

# Comics, Computers, AND THE Digital Humanities

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## Exploring digital humanities: where art and ideas meet innovation and technology

**T**he Office of Digital Humanities (or ODH) plays a key role in the College of Humanities at BYU. Through the emerging study of digital humanities, faculty and staff in ODH engage in endeavors that complement and enhance the work of faculty throughout the College. They utilize tools and technological skills to build websites and databases, conduct discoveries by digitizing and compiling data, and have fun while they do it.

### What Is Digital Humanities?

Digital humanities refer to the study of the humanities from a digital and technological standpoint. In the digital humanities program, students create websites and learn how to typeset, compile and interpret digital data, do close readings of digital art, or acquire human skills such as language or critical thinking through the use of computers.

“It’s a complicated, innovative field,” says Associate Research Professor Jeremy Browne (Digital Humanities), that is “becoming more and more common over the years.” However, many (when they are not wondering what it is in the first place) still consider this field a novel approach to the humanities. But, Browne added, “that is part of the fun.”

The innovative field of digital humanities engages in the application of digital arts and skills, involving the use of languages like HTML and CSS, design programs like Adobe Creative Suite, and text-analysis programs such as WordCruncher.

Digital humanities take a humanistic approach to thinking about the digital culture we all live in, looking at how we think about the world in relation to memes, video games, or art created by artificial intelligence and asking questions about what it all means. They also take a digital approach to thinking about the human culture we live in by analyzing texts and publications.

### The Office of Digital Humanities

While digital humanities may feel like a new field, ODH and the responsibilities it fills have been around for a while. Some faculty have been doing research for over 30 years. ODH has its roots in language translation, foreign language testing, and as a humanities resource center. In 2013, ODH became its own office within the College. ODH faculty and staff continue to work with foreign language acquisition as well as support research; their projects range from building web services for Russian-language essay contests to processing data about advertisements printed in a historical Utah women’s magazine.

ODH collaborates on a large collection of projects, both on and off campus. The office builds websites and software for projects like the Cambodian Oral History Project and for language learning around campus. It also supports other projects through already existing tools, such as WordCruncher.

WordCruncher is a tool for searching, studying, and analyzing texts that started 30 to 40 years ago as the first digital version of the Latter-day Saint scriptures. The program can perform tasks like calculating word collocations, which allows a reader to find terms that occur near one another. Current WordCruncher projects include a collaboration with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the papers of Brigham Young.

Jesse Vincent, the director over WordCruncher, is focused on helping any professor or student, or even alumni, get started with WordCruncher to help analyze digital texts in insightful ways. WordCruncher is a tool available to anyone (see [WordCruncher.com](http://WordCruncher.com)).

ODH is more than just a supporting office though. Run by full-time faculty who teach courses and engage in their own research, ODH houses the digital humanities and technology minor. It also offers several classes integrated into other major and minor programs and available as electives. In 2019, students ranked Digital Humanities 250: Web Publishing number three for must-take electives at BYU.

Every program on campus benefits from a digital humanities class or two, if not an emphasis via the minor. The offered classes provide opportunities to gain marketable skills and expand one’s qualifications in quantifiable areas such as web design or digital research methods.



ABOVE: Photo by Professor Brian Croxall

LEFT: This comic from January 23, 1952, features Charlie Brown breaking the fourth wall and Schroeder speaking in a blackletter typeface (which Schulz replicates for his signature).

## The Peanuts Gallery: Familiar Texts, New Methods

University wide, scholarship often involves pattern finding and interpretation. Chemists, historians, and poets all look for patterns in their studies and then try to interpret what those patterns mean. Humanities students get lots of practice finding patterns and meanings through closely examining elements of a specific text or work, but that is not the only way to approach humanistic scholarship.

Assistant Research Professor Brian Croxall (Digital Humanities, American Studies) teaches one of those other approaches in his class called Research in the Digital Humanities (Digital Humanities 315). He says, “There are different ways of approaching humanities texts than just reading them and thinking about them. It’s not that [a digital approach] is better or more right.” A part of teaching this research class “is just suggesting to the students, ‘Hey, what if we did something really different? What if we came at studying the humanities from a different angle?’” And his students do just that. They take familiar humanities questions and answer them through new methods and tools.

