

TOPICS OFFERED FOR FALL 2017

*Please note that the books listed for each course are only possible candidates.
Do not buy any until the pre-meeting and a decision on the common reading is made.
Classes start September 1st and end December 29th.
Holiday periods are adapted to by individual class voting.*

1. (ALG) NINE ALGORITHMS THAT CHANGED THE FUTURE

Every day, we use our computers to perform remarkable feats. A simple web search picks out a handful of relevant needles from the world's biggest haystack: the billions of pages on the World Wide Web. Uploading a photo to Facebook transmits millions of pieces of information over numerous error-prone network links, yet somehow a perfect copy of the photo arrives intact. Without even knowing it, we use public-key cryptography to transmit secret information like credit card numbers; and we use digital signatures to verify the identity of the websites we visit. How do our computers perform these tasks with such ease?

This is the first book to answer that question in language anyone can understand, revealing the extraordinary ideas that power our PCs, laptops, and smartphones. Using vivid examples, John MacCormick explains the fundamental "tricks" behind nine types of computer algorithms, including artificial intelligence (where we learn about the "nearest neighbor trick" and "twenty questions trick"), Google's famous PageRank algorithm (which uses the "random surfer trick"), data compression, error correction, and much more.

These revolutionary algorithms have changed our world: this book unlocks their secrets, and lays bare the incredible ideas that our computers use every day. Presentations can focus on how these algorithms have been applied or discuss other important algorithms that have been developed since this book was published or report on some of the people who invented them.

Common Reading: *Nine Algorithms That Changed the Future: The Ingenious Ideas That Drive Today's Computer*, by John MacCormick and Chris Bishop (January 2012)

2. (AST) THE ART OF THE STORY

The Art of the Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories, edited by Daniel Halpern. It features writers such as Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, Joyce Carol Oates, Martin Amis, et al.

Jorge Luis Borges' introductory quote: "Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential."

These stories are interesting, thought-provoking stories by well-known authors from many different countries, with lots to discuss. This edition was from 1999, Penguin Books

Common Reading: *The Art of the Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories*, edited by Daniel Halpern (November 1999)

3. (ATL) COVERING *THE ATLANTIC MAGAZINE*

The Atlantic covers a full range of topics. Some of the cover stories from 2016 and 2017: Why is Silicon Valley So Awful to Women? How to Build an Autocracy; Donald Trump and the Failure of America; How Social Media Got Weaponized; The Secret Shame of the Middle Class.

Inside of each issue is an eclectic assortment of articles as well. Using articles from magazines within the last year, S/DG members would provide questions for discussion and lead the group with additional insights from outside reading about the topic or the author. Any one of the articles could be expanded upon and brought up to the present by linking current information.

Past issues of magazines are available in the library and most if not all articles are available online.

Common Reading: Current issues of *The Atlantic Magazine*.

4. (BAE) THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2016

A true essay is “something hazarded, not definitive, not authoritative; something ventured on the basis of the author’s personal experience and subjectivity,” writes guest editor Jonathan Franzen in his introduction. However, his main criterion for selecting *The Best American Essays 2016* was, in a word, risk. Whether the risks involved championing an unpopular opinion, the possibility of ruining a professional career, or irrevocably offending family, for Franzen, “the writer has to be like the firefighter, whose job, while everyone else is fleeing the flames, is to run straight into them.”

The Best American Essays 2016 includes Alexander Chee, Paul Crenshaw, Jaquira Díaz, Laura Kipnis, Amitava Kumar, Sebastian Junger, Joyce Carol Oates, Oliver Sacks, Thomas Chatterton Williams and others.

Common Reading: *The Best American Essays 2016*, edited by Jonathan Franzen and Robert Atwan (October 2016)

5. (COL) AMERICAN COLOSSUS

The Gilded Age - all the great beginnings of the last 150 years or so: Vanderbilt’s railroad empire; Carnegie’s steel buildings and elevators, and libraries; Edison’s electric lights, and the telegraph, telephone, records, and movies; cars and the production lines and Standard Oil; the beginnings of air travel. All of it spread out in a sprawling, sometimes ironically humorous, back-and-forth saga alternating the gains with depressions and nationwide strikes, populists fighting back against the one percent. The opportunities for presentations abound, and the populists in the class can battle the elitists in more or less polite discussions. Exciting.

