

Case study

Mapping close reading: How JSTOR supports humanistic inquiry



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Summary

The Close Reading Archive, created by John Guillory and Scott Newstok, is a digital resource that traces the intellectual and cultural history of close reading in literary studies. Supported by JSTOR's discovery tools and citation features, the project combines a deep annotated bibliography with historical insights, offering educators and researchers a dynamic, accessible platform for exploring humanistic inquiry.

The [Close Reading Archive](#) is a digital resource that reframes our understanding of the origins and evolution of Anglophone literary study. Developed collaboratively between [John Guillory](#) and [Scott Newstok](#), the project combines a robust bibliographic infrastructure with a historical and theoretical investigation into one of the humanities' defining practices. JSTOR was critical throughout in shaping the structure of these inquiries and providing access to relevant materials.

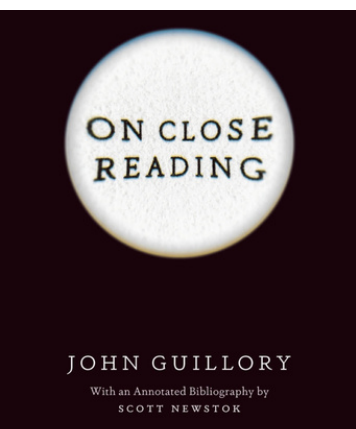
From intellectual exchange to digital architecture

The project is rooted in a long-standing scholarly dialogue. "Years ago, John Guillory shared with me his early drafts of a project on close reading," recalls Newstok, executive director of the [Spence Wilson Center for Interdisciplinary Humanities](#) at Rhodes College. Guillory, who had been researching the topic since the 1980s, recently invited Newstok to join as a formal collaborator.

"In 2023, Guillory proposed a book, in which his argument would be supplemented by my annotated bibliography."

Guillory's [On Close Reading](#) became the foundation, while Newstok continued collecting and annotating references and commentary. The bibliography ultimately burgeoned to over 750,000 words, far surpassing the capacity for print publication.

To make this archive accessible, Newstok partnered with NYU graduate student [Lili Hsu](#) to develop a searchable database. At the same time, a student research assistant at



Cover of "On Close Reading" by John Guillory.

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Rhodes College, [Ahyoung Hwang](#), helped regularize the formatting, resolve link rot, and structure the data into a coherent and navigable form.

"Each entry includes a kind of 'tiered' set of information: a key quotation (usually a central phrase, no longer than a sentence); an excerpt of key passages; and an external link. With this structure, a user can skim for pithy statements, delve more deeply into a quotation, or consult the original source in greater detail," elaborated Newstok.

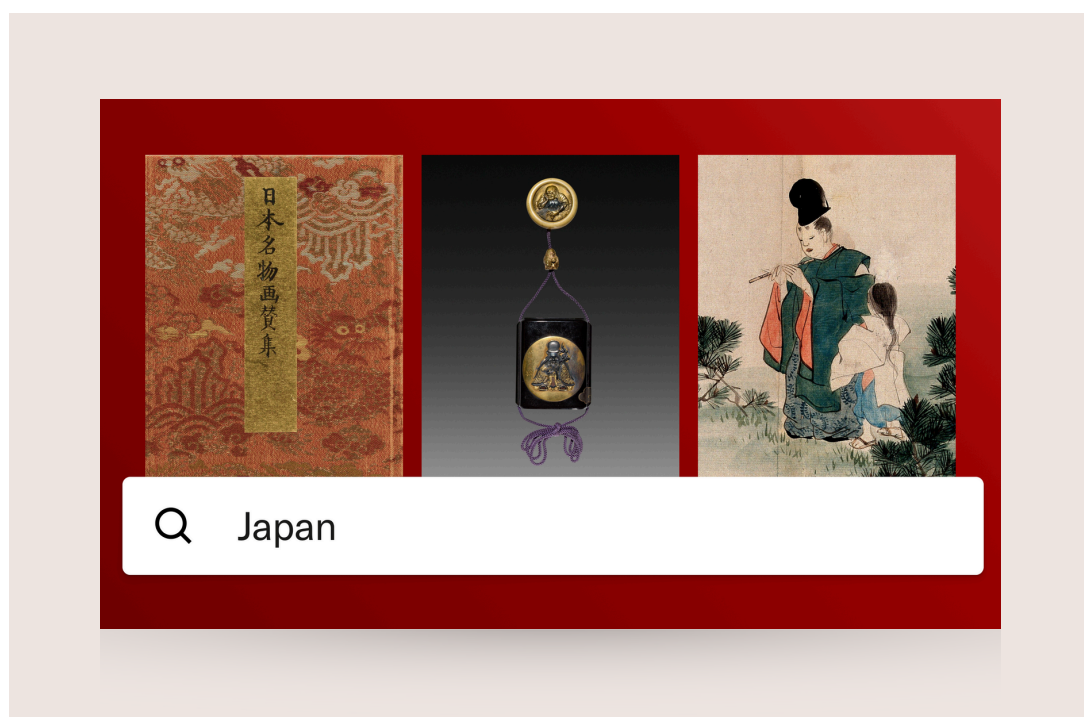
JSTOR's role in facilitating recursive research