In Digital Humanities 315, students do the familiar close examinations (or close readings) of a text using XML encoding. One of Croxall’s students calls this “closer than close reading.” They also practice distant reading, a method of reading that digitally compiles words and elements from many texts written by one (or more than one) author, or in one time period, and analyzes the data to answer questions. In Croxall’s class, the questions explore things like the ways Snoopy plays pretend or how characters co-occur in 50 years’ worth of *Peanuts* comic strips.

The popular *Peanuts* research started with Amy Schulz-Johnson, linguistics MA student at BYU and daughter of Charles Schulz, author of the *Peanuts* comic strips. When she returned to BYU as a nontraditional student to finish her bachelor’s degree, she learned about WordCruncher. With the help of ODH students, she began a linguistics study of her father’s comics that she carried over to her master’s thesis.

Schulz-Johnson’s work inspired Croxall’s Digital Humanities 315 class curriculum. Over the last three years, Croxall and his students have been doing their own separate research. Focusing on a few years of the 50-year run of *Peanuts*, the students are creating highly annotated digital editions of the strips. The editions record which characters

appear in each panel, details about the shape of speech bubbles, settings for the strip, activities the characters engage in, and much more.

Using this information, students create charts, graphs, and other sorts of visual and digital data to answer questions about the text. They research questions that range from “Which characters show up most commonly with each other?” to “What does each character’s speech and thought patterns reveal about them over the course of the comics?”

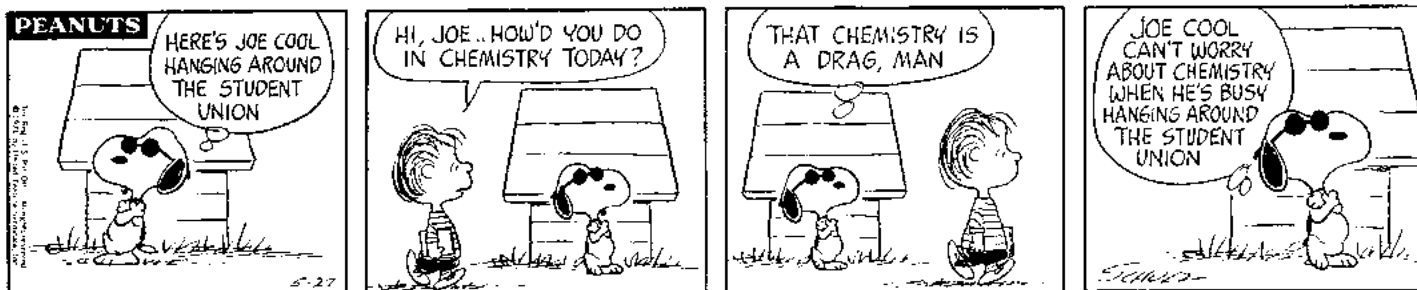
To some, questions like these might not look like they have much substance on the surface. They could be useful to social scientists or interesting to illustrators and writers studying their craft, but much of the inspiration for asking these questions lies in applying digital methods and tools, learning how to conduct research, and having fun while making discoveries. Croxall wants his students to ask questions he does not know the answer to yet. “We are trying to do something a little different rather than write an essay about something I already know all about. I point them in a direction, and we work together toward it.”

Furthermore, utilizing digital tools to ask and answer questions gets students familiar with thinking about data. Giving them the tools to think about data gives them a leg up when looking for a job and helps them relate to how other people across the university think about research.

## Technology Enables the Humanities

Technology has never been truly separate from the study of the humanities. Ancient Roman aqueducts and domes, the invention of the printing press, the study of the human impact on the environment—all are commonly studied by humanities faculty and within humanities classes. Programming, recording, transcribing, and brain scanning are just modern iterations of how ideas and creation meet innovation and technology.

Using digital tools is an additional way to think about and analyze human culture. The multifaceted Office of Digital Humanities takes a decidedly 21st-century approach to culture, both old and new. The tools found within the realm of digital humanities “do not replace, just enable,” says Browne. In the College of Humanities, ODH provides the tools that enable students and faculty to use technology to engage in scholarship through classes, research projects, tool building, language learning, and more. ■



This comic from May 27, 1971, captures the first-ever appearance of Joe Cool, one of Snoopy’s most well-known guises.  
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