Common Reading: *American Colossus: The Triumph of Capitalism, 1865-1900* by H.W. Brands (October 2011)

6. (CTY) DREAM CITIES: SEVEN URBAN IDEAS THAT SHAPE THE WORLD

From the nineteenth century to today, what began as visionary building concepts—sometimes utopian, sometimes outlandish, always controversial—were gradually adopted

and constructed on a massive scale in cities around the world.

This class will explore our cities in a new way—as expressions of ideas about how we should live, work, play, make, buy, and believe. We'll read the stories of the architects and thinkers whose imagined cities became the blueprints for the world we live in. Our focus is on seven architectural concepts, which the author has labeled castles, monuments, "slabs," homesteads, corrals, malls, and habitats. Come fly with us to London, Dubai, Los Angeles and elsewhere and get a close up look at the masterpieces of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and many more.

Possible presentation topics:

- Background information on architects (dead or living) or schools of architectural thought
- Particular buildings (residential or commercial)
- Current trends in architecture (green buildings, “maker” spaces, co-working spaces)
- Architecture of churches, temples, or mosques
- City planning policies in your community

Common Reading: *Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shape the World*, by Wade Graham (January 2016)

7. (DAR) THE UNTOLD STORY OF DARPA

Founded in 1958 in response to the launch of Sputnik, the agency's original mission was to create “the unimagined weapons of the future.” Over the decades, DARPA has been responsible for countless inventions and technologies that extend well beyond military technology. Sharon Weinberger gives us a riveting account of DARPA's successes and failures, its remarkable innovations, and its wild-eyed schemes. We see how the threat of nuclear Armageddon sparked investment in computer networking, leading to the Internet, as well as to a proposal to power a missile-destroying particle beam by draining the Great Lakes. We learn how DARPA was responsible during the Vietnam War for both Agent Orange and the development of the world's first armed drones, and how after 9/11 the agency sparked a national controversy over surveillance with its data-mining research. And we see how DARPA's success with self-driving cars was followed by disappointing contributions to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Weinberger has interviewed more than one hundred former Pentagon officials and scientists involved in DARPA's projects—many of whom have never spoken publicly about their work with the agency—and pored over countless declassified records from archives around the country...”

Presentations could be on any one of “DARPA's successes and failures, its remarkable innovations, and its wild-eyed schemes.”

Common Reading: *The Imagineers of War: The Untold Story of DARPA, the Pentagon Agency That Changed the World*, by Sharon Weinberger (March 2017)

8. (EXP) THE DEATH OF EXPERTISE

People are now exposed to more information than ever before, provided both by technology and by increasing access to every level of education. These societal gains, however, have also helped fuel a surge in narcissistic and misguided intellectual egalitarianism that has crippled informed debates on any number of issues. Today, everyone knows everything: with only a quick trip through WebMD or Wikipedia, average citizens believe themselves to be on an equal intellectual footing with doctors and diplomats. All voices, even the most ridiculous, demand to be taken with equal seriousness, and any claim to the contrary is dismissed as undemocratic elitism.

This rejection of experts has occurred for many reasons, including the openness of the Internet, the emergence of a customer satisfaction model in higher education, and the transformation of the news industry into a 24-hour entertainment machine. Paradoxically, the increasingly democratic dissemination of information, rather than producing an educated public, has instead created an army of ill-informed and angry citizens who denounce intellectual achievement.

