

## UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The George Washington University: Fall 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

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### *Thinking about Conspiracy Theories: The Dark Alliance Controversy*

Full Annotated Bibliography: 9/25

Draft: 10/1

For publication: 10/8-10/11 (depending on peer review group)

Length: 1250-1750 words

**Assignment Goals:** To develop the critical reading tools and habits of mind of a good analyst; to distinguish between a productive thesis and an unproductive one; to learn how to deploy textual evidence in support of an original interpretive claim; to learn how to assess critically the writing of a peer. To get oriented to the phenomenon of conspiracy theory; to make first contact with the field of conspiracy theory studies.

**Readings:** Michael Kelly, "The Road to Paranoia;" Robert Alan Goldberg, "Mainstreaming Conspiracism," in *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); John Baez, "The Crackpot Index," *Skeptic* v. 8, no. 4 (2001): 18; Gary Webb, "Dark Alliance" (3-part series), *San Jose Mercury News* August 18-20, 1996); Mike Davis, "The Hammer and the Rock," in *City of Quartz* (NY: Vintage, 1990); Sue Paterno, "The Sad Saga of Gary Webb," *American Journalism Review* (June/July 2005); Peter Knight, "Fear of a Black Planet: 'Black Paranoia' and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy," in *Conspiracy Culture* (NY: Routledge, 2000); Peter Kornbluh, "Crack, The Contras, and the CIA: The Storm Over 'Dark Alliance'," *Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 1997); Mary E. McCoy, "Dark Alliance: News Repair and Institutional Authority in the Age of the Internet," *Journal of Communication* v. 51, n.1 (March 2001): 164-93; Society for Professional Journalists, "Code of Ethics"; *Writing Analytically* (WA) Chs. 1-3, 5-7, 8.

**The Tasks:** Conduct an analysis of the "Dark Alliance" controversy," write an interpretive essay explaining the continuing significance of this controversy to an audience of recent GWU graduates, and marking an argument about conspiracy theory as a societal phenomenon in dialogue with scholars studying conspiracy theory. You may directly cite no more than six significant passages from the original series *and* the responses combined. You must also set up, use, and pay off one quote each from Kelly, Goldberg, Davis, Paterno, Knight, Kornbluh, and McCoy.

**Grading Criteria:** The essay demonstrates that its author has suspended judgment about the phenomenon of conspiracy theory until s/he has conducted her or his analysis of the controversy. A productive and contestable thesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive (see box in WA, p. 164, see also p. 197); the thesis evolves (WA Ch. 6). The first instance of the working thesis is underlined; subsequent reformulations of the thesis are marked with double-underlines. In support of the thesis, patterns of repetition and contrast have been noted and discussed; anomalies have been noted and discussed; indirectly suggested meanings have been made explicit (for more on each of the preceding criteria see WA Ch. 2). Specific well-described passages from the Manifesto are analyzed as evidence testing the thesis; specific well-described passages from secondary sources are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the Manifesto. The introduction and conclusion function well (WA Ch. 8); the writer has developed a serious, engaging and authoritative voice; the essay is effectively organized (see WA Ch. 6 for more); the essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors; it properly uses in-text page/paragraph references and a works cited list.

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## “Thinking Along with the Unabomber” (Close Reading) Assessment Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The introduction functions well.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Positions the essay as a response to some aspect of  
conspiracy theory studies:

Yes  Somewhat  No

Establishes the topic of the essay:

Yes  Somewhat  No

Develops the topic of the essay:

Yes  Somewhat  No

Meets/challenges readers' needs and expectations:

Yes  Somewhat  No

The thesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Identifiable:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Original:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Interpretive:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Productive:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

In order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your theses, your essay noted and discussed the meaning or effects of significant patterns of ideas and/or rhetoric in the Dark Alliance controversy materials.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Noted:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Discussed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

In your analysis the implicit meanings of materials have been made explicit and discussed in order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your theses.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Made explicit:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Discussed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Specific, well-chosen, well-described passages are drawn from the Dark Alliance materials and analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Specific, well-chosen, well-described passages are drawn from secondary sources and analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

(Kelly)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

(Goldberg)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

(Davis)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Specific, well-chosen, well-described passages are drawn from secondary sources and analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

(Knight)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

(Kornbluh)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

(McCoy)

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports or complicates/enriches your theses.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

*Primary sources: The evidence offered*

Tests thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Supports thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Complicates/enriches:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

*Secondary sources: The evidence offered*

Tests thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Supports thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Complicates/enriches:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The thesis evolves (questions, interpretations, and explanations are reformulated as your analysis develops).

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Yes       Some       A little       Not at All

The body of the essay is effectively organized.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

The conclusion functions well.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Makes an effective transition from the body of the essay	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Offers more complex, nuanced and productive versions of the argument	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Connects specific conclusions to more abstract or general concerns relevant to our study of CT and/or the world	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Pays off readers' effort with a significant, productive, and insightful walk-away point	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The essay demonstrates that you have suspended judgment about the various groups' "Dark Alliance" truth claims argument until you understood them.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The writer has developed a serious, engaging, and authoritative voice.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Serious:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Engaging:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Authoritative:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Grammar/Typos:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All

Stylistic choices are appropriately made and well executed.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Appropriate:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Well-executed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Mostly	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All

The essay properly uses an academic citation system.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

In-text page/paragraph references:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Works cited:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

**Total Quality Points:**      /64      **Percentage:**      **Grade:**

**A=85-100**

**B=61-84**

**C=37-60**

**R/F=<37**

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### ***Peer Review for “Thinking About Conspiracy Theories” Assignment***

Due: As assigned the week of 10/2 – 10/5

Length: 500-750 words

**Assignment Goals:** To learn how to read and comment on a fellow writer’s work in order to help him or her develop his or her ideas into an intelligible, persuasive, interesting and productive essay; to provide peers with a considered intellectual response to their work with the goal of helping her or him meet the intellectual and compositional standards of the class and the field of conspiracy theory studies. To learn to apply such standards to one’s own writing.

**The Tasks:** Read, analyze and mark up a peer's draft using MS Word's reviewing tool and the “Marking and Analyzing Early Drafts” handout. Write a peer review letter aimed at helping make the essay more intelligible, persuasive, interesting, productive, and/or significant.

**Grading Criteria:** The review letter shows signs of a careful and considerate reading of the draft; it offers both an accurate overview of the essential argument of the draft (of about 150 words) and invokes specific examples to engage and respond to the author’s ideas; it helps the author locate the essential ideas of his or her draft; it helps the author develop ideas in their draft (through devil’s advocacy, problematizing binaries, offering alternative explanations or interpretations of evidence, providing richer or problematizing examples, suggesting new nuances or complications, qualifying claims or in other ways); writes something about the possible pitfalls and potential of the piece; **does not** take up issues of organization, style, grammar, and voice in the context of particular ideas.

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## ***The Things People Believe: Accuracy, Sufficiency, and Interpretation in Conspiracy Reporting***

Due: 11/12

Length: 2200-2800 words

**Assignment Goals:** To learn how to design a research project; to find, analyze, and interpret a coherent set of primary sources, to learn how to synthesize primary sources to construct an object of study; to learn how to use primary research to develop researchable hypotheses; to begin to situate your research in the field of conspiracy theory studies; to develop familiarity with the research tools at Gelman Library

**Readings:** Everything you've read in the course so far; Peter Knight, "Conspiracy/Theory" in *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (NY: Routledge, 2000); Michael Barkun, excerpts from *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U California P, 2003); Jack Zipes, excerpts from *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (NY: Routledge, 1993); Jeffrey S. Victor, excerpt from *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1993); Jodi Dean, "The Familiarity of Strangeness" in *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (NY: Cornell UP, 1997); Michael Shermer, excerpts from *Why People Believe Weird Things* (NY: Henry Holt, 2002)..

**The Tasks:** Design, find, analyze, and interpret a coherent, socially-situated, sufficient and varied set of primary sources; write a descriptive research report based on this research following the structure established on the next pages.

**Grading Criteria:** The report accurately and adequately synthesizes a collection of sufficient and varied primary sources into a productive object of study; it describes and interprets a set of conspiracy theory texts, the people and groups who circulate them, and relevant background information about the moment(s) in which the theory circulates; it offers a plausible and productive, if speculative, argument about what this conspiracy theory is explicitly and implicitly theorizing; it briefly situates your research in the field of conspiracy theory studies; it conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this conspiracy theory; it reflects on the implications of this report for further research this semester.

In addition, the report demonstrates that its author has suspended judgment until s/he understood the conspiracy theory under study. A productive and contestable thesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive (see box in WA, p. 164, see also p. 197); The working thesis is underlined. In support of the thesis, an analysis of conspiracy theory texts has been conducted: patterns of repetition and contrast have been noted and discussed; anomalies have been noted and discussed; indirectly suggested meanings have been made explicit (for more on each of the preceding criteria see WA Ch. 2). Specific well-described passages from conspiracy theory texts are analyzed as evidence testing the thesis; specific well-described information about the people who create and circulate these theories are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the texts. Specific passages from secondary sources in the field of conspiracy theory studies are used to establish scholarly interlocutors of this project. The set up and conclusion function well (WA Ch. 8); the writer has developed a serious, engaging and authoritative voice; the essay is effectively organized (see WA Ch. 6 for more); the essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors; it properly uses in-text page/paragraph references and a works cited list. The report includes a bibliography of every primary and secondary source consulted for the project, separated into sections labeled "Primary Sources" and "Secondary Sources."

## ***Report Structure***

Insert these section titles into your report. All sections should be written in (multi-)paragraph form intended to be read by a reader and be organized using a sensible pattern of development. **Do not** simply “answer the questions” in list form and submit the results. Craft a report-article in the vein of Gary Alan Fine or Jeffrey Victor.

**Project Title: “Research Report” is not an acceptable title; neither is a title like “Mind Control” or “The Moon Hoax”.**

### **Set-up (250-300 words)**

- What is your research project? Offer a brief telling example. .
- What are your research design and research parameters? Why did you make these choices? How do they impact your study?
- What are your essential research questions?
- What are the key findings of your study?
- What is the significance of your research?

### **Synthesis of the Object of Inquiry (250 words)**

- Considering all 20-30 of your sources, what is the basic narrative of the conspiracy theory you’re studying? BE sure to indicate which sources you used to construct this synthesis.
- What are significant variants?
- Among what kinds of people do these stories circulate? Be as specific as you can.
- In what moment(s)?
- What is your working hypothesis about how these stories function for some real people who are trying to make some sense of something in the world in which they live?

### **Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts (750-1000 words)**

- Your sources should be engaged in a discussion with one another about something important in their moment(s). You should be able to identify their complaint and their pitch. This section should extract and explicate that argument by means of close textual readings of well-chosen sources and start to think about what personal and societal imperatives it *could* be serving. You need to actually select and use quotes from the sources to make your case.
- This **should not** be in the form of source 1 analysis followed by source 2 analysis followed by source 3 analysis. Instead think of this as a small close analysis essay organized by idea and theme tested against evidence drawn from the content of these stories.
- Using no more than a few specific conspiracy texts, describe, explain and interpret the significant motifs in your conspiracy theory to test your working hypothesis. Be sure to draw examples, passages, and quotes from your primary source material
- At the end of this section readers need to have a good idea of the content, texture, and language of these stories, their key motifs, themes and ideas and what they might possibly mean.

### **Analytical Description of the People and Groups Circulating these Stories (250 words)**

- Robert Alan Goldberg says that conspiracy theories do not thrive in isolation (239+). So, who are the people who produce, distribute, and consume these stories? Refer to them by name if possible. See if you can deduce categories of the kinds of people who use these texts.
- What are the personal and social imperatives of the people/groups circulating these texts? Draw and use specific evidence from the biographies, web-presence, reputation, and textual production of actual nameable people to support your claims.
- If more than one group is circulating your conspiracy theory (cf. Jeffrey Victor), what are the personal and social imperatives animating those different networks?

### **Important Background Information About the Moment(s) in which These Texts are Circulating (300 words)**

- What do we need to know about the times and places these stories a) are about, b) circulate in to understand how they work for the people who produce, distribute and consume them?
- What information about the world (public/private: economic, political, cultural; historical) do we need to know to make sense of the significant motifs in the stories?

How does this information relate to the personal/social imperatives of the conspiracists?  
How does this information relate to significant motifs in these stories  
What real societal problems, puzzles, or anomalies (as perceived by conspiracists) seem to be being addressed in these stories?

**Presentation and Discussion of Your Tentative Conclusions (300-500 words)**

Think of this as a miniature multi-paragraph essay based on the information and analyses you've presented so far. What have you learned about how your particular CT works for particular conspiracists trying to understand something about their world? What have you learned about CT in general from conducting this research?

**Discussion of Relevant Secondary Sources from the Field of Conspiracy Theory Studies (250 words)**

Of the conspiracy theory scholars you've read so far, who would be most interested in your work? Why? What would they say about your work? Use specific passages from their work to answer these questions.  
Of the conspiracy theory scholars you've read so far, who would be most challenged by your work? How? What would they say about your work? Use specific passages from their work to answer these questions.  
How do you see your research contributing to the field of conspiracy theory studies?

**Implications of this Report for Further Research (150 words)**

What new but related research questions arise from this report? What richer more nuanced versions of your questions do you now have?  
About what do you need to learn to make a better case for your conclusions? To nuance them further?  
What are the limitations of the study at this time?

**Research Bibliography**

A properly formatted list of *all* of the primary and secondary sources consulted in your research so far, whether on-line, in print, a video, music, a cartoon—whatever. Separate the list into two sections: *Primary Sources* and *Secondary Sources*.

***Step-by-Step Analysis Process for the Research Report and Beyond***

Once you've gathered a well-designed, coherent set of primary sources:

0. Create an object of study by combining elements from multiple primary sources into a representative conspiracy theory (cf. Jeffrey Victor's paragraph). Identify the main variants and interesting outliers/anomalies.

1. Do close analysis of several of your primary sources to identify key themes, characters, plots, settings, interesting uses of language or imagery. Use notice-focus-significance, analysis of repeated elements and binaries, strands, and anomalies, paraphrase x 3, rhetorical analysis, anything from *Writing Analytically* that will help you crack open the texts. For this project, a good source will have an argument. What would you say is its "complaint," "pitch," and "moment"? How does this source help us understand the person's/persons' personal and social imperatives?

2. Identify the people/types of people as best you can. Describe them. What are their personal and social imperatives? What concerns about the world do they have? How are those imperatives/concerns being used/served in these stories?

3. Do basic background research (at the level of encyclopedia research, consulting general histories, news publications, specialized encyclopedias) about the moment of your sources. What economic, political and cultural concerns are important? How is the societal structure defined in political, economic, and cultural terms? How do these factors produce/influence the personal and social imperatives of the people who believe (or otherwise use) the conspiracy theory that is the object of your study? The background information should make a bridge between the psychological response of people confronting some sociological observation.

4. Write (or reformulate) your hypothesis in a form something like this: These stories [describe them] help these people or these types of people [describe them: A, B, C, D] who have these personal and social imperatives [A, B, C, D] do this kind of work [name the different kinds of work stories can do for people] as they respond to these aspects [A, B, C, D] of their moment/societal structure. Generate as many reasonable hypothetical versions of the hypothesis as you can and test them against your evidence to find the one(s) that are most compelling, that seem to be able to account for most elements of the story and seem most responsive to the people's personal and social imperatives in reference to their moment. Re-read *Writing Analytically* Chs. 5-6 for help developing and refining your thesis. Read Ch. 5 for help linking evidence to claims.

5. On the basis of the results of your preliminary work, write a new project description: I am studying xxxxxxxxx, in order to learn yyyyyyy, which is significant because zzzzzzzzz.

6. Go back to step 1 and look at the conspiracy theories again. Continue through these steps until you're ready to write the report.

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## **Research Report: The Form**

Please use these titles to section your report. All sections should be written in (multi-)paragraph form intended to be read by a reader and be organized using a sensible pattern of development. **Do not** simply “answer the questions” in list form and submit the results. Craft a report-article in the vein of Gary Alan Fine or Jeffrey Victor.

**Project Title: “Research Report” is not an acceptable title; neither is a title like “Mind Control” or “The Moon Hoax”.**

### **Set-up (250-300 words)**

- What is your research project? Offer a brief telling example. .
- What are your research design and research parameters? Why did you make these choices? How do they impact your study?
- What are your essential research questions?
- What are the key findings of your study?
- What is the significance of your research?

### **Synthesis of the Object of Inquiry (250 words)**

- Considering all 20-30 of your sources, what is the basic narrative of the conspiracy theory you’re studying? BE sure to indicate which sources you used to construct this synthesis.
- What are significant variants?
- Among what kinds of people do these stories circulate? Be as specific as you can.
- In what moment(s)?
- What is your working hypothesis about how these stories function for some real people who are trying to make some sense of something in the world in which they live?

### **Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts (500-750 words)**

- Your sources should be engaged in a discussion with one another about something important in their moment(s). You should be able to identify their complaint and their pitch. This section should extract and explicate that argument by means of close textual readings of well-chosen sources and start to think about what personal and societal imperatives it *could* be serving. You need to actually select and use quotes from the sources to make your case.
- This **should not** be in the form of source 1 analysis followed by source 2 analysis followed by source 3 analysis. Instead think of this as a small close analysis essay organized by idea and theme tested against evidence drawn from the content of these stories.
- Using no more than 3 specific conspiracy texts, describe, explain and interpret the significant motifs in your conspiracy theory to test your working hypothesis.
- At the end of this section readers need to have a good idea of the content, texture, and language of these stories, their key motifs, themes and ideas and what they might possibly mean.

### **Analytical Description of the Social Network(s) in which These Texts are Circulating (250 words)**

- Robert Alan Goldberg says that conspiracy theories do not thrive in isolation (239+). So, who are the people who produce, distribute, and consume these stories? Refer to them by name if possible. See if you can deduce categories of the kinds of people who use these texts.
- What are the personal and social imperatives of the people/groups circulating these texts? Draw evidence from the biographies, web-presence, reputation, and textual production of actual nameable people to support your claims.
- If more than one social network is circulating your conspiracy theory (cf. Jeffrey Victor), what are the personal and social imperatives animating those different networks?

### **Analytical Description of the Significance(s) of the Channel(s) of Communication (250 words)**

What channel(s) of communication are being used to circulate these stories? How do the requirements or conventions of the medium shape the content? What draws the people using these media to them? We all need to start thinking about how people use the internet in relationship to CT in some other terms than the “validity” or “reliability” of the “information.” Think about what people actually do as they search, read, chat, forward, save files and so on. How does the actual form of communication—computer mediated conversation, browsing, using search engines, blogging, watching video—shape how people find, use and think about the sites they encounter? What kinds of “thinking” are people doing when using the internet? Similar kinds of questions can be asked about watching films and television, reading books and magazines, and other forms of communication. Formulate your answers in relationship to what Robert Alan Goldberg has to say about how media/Internet and conspiracy theory intersect.

**Important Background Information About the Moment(s) in which These Texts are Circulating (300 words)**

What do we need to know about the times and places these stories a) are about, b) circulate in to understand how they work for the people who produce, distribute and consume them?

What information about the world (public/private: economic, political, cultural; historical) do we need to know to make sense of the significant motifs in the stories?

How does this information relate to the personal/social imperatives of the conspiracists?

How does this information relate to significant motifs in these stories

What real societal problems, puzzles, or anomalies (as perceived by conspiracists) seem to be being addressed in these stories?

**Presentation and Discussion of Your Tentative Conclusions (300 words)**

Think of this as a miniature multi-paragraph essay based on the information and analyses you’ve presented so far. What have you learned about how your particular CT works for particular conspiracists trying to understand something about their world? What have you learned about CT in general from conducting this research?

**Implications of this Report for Further Research (150 words)**

What new research questions arise from this report? Or what richer more nuanced versions of your questions do you now have?

What further information do you need to make a better case for your conclusions? To nuance them further?

What are the limitations of this study?

**Research Bibliography**

A properly formatted list of *all* of the primary and secondary sources consulted in your research so far, whether on-line, in print, a video, music, a cartoon--whatever. Separate the list into two sections: *Primary Sources* and *Secondary Sources*.

## ***UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES***

The George Washington University: Fall 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

home.gwu.edu/~edrown

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### Questions toward initial conspiracy theory research project design: (add space as necessary)

Due:

Post in the discussion forum called “Initial Research Project Design” and Bring to the Library Session”

**What is the topic of your research project? Write your answer in this form: I am studying \_\_\_\_\_, in order to learn \_\_\_\_\_, which contributes to the field of conspiracy theory studies by \_\_\_\_\_.**

**What is the basic story of the conspiracy theory or theorist you want to study?**

**From what aspect of the current debate in conspiracy theory studies does your interest in your research topic arise? Which of the conspiracy theory scholars whom we have read would be most interested in reading your research? Why? Which would be most critical of your work? Why?**

**What essential and supporting questions do you want or need to answer?** (Remember “essential” questions are those that can generate multiple plausible answers, go beyond facts, and require analysis, interpretation, synthesis and judgment to answer; “supporting” questions are those that can be answered more or less definitively with information and which equip you to figure out how to answer your essential questions. See the handout under “Handouts and Advice” on the course website).

**What kind of primary source material will you gather to answer those questions? What is the logic behind these choices? How do these materials represent/document the beliefs of a particular group of people?**

**What complementary topics will you need to learn about in order answer and contextualize these questions?**

**What theoretical concepts (borrowed or invented, about the intersections of culture, politics, economics, psychology, group, identity) do you think you will need to frame initial hypotheses for your research?** (In scholarship, theories are not untested speculations, they are the product of scholars’ broad and deep encounter with a) the thing being studied, and b) the methods and insights of the field(s) which study it. So, for us, “theoretical” concepts are those that illuminate and explain the often-unspoken assumptions about the nature of self, society, language, media [add your own terms here] that warrant our claims about the object under study. You’ve already encountered examples of such concepts: “moral panic,” “agency panic” “totalization,” “liberal/possessive individualism,” “nationalism,” and “cultural milieu” to name just a few).

**What do you think your initial hypothesis is? What serious questions do you think people are thinking by means of conspiracy theory? What personal and social imperatives are these narratives meeting or challenging?**

## Defining Initial Research Parameters

Due:

Bring to Library Session and Post in the Discussion Forum called “Research Parameters

In preparation for our first library research session, it’s important to begin to define some initial research parameters in order to guide our search for information, insight, and perspective. Surprisingly, you need already to have thought in a pretty abstract way about the nature of conspiracy theories in order to define your research parameters. So bear with me as I explain why I think conspiracy theories are best thought of as a subset of contemporary (often called “urban” legends) and what implications that has for your project. According to sociologist Gary Alan Fine, contemporary legends “depict topics of public concern” (*Manufacturing Tales* 2). They hold up a “mirror—a distorted one—to the social and economic conditions of modern, Western, industrial society” (2). Thomas McLaughlin would take Fine’s work one step further and argue that contemporary legends are enable their tellers and listeners to engage in a bit of vernacular theorizing (*Street Smarts and Critical Theory*). By vernacular theorizing, McLaughlin means that people use the cultural resources (contemporary legends, popular narratives, or even conspiracy theories) they find around them to reveal and explain the societal conditions under which they live. As many scholars and social critics have claimed (both recently, and for nearly a hundred years), the conditions of modern, Western, industrial society are constantly in flux.<sup>1</sup> Cultural, economic, and political imperatives are often contradictory. Individuals’ sense of self, as well as their sense of connection to family, group, and place, is tentative. Synthesizing this account with Fine’s ideas, we can say that conspiracy theories are mediated expressions of people’s collective anxieties about structural contradictions of a society. McLaughlin would take it further, arguing that conspiracy theorists and conspiracy enthusiasts are engaged in the theoretical work of revealing and explaining the dynamic, often contradictory, workings of a society where “official explanations” of those workings are no longer persuasive.

The implications of this theory for the way you gather and handle data in your research are significant. According to Fine, these ideas mean that the best way to produce persuasive explanations of the “work” done by contemporary legends for the people who disseminate and receive them is to examine the relationships among four variables: a) the text of the legend (here conspiracy theory) itself with its characters, plots, themes, settings and other significant elements (I’m going to call this variable TEXT below; b) the social structure of the place(s) and time(s) in which these texts are circulating (PLACE and TIME); and the mediating factors of c) the personal imperatives of the individuals and groups which circulate them (PEOPLE), and d) the dynamics of the interaction between narrator and audience (COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS).<sup>2</sup> These categories can make clear the kinds of data you need to gather in order to produce a credible interpretation of your conspiracy theory. Given the magnitude of such a project and the relatively short span of time we have, it is necessary to designate some of these factors as dominant variables, and others as subordinate variables. The first dominant variable will provide you with a field of inquiry. Adding a second dominant variable will significantly focus your research, reduce the scope of things you need to look at in depth, and give you some sense of what kinds of questions your data set will be able answer. By the way, essential questions can be asked about each of these four variables.

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<sup>1</sup> Just a small sample of the range of the scholarship and criticism of the crisis of social change, limited here only to Americans, could include the work of historical critic Henry Adams, sociologist W. E. B. du Bois, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, critic William Whyte, sociologist David Riesman, cultural critic Betty Friedan, media theorist Marshall McLuhan, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and cultural theorists Fredric Jameson and David Harvey.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these categories see Fine, “Toward a Framework for Contemporary Legends” in the Supplemental Reading folder on the class website. McLaughlin’s “Theory Outside the Academy” is where he lays out his argument for vernacular theory.

Here's an example: Say you're interested in John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories (TEXT). That's your first dominant variable (marked with a \*). After that you could go in a number of different directions, each of which would produce different hypotheses, different research results, and ultimately different conclusions.

**\*TEXT:** John F. Kennedy Assassination CTs (gather multiple examples)

**PLACE and TIME** of your research: [could do] a) versions of CTs that emerge just after Robert Kennedy was killed; b) versions of CTs that emerge after Pres. Ronald Reagan was shot; c) versions that emerged after Oliver Stone's *JFK*; d) versions that originated just after the original shooting and have persisted until today....

**PEOPLE:** a) versions of CTs circulated by people with advanced degrees; b) versions circulated by people not born when JFK was shot; c) versions circulated by members of the "patriot movement"; d) versions that prompted angry responses by prominent Kennedy affiliates....

**COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS:** a) versions exchanged face-to-face; b) fictionalized versions in novels; c) versions in foreign films; d) versions that circulate in online newsgroups; e) versions heard on AM talk radio; f) versions heard in Oakland, CA in discussions among conspiracy theorists attending screenings of the film "The Great Conspiracy: The 911 News You Never Heard" on nights the filmmaker attended....

Any one of these four variables could be designated as dominant. You could focus on all the conspiracy theories generated by one person (say David Icke, Terry Melanson, or Barbara Hartwell), on ones prominent in one kind of media, or at a particular time and/or place. There are logical consequences of your choice. If you choose to focus on one conspiracy theorist, you may no longer have a choice about the kind of CT that person is producing. He or she may produce only one kind (so your choice is made for you), or produce a wide range (in which case that itself is a significant feature of your research, even if later you choose to focus on just a part of his or her production).

Do your best on a separate sheet to define all four parameters of your study. First generate a lot of ideas (like my example above), and then narrow your parameters as best you can. Be sure to designate one or two variables as dominant by marking them with a \*. And be aware that these parameters will surely change somewhat as you gather more data and try to understand it.

# UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The George Washington University: Fall 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

## ***“The Things People Believe” (Research Report) Assessment Form***

**Name:**

### Setup:

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Establishes the topic and project of the report:  Yes  
Describes the research design and parameters of the project:  Yes  
Proposes initial research questions:  Yes  
Outlines key findings:  Yes  
Establishes the significance of the research:  Yes  
Meets/challenges readers' needs and expectations:  Yes

Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No

### Object of Inquiry:

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Synthesizes an object of inquiry from 15-20 primary sources:  Yes  
Identifies significant variants  Yes  
Identifies the social networks:  Yes  
Identifies the moment(s):  Yes

Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No  
 Somewhat  No

The working hypothesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive:

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Identifiable:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Original:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Interpretive:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Productive:  Yes  Somewhat  No

### Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts

In order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your thesis, your report noted and discussed the meaning or effects of significant patterns of repeated and contrasting elements (ideas, images, terms, binaries, uses of evidence, or rhetorical strategies) found in your CT set. Implicit meanings found in your CT set have been made explicit and discussed in order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your thesis.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Noted:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Discussed:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Made explicit:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Discussed:  Yes  Somewhat  No

Specific, well-chosen, well-described examples are analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Well-chosen:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Set up:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Described:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Analyzed:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Paid off:  Yes  Somewhat  No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Tests thesis:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Supports thesis:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Complicates/enriches:  Yes  Somewhat  No

Analytical Description of the People/Groups

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Identifies the people and groups that produce, distribute and consume these stories:

Yes       Somewhat       No

Discusses the personal and social imperatives of these people and groups:

Yes       Somewhat       No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Tests thesis:             Yes             Somewhat       No  
Supports thesis:         Yes             Somewhat       No  
Complicates/enriches:  Yes             Somewhat       No

Background Information about Relevant Moment(s)

Presents and discusses important background information:

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       No

Relates the background information to personal/social imperatives of conspiracists:

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       No

Relates background information to significant motifs in the stories:

Yes       Somewhat       No

Identifies the real societal problems, puzzles, anomalies perceived by conspiracists being addressed in the stories:

Yes       Somewhat       No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports and complicates/enriches your thesis.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Tests thesis:             Yes             Somewhat       No  
Supports thesis:         Yes             Somewhat       No  
Complicates/enriches:  Yes             Somewhat       No

Conclusions

The report offers a plausible and productive argument about what this CT is explicitly and implicitly theorizing.\*

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Plausible:             Yes             Somewhat       A little         Not at All  
Productive:           Yes             Somewhat       A little         Not at All

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\* By theorizing I mean revealing (and perhaps challