondary Sources (peer-reviewed or popular books, articles, case studies, etc.)? Primary Sources (personal experience, observations, interviews, etc.)? Controversies or Criticisms surrounding the object? Other Media?
* How do these kinds of information work in the context of the reading?

### **Questions from the *Disability Visibility* Discussion Guide:**

* What kinds of adaptations have you made to participate in your passions and career?
* How did the author’s adaptations to seeing stars help others and contribute to the development of their field?
* If the adaptations you’ve made were adopted by professionals in your field (work or school), how would that impact things?

## **Twenty Questions to Ask an Object:**

## **Wanda Diaz-Merced’s “How a Blind Astronomer Found a Way to Hear the Stars”**

For Instructors: This worksheet has been slightly adapted from the original provided by Dr. Lancaster to specifically help students consider Object-Inquiry in the context of Diaz-Merced’s entry in the Common Book, though they can still also be used to help students brainstorm for their own objects. To that end, I have also divided the questions into sections that cover the more general questions about what the object is and deeper questions about the significance of the object. I have also included questions that cover more metaphorical objects for instructors who allow their students to write on more abstract concepts or, as Diaz-Merced writes, objects too vast for an individual to own.

Choose quotes from the reading that help you answer these questions for Diaz-Merced’s object. If there is no answer within the reading, explain why you think Diaz-Merced might have chosen to leave it unanswered.

1. What are the object’s sensory (look, feel, sound, taste, smell) properties?
2. What are the object’s physical (material composition, size, shape, parts, etc.) properties?
3. Who made the object?
4. How was the object made?
5. What circumstances led to the creation of this object?
6. What is the object’s history?
7. How do/did people interact with this object? Do you interact with the object in a different way?
8. How is the object oriented (does it have a front/back, top/bottom, right/left)?
9. What is the object’s purpose?
10. Is the object part of a group of objects? If so, how?

### **Questions that determine Meaning or Significance:**

1. Does the object invite people to act/behave in a certain way?
2. What is your response (emotional, mental, physical) to the object?
3. How does this object, possessing it, and/or interacting with it relate to the identity of an individual or group?
4. Does the object relate to a set of (social, political, spiritual) values or beliefs? If so, how?
5. How is this object “obtained”? Is it bought/sold? Given? Can you literally or metaphorically obtain it?
6. What could a person gain by “obtaining” this object?
7. What is the object’s (monetary or symbolic) value?
8. What is the object’s meaning in the present? How has it’s meaning changed over time?
9. What is special or distinctive about the object?
10. How has this object been interpreted for an audience that is unfamiliar with it?

## **Developing a Research Question**

The ability to ask questions is one of the most important skills a student can develop. Academics are constantly asking and revising their questions based on the research they conduct. While you will learn various research methods and tools throughout the semester, this unit is focused on getting you into the habit of asking good questions.

Follow the steps below for the object you are considering for your project.

1. Begin with the 5 journalistic questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?). Write as many of these questions for your object as you can.
2. Choose 3 questions from this list – one you can make broader (less specific), one you can make more narrow (more specific), and one you can ask related questions about.
3. Look at a few articles/wikis/blogs. What are other people saying or asking about your object?
4. Once you have a question you think could work for your essay, think about the following criteria for a good research question:
   1. It isn’t too broad. You should be able to fit your question and related research into a 4–5-page essay, without going over the page count.
   2. It isn’t too narrow. You shouldn’t run out of things to say about your object until the end of your paper.
   3. It doesn’t have a simple answer. Don’t worry about asking questions that have concrete, established, or black and white answers. This assignment is about exploration, not fact-finding.
   4. It interests you. If you don’t care about your topic, don’t write about it.