Tom Nichols, the author, is Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Naval War College, an adjunct professor at the Harvard Extension School, and a former aide in the U.S. Senate. He is also the author of several works on foreign policy and international security affairs. Nichols has deeper concerns than the current rejection of expertise and learning, noting that when ordinary citizens believe that no one knows more than anyone else, democratic institutions themselves are in danger of falling either to populism or to technocracy--or in the worst case, a combination of both. *The Death of Expertise* is not only an exploration of a dangerous phenomenon but also a warning about the stability and survival of modern democracy in the Information Age.

There are a myriad of areas for presentations, including climate change, the anti-vaccine movement, politics, and journalism that should make for interesting discussions.

Common Reading: *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, by Tom Nichols (March 2017)

9. (FTN) FOOD – THEN AND NOW

Everybody eats. We eat for survival and we eat for pleasure. We choose foods for their taste or their availability. We make eating decisions based on diets, fads, taboos and class conceits. Poor people wish they could have what is on rich people's tables. Rich people forget the benefits of simple foods. The story of our connection to food is not simple. Despite thousands of years of cooking tradition, we have largely forgotten what it means to eat well. This S/DG will explore our relationship with food and the way our eating habits have changed through the ages as well as the factors that influence our connection with food today.

Using the book *Caveman, Monks and Slow Food: A History of Eating Well* by Devra Gartenstein, we will study and discuss the history of food through the ages. This backward look will be balanced by our presentations which members will research and present exploring a forward look at the current issues around food today. Presentations can run the gamut of topics such as current eating trends, new health discoveries and

nutrition, sustainability, famine and food shortages, the food industry, artisan foods, pesticides in food production and even celebrity chefs.

Common Reading: *Cavemen, Monks & Slow Food: A History of Eating Well*
by Devra Gartenstein (July 2011)

10. (IKE) THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER

This S/DG will offer a fascinating portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower, with special emphasis on his years as a five-star general and his time as the thirty-fourth President of the United States. Learn about President Eisenhower's modest childhood in Kansas, his college years at West Point, and his rapid ascent through the military ranks, culminating in his appointment as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II. Beginning when Eisenhower assumed the presidency from Harry Truman in 1952, we will also study his two consecutive terms, exploring his volatile relationship with then-Vice President Richard Nixon, his abhorrence of isolationism, and his position on the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the Civil Rights Movement. Many elements of Eisenhower's presidency speak to American politics today, including his ability to balance the budget and skill in managing an oppositional Congress. This comprehensive study of Ike will appeal to biography lovers as well as to enthusiasts of presidential history and military history alike. There are numerous topics for presentations: such as Ike's early life, his training and its application, World War I, the early years of WW II, the destruction of Nazi Germany, campaign for the presidency, the golden age of the 1950s, and Ike's retirement years.

Common Reading: *Eisenhower: A Life*, by Paul Johnson (August 18, 2015)

11. (KOR) THE KOREAN PENINSULA - THE NEVER-ENDING CONFLICT

This S/DG will focus on the contemporary history of the Korean peninsula – essentially from mid-century to the present, with emphasis on understanding North-South relations, North Korea, and the Korean peninsula in world affairs. Topics for discussion will include the division and how it came to be; the war and its impact on both domestic and international affairs; the armistice and its legacy; issues of legitimacy in both South and North; the contrasting development and place of the two Koreas in the world; what's known of the North and life there; scenarios for resolution of the “un-ended” conflict; and how to manage when it does end. We will strive to consider these topics from multiple perspectives, but essentially from that of South Korea, the U.S., and North Korea.

Our text, *A Concise History of Modern Korea*, explores the social, economic, and political issues it has faced since being catapulted into the wider world at the end of the 19th century and presents the radically different and historically unprecedented trajectories of the the two Koreas. Seth assesses the insights they offer for understanding not only modern Korea but the broader perspective of world history.

Presentation topics can include: compare and contrast Korea and Vietnam, Korea and Germany, the differences between NK and SK in women's rights, foreign policy, religion, government, economics, etc. Other topics can include M.A.S.H (movie and or TV series), art, poetry, the legacy of 35 years of Japanese colonialism, the American influence, the famine in NK, etc.