JSTOR served as a cornerstone for the Archive's discovery process, taking advantage of advanced features such as automatic citations and refined search capabilities. As Newstok describes it:

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These serendipitous connections were made navigable by JSTOR's filtering tools. Newstok explains, "Sorting by relevance, or limiting searches to title or abstract, helped delimit the nearly 40,000 JSTOR entries that include the phrase 'close reading' (many of which don't ultimately refer to the practice in literary studies, yet some of which are suggestive nonetheless)." He notes that the entire research process was "recursive," with JSTOR's on-platform citation feature as an effective facilitator.

This recursive approach allowed the Archive to trace the linguistic and conceptual predecessors of "close reading," surfacing terms like "verbal analysis," "explication," and "close criticism." What emerged was a lexicon that evolved alongside the discipline itself.





W. P. A drawing of a person reading with the characters of A Midsummer Night's Dream around her. 1 drawing : ink. 19th century. Open: Folger Shakespeare Library.

Discoveries that complicate the received history

Among the Archive's insights is that the phrase "close reading" was rarely used by the very critics with whom it is now most often associated. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, experimented with a host of near-synonyms, yet showed reluctance to embrace the term even in his later writings. According to Newstok:

"The term's applied retroactively—something subsequent critics invoked, sometimes in disdain."

The Archive brings to light how close reading was never a monolith:

"No single rubric or set of 'rules' captures the practice. And that's precisely Guillory's point: close reading is a 'cultural technique,' one that's modeled, case-by-case, through apprenticeship to skilled practitioners. The best close readers—whether Erich Auerbach or Eve Sedgwick—are responsive, inventive, and informed. There's no formula for that."

As a teaching resource, the Archive provides accessible models without insisting on any unique method:

"The archive offers enough variety to help instructors experiment, refine, and teach, without pretending there's only one 'right' way."

Community, pedagogy, and public scholarship

The Archive has already found a home in classrooms and professional communities, including a recent [webinar from The English Association](#). Newstok reports that educators have used the tool to invite students into a broader scholarly ecosystem:

"It's been gratifying to hear from other teachers who've consulted the Archive as a gateway for their students to explore JSTOR and other digital resources."

On Close Reading and the Archive have also been spotlighted across scholarly venues:

- "A gift to the discipline."—[Dan Sinykin, The Nation](#)
- "An astonishing and faintly Ozymandian monument of scholarly metadata."—[Colin Vandenburg, n+1](#)
- "Newstok's annotated bibliography...would constitute a notable contribution even if it had been published by itself."—[Joshua Gang, Modern Philology](#)

A philosophy of collaboration and gratitude

The Close Reading Archive exemplifies what it means to work within a living scholarly tradition. Newstok acknowledges the human network behind the project:

"Undertaking this project has renewed my appreciation for the countless people who undergird the ongoing work of the humanities—students, colleagues, editors, reviewers, publishers, technologists, the folks behind platforms like JSTOR."

“Treating writing and reading as a ‘conversation’ across time and space is an old conceit: we talk to books, and they talk back to us.... Part of what an archive like this helps make just a bit more visible is the ongoing effort that sustains these unending conversations—we’re not the first to discuss close reading, nor will we be the last.”

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In an era of cultural skepticism toward the humanities, the Archive affirms their ongoing relevance. Quoting thinkers from Petrarch to Kenneth Burke, Newstok describes the archive as a portal into a perpetual dialogue:

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Explore the Archive

The preface of *On Close Reading* can be read online, courtesy of The University of Chicago Press. The Close Reading Archive itself is freely accessible, along with an overview of the Bibliography, and a selection of its entries has been published open-access by Cambridge University Press. Together, these resources offer a glimpse into the history and evolution of literary criticism, and confirm how scholarship grounded in humanistic values continues to thrive in our digital era.

For librarians, faculty, and institutions

If your institution is invested in the humanities and social sciences and eager to support research that bridges tradition with innovation, JSTOR offers tailored solutions to make it possible.

With citation integration and long-term digital access, we equip libraries, faculty, and students with a research infrastructure designed for discovery and interdisciplinary impact. Learn more about how we can strengthen your institution’s research support on [our website](#).