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| Example: Let’s say I’ve decided to write about the soccer ball. I might start with the 5W’s/H.   * Who invented the soccer ball? * What are the features of a “good” soccer ball? * Where can you find soccer balls? * When did people first use soccer balls? * Why do soccer balls have hexagons on them? * How do people use soccer balls?   Now I might use these questions to generate more questions.   * Zooming out: Why do soccer balls have hexagons? →Why are soccer balls designed the way they are? * Zooming in: Where can you find soccer balls? →Where do youth coaches find soccer balls for their programs? * Branching out: How do professional athletes use soccer balls? →How do school kids in South America use soccer balls? How do people with disabilities use soccer balls?   Now I might do a web search on some of these questions. A search for “Who invented the soccer ball?” soon leads me to an article about how an architect named Buckminster Fuller was involved in designing the modern soccer ball. That article discusses how Fuller’s soccer ball changed the way the game was played. So now I might form a new research question: How has the evolving design of the soccer ball influenced the game of professional soccer? This question has the features of a good research question for a 4-5 page paper. |

How to avoid fact-driven questions

* **Ask about the *reason* behind the fact.** Your question might have a factual answer, but why is that a fact? Ex. “Where are chalkboards still used?” → “In a digital age, why can you still find chalkboards in many primary and secondary school classrooms?”
* **Ask about the *effect* of the fact.** Your question may have a factual answer, but what impact does it have on people? Ex. “How did people use the cordless telephone?” → “How did the cordless telephone change the way families in the United States used their phones?”
* **Ask about the *deeper meaning* of the fact.** Your question might have a factual answer, but what are the broader implications of this answer? Ex. “How did scrunchies become popular again?” → “What does the comeback of the scrunchie tell us about youth culture in the United States?”

## **WP 1 Proposal**

For instructors: This assignment can be as high or as low stakes as you want it to be for students. Having it worth more than the low-stakes activities students complete might help them understand the significance of the project proposal as part of the actual project. As a reminder, much like conference proposals we submit, it is important to have students submit these proposals as soon as possible, as feedback from instructors at this stage can help students avoid confusion about the actual project and to determine if their object is one they can successfully write about for this project.

For students: The Academic Proposal is another genre with which all students should be familiar. This stage of writing comes in before a project is accepted for a public venue – whether that is a conference presentation or a publication. Proposals serve as prewriting for a larger project – they give your readers a better sense of your topic, your methods, and why you care about your project. But proposals are also flexible – just because you write something in your proposal doesn’t mean you have to follow the same path for your essay, as long as you follow the assignment criteria. For the purposes of WP1, the proposal will allow you to begin to plan how you will write your essay and will give me a way to make sure your project aligns with the goals of the assignment, which means this is the time to be as clear as possible with your ideas.

Your proposal should answer the following questions about your object:

* Is there an object with which you have a connection? If so, what are they? What connection do you have with them?
* How do you interact with this object? How do your interactions with the object differ from someone else’s? Why?
* What larger ideas or meanings do you associate with your object (topics surrounding Disability, Accessibility, Family, Spirituality, Race, Cultural Values, etc.)?
* What do you already know about your object? What story can you tell about it?
* Where can you find more information on your object? What sources or research methods can you use to find that information?

Proposal Guidelines: These are the things I will be looking for in your proposals.

Your proposal should:

* clearly state what your topic is.
* clearly state why you are interested in your object.
* feature 1-2 clear research questions you plan to pursue in your paper.
* mention the two popular sources you plan to use for your paper.
* indicate the wider public, institutional, or historical context you plan to connect to your object.
* clarify the connections you plan to make between your object and the context you choose.
* be at least 1-2 pages long.
* be 12 pt. Times New Roman or Arial, double-spaced.
* include an attention-grabbing, relevant title, even if you don’t use the same title for your essay.
* include a Works Cited section with the sources cited in MLA, APA, or Chicago style.

## **WP1 Optional Outline and Drafting Activity**

For Instructors: Students may be unfamiliar with the concept of an inquiry essay, too used to standard thesis-driven research essays that they have been taught in previous classes. This means that students will struggle not only to generate research questions and integrate them into their essays but also to format their essays. While the WP1 assignment sheet below suggests other methods of organizing the paper, students may find this more structured outline helpful. For a peer workshop centered on developing a final draft, instructors may want to encourage students to generate a complete draft (though not everyone will), so that they/their peers/you, the instructor can better consider the structure of their essays.

**Section 1: Introduction**

* Provide a brief introduction to your topic. Maybe this looks like talking about how you're connected to the topic or why you think it's interesting, something special, significant, or distinct about the object you're using as the focus of your essay. Either way, by the end of this section, you should clearly have asked your question[s].

**Section 2: Context**

* In the first part of your essay, you can provide any contextual information you think your essay needs. This includes historical information (such as the inventor or originator of your object, where it came from, how it connects to your wider topic, etc.). You can define any uncommon or unknown terms here or talk about where your research picks up where someone else's leaves off.

**Section 3: Data and Research**

* Where did you find your information? What interesting things did they have to say about your topic? What did they say that was relevant to the questions you asked? Why did you choose these sources? What are some complications with finding or interpreting the information you found? What is your personal experience with the object you chose? How did that experience lead you to ask these questions?

**Section 4: Results**

* Did you find any answers to your questions? Did you only find more questions? Regardless of what you found; how did your research lead you to this point? What is the quality of the results you found (difficult to interpret? easy to understand? only partially connected? statistics and fact-based? qualitative and primary sources? Or something else?)

**Section 5: Conclusions**

* Did you come to a new understanding? Did the information you found confirm what you already thought you knew? How does the information you found either answer or not answer the questions you asked? What questions are you left with? Do you have any new questions? What further research would you do? Reflect on the process of trying to answer your research questions and on any changes in your personal connection to your object.

## **WP 1: Object-Inquiry Research Essay**

**Your Project**: After reading and discussing the transcript of Wanda Diaz-Merced’s “How a Blind Astronomer Found a Way to Hear the Stars,” you should understand what inquiry-based writing looks like. For this essay, you will write a story about an object that you have a personal attachment to as you attempt to answer questions about the meaning of the object. You will include information from popular sources throughout the essay. The rhetorical purpose of this essay is exploration and discovery, which means you don’t have to argue any points or find clear answers to the questions you start with. Your writing should be between 1000- 1300 words (4-5 pages).

Write a story about your object that includes information from the sources you have found. You may organize this story in any way you want (chronologically following the meaning of the object as it has changed over time; a story of your personal experience with the object, etc.) as long as you remain focused on the object’s significance or meaning and not just the object itself.

Since this assignment mostly relies on narrative, the use of the first-person (I, me, my, mine) is encouraged. The assignment should still adhere to the other conventions of academic writing listed below:

* Citation – you should include a Works Cited page that includes all 3 of your popular sources formatted in MLA, APA, or Chicago style.
* Language, Grammar, and Tone – you’re writing for an audience that is educated but doesn’t know much about your object; your language, tone, and grammar should be clear, semi-professional (you won’t need a thesaurus, but try to avoid explicit language), and proof-read for grammatical errors.
* Format – 12pt. Times New Roman or Arial, double-spaced, a heading at the top left (your name, my name, the course, and date), page numbers, a title, and saved as a Word Doc or PDF

Criteria for Evaluation: Your essay will be graded according to the extent to which you achieve the following criteria (from most to least important):

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| A Complex Research Question | Do I clearly state my questions during the introduction of my essay?  Are my questions focused on meaning and significance rather than facts?  Is my essay structured to follow possible answers to my questions?  Have I made it clear to readers why my object matters?  Have I included my response to the information my questions have led me to?  Have I detailed any questions I’m left with by the end of my essay? |
| Useful and Credible Sources | Are my sources reliable and credible?  Are they appropriate for my research question (do they help me stay on topic or add important information for my readers)?  Am I balancing my sources with my own interpretations and applications?  Do I give credit to the authors of all my sources?  Do I accurately represent the authors’ ideas? |
| Clear and Logical Structure | Am I intentional with the way I organized my essay?  Is my personal narrative clear and relevant to the questions I’m asking?  Do I provide a thorough description of my object? |
| Appropriate Style and Tone | Do I use clear and engaging language?  Are my vocabulary and tone appropriate for my audience and subject?  Have I proofread my essay?  Can my readers understand what I’m trying to say? |

Reflection:Respond to the following questions in 1-2 pages, formatted in the same style as your essay.

* How did you decide on the research question you chose?
* How did you break down the process of finding and evaluating sources, and did the process work well?
* What were some challenges you faced while either writing or researching?
* How do you feel you were able to use what has been covered in class so far in order to complete the assignment?
* How will you use what you learned in this assignment later on, in other classes, or in your daily life?

Important Dates:

Proposal Due:

Peer Workshop:

Rough Draft Due:

Peer Review:

Final Draft Due:

Reflection Due:

1. Thanks to English GTA Kristin Maynard for designing and developing these activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)