Common Reading: *A Concise History of Modern Korea* (Volume 2, Second Edition) by Michael J. Seth (March 2016)

12. (LUT) THE MONK WHO SHOOK THE WORLD

In 1517 an obscure monk, Martin Luther, posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This S/DG will learn how this act led to Luther's excommunication in 1521 and to the rise of the Reformation in 1530. The common reading sets Luther's thoughts and actions in the social context of his time as well as discussing his talents as a musician. (He composed the great battle hymn to the Reformation: *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.) Besides his music, presentations could be on Saxony, use of indulgences, the theologian Johann Eck, or the impact of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press on Luther's era.

Common Reading: *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, by Lyndal Roper (March 2017)

13. (MSK) ELON MUSK – SPACEX, TESLA, WHAT NEXT?

Elon Musk is one of the world's most exciting, unpredictable, and ambitious entrepreneurs. Musk, one of the founders of PayPal, taught himself to program as a child, and at age 12 made his first software sale. In his 20s he became a multimillionaire. Known more recently as the CEO of Tesla Motors and of SpaceX, Musk is changing the world to fit his vision. In 2012, his SpaceX team sent a spacecraft to the International Space Station, the first private company to do so, and the company has continued to reach new milestones. Musk's mission for Tesla: produce affordable electric cars. Next project: the Hyperloop, which will propel riders in pods through a network of tubes at 700 mph. Sound fun? Join us for this breathtaking ride.

Possible presentation topics:

- Advantages/disadvantages of electric cars
- Status of other private "space" companies (Blue Origin, Avio, Virgin Galactic, Ad Astra)
- Investment company Space Angels Network
- The Hyperloop Pod Competition
- Musk's latest venture: Neuralink (connecting the human brain to computers)
- Guest speaker from SpaceX or Tesla

Common Reading: *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future* by Ashlee Vance (January 2015)

14. (NOR) NORSE MYTHOLOGY

People have always been fascinated by The Viking Age, when the Vikings were the masters of the seas and were feared as ruthless and fierce pirates. It helps explain the popularity of the TV shows "The Vikings" and "The Game of Thrones." A key characteristic of this period is the body of mythology stemming from Norse paganism and continuing after the Christianization of Scandinavia and into the Scandinavian folklore of

the modern period. Numerous gods are mentioned in the source texts such as the hammer-wielding, humanity-protecting thunder-god Thor, who relentlessly fights his foes; the one-eyed, raven-flanked god Odin, who craftily pursues knowledge throughout the worlds and bestowed among humanity the runic alphabet; the beautiful, feathered cloak-clad goddess Freyja who rides to battle.

Norse Mythology, is a best-selling book written by Neil Gaiman is considered a “gripping, suspenseful and quite wonderful reworking of these famous tales” and will be the S/DG book. It is a considered retelling of sixteen familiar tales, presented in virtually the same sequence as they are found in Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, and crafted as sympathetically as any modern author can. Each session the class will discuss one of the tales as literature as well as present related topics such as religion in the Dark Ages and mythology in general.

Common Reading: *Norse Mythology*, by Neil Gaiman (February 2017)

15. (PUL) THE PULITZER PRIZE

What do the Washington Times, Wynton Marsalis and Ernest Hemingway have in common? They are all Pulitzer Prize winners.

Find out about the hows and whys of being a Pulitzer Winner and research the lives and works of past winners. Prizes are awarded yearly in 21 categories although the general headings are newspaper, online journalism, literature and musical composition. This extraordinary list of recipients as well as nominees who didn't win, provides a wealth of information for research and presentations....and for a fee of \$50 on your credit card, you might be entered into the annual competition.

No Common Reading.

16. (SCI) THE SCIENTISTS

A unique history of science that focuses on the scientists rather than just the breakthroughs. Our text covers the people who “made” science, and the context of the times in which they lived and worked.

Starting with the Renaissance, when science replaced mysticism as a means of explaining the workings of the world, and continuing through the centuries, our author gives us an anecdotal narrative enlivened with stories of personal drama, success and failure. Described as “a dot-to-dot line linking amateur to genius, and accidental discovery to brilliant deduction,” our text was described by *The Economist* as “a splendid book.” If you enjoy learning about the real people behind the discoveries, and about what makes them tick, this class is for you. Some of the luminaries covered: Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Linus Pauling.

Presentations could include:

- Biographies of current scientists
- How scientific research gets funded
- The place of the scientist in public life (Neil deGrasse Tyson or Bill Nye on Twitter, e.g.)
- Efforts to entice students into STEM fields

- “Rogue” scientists under the current administration

Common Reading: *The Scientists: A History of Science Told Through the Lives of Its Greatest Inventors*, by John Gribbin (August 2004)

17. (SEA) HISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

This S/DG focuses on the history of Southeast Asia, beginning with the early history but concentrating on changes made since the 18th century. Participants will choose a relevant topic for presentation as well as choosing a chapter from the text, develop discussion questions and facilitate discussion. Relevant topics include: the impact of colonial rule, the economic transformation of the 19th and 20th centuries, the independence movements, the impact of social change, the role of religion, ethnic minorities, immigrants, art and literature.

Common Reading: *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History*, by Milton Osborne, (11th edition, 2013)

18. (SHK) SHAKESPEARE: ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE ...

The Omnilorean New Globe Players plan a fun September-December 2017 season — reading and studying 3 of Shakespeare’s great Comedies. Did you know that of the 38 plays generally credited to the Bard, almost half (18) of them are Comedies? With players standing and with a few props, we will do reading walk-throughs of *Taming of the Shrew* and two other comedies to be chosen at the pre-meeting in August. (Nominations so far include *Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest*, and *All’s Well that Ends Well*.)

In this S/DG you will learn how to research all perspectives of Shakespeare’s works — sources of each play upon which the Bard builds rich characters and enhances the plots, how to play each character “in character,” themes, symbols, images, motifs, commentary on issues of the day, and all manner of *rhyme and reason*. Class members each serve on one play’s Board of Directors, responsible for casting roles for the repertory and leading discussions based on the research — optionally adding videos, music, and costumes. For a glimpse of how we live the Bard in this S/DG, check out <http://omnilore.org/members/Curriculum/SDGs/17a-SHK-Shakespeare> to view the Winter/Spring Shakespeare class’s website of links to references relevant to our plays and downloadable organizing artifacts.

There are no prerequisites, theatrical or otherwise. You will find that the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon will teach us, just as he’s taught others for four hundred years. With plenty for the novice as well as the veteran, it is a *foregone conclusion* members will leave this class with a fuller understanding of the masterful story construction, realistic characters with depth and humanity, and the rich, evocative language which have earned William Shakespeare the title of greatest writer in the English language.

Common Reading: Selected Plays

19. (SPL) SPIELBERG

This S/DG is dedicated to a review of Steven Spielberg's movies, guided by the text, a film-centric portrait of the popular director. Participants will each choose a film, develop

discussion questions with aid of the text, and facilitate a discussion on that film with the other members of the S/DG.

Common Reading: *Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films*, by Molly Haskell (January 2017)

20. (TED) TED TALKS: IDEAS WORTH SPREADING

A click on www.ted.com will take you to an unusual and fascinating website – TED Talks. TED is a nonprofit organization devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading. It started out (in 1984) as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, and Design. TED brings together some of the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers, who are challenged to give the talk of their lives (in 18 minutes). These are, for the most part, riveting talks by remarkable people and the talks are made available free to the world online.

Omnilore S/DG participants select a talk and do research on the subject and the speaker. The talk will serve as a nucleus for the presentation. The presenter provides the group with the talk chosen and questions or ideas for consideration leading to discussion. Group members watch the talk on their computer at home and come prepared for informed discussion. This S/DG has been offered several times previously, the last time in the Fall 2014 trimester during which time it split into two classes. With more than 450 talks now available and more added each week there are plenty of talks that have not been subjects of the earlier classes.

No Common Reading

21. (TUR) THE CRISIS OF MODERN TURKEY

In a world of rising tensions between Russia and the United States, the Middle East and Europe, Sunni and Shia, Islamism and liberalism, Turkey is at the epicenter. And at the heart of Turkey is its right-wing populist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Since 2002, Erdoğan has consolidated his hold on domestic politics while using military and diplomatic means to solidify Turkey as a regional power. His crackdown has been brutal and consistent – thousands of journalists arrested, academics officially banned from leaving the country, university deans fired, and many of the highest-ranking military officers arrested. In some senses, the nefarious and failed 2016 coup has given Erdoğan the license to make good on his repeated promise to bring order and stability under a ‘strongman’. In our common reading, leading Turkish expert Soner Cagaptay looks at Erdoğan’s roots in Turkish history, as well as the threats that Erdoğan has worked to combat, all of which have culminated in the crisis of modern Turkey. Presentations could be on Mustapha Pasha (later known as Atatürk), the Ottoman legacy, the Armenian issue, or Turkey as an ally of the USA.

Common Reading: *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*
by Soner Cagaptay (July 2017)

22. (USH) A MULTICULTURAL HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States has a racially and ethnically diverse population, and the history of their experiences as Americans is often left out of textbooks. Ronald Takaki, a third-generation

Japanese-American, chronicles the history of our diverse society in *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. He presents the perspectives of American Indians, Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, Irish, and Jews in order to provide an alternative to mainstream history. He states that “My scholarship seeks not to separate our diverse groups but to show how our experiences were different but they were not disparate. Multicultural history, as I write and present it, leads not to what Schlesinger calls the ‘disuniting of America’ but rather to the re-uniting of America.” Takaki’s book will serve as our guide as we discuss how multiculturalism has shaped our nation’s past and how it will continue to shape its future. Increasing diversity in the United States represents an historic shift toward multiculturalism with long-range implications for how we view racial issues and how the political landscape will be refashioned.

Common Reading: *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Revised Edition, by Ronald Takaki (2011)

23. (VIC) VICTORIA, THE QUEEN

From the introduction, “Few would have bet Victoria would become queen of the British Isles. Her father, after all, was not the first son of a king, but the fourth. It was, as so often with inherited power, due only to a series of tragedies...that on June 20, 1837, the destiny of a nation wheeled, spun, and came to rest on the small frame of an 18 year old girl. A girl who read Charles Dickens, worried about the welfare of Gypsies, adored animals, loved to sing opera, was fascinated with lion tamers, and hated insects and turtle soup...The queen was born at a time of immense upheaval—the sleepy village that surrounded Kensington Palace would become a bustling metropolis by the end of her lifetime {1901}...Uprisings would rattle the Church, the aristocracy, and Parliament. Under her reign {longest until recently overtaken by Queen Elizabeth—her great-great granddaughter— in 2015}, Britain would achieve a greatness it had not known before. This queen would rule a quarter of the people on earth, an epoch would be named after her, and her stern profile would forever be associated with a paradoxical time of growth, might, exploitation, poverty, and democracy. Victoria was the most powerful queen, and the most famous working mother, on the planet...”

From the *New York Times*: “Christened Alexandrina Victoria, this woman who lent her name to the age would, as Mark Twain once put it, ‘see more things invented than any other monarch that ever lived.’ While the era is known for great leaps in innovation and industrialization, it’s equally famed for its spirit of repression — social, sexual, emotional — and Queen Victoria was its standard-bearer.”

Any number of presentations are possible. Suggestions would be on the changes in 19th century living conditions, any aspect of the British Empire, the roles of women, or on Victoria herself, including her marriage, the myths, her relationship with her servant, the role of her youngest daughter who destroyed so much of her mother’s private papers (conservative estimates are that Victoria wrote an average of 2500 words per day during her reign), because certain parts had “appalled” her.

The bonus is that the book is superb (one opinion).

Common Reading: *Victoria, The Queen*, by Julia Baird (November 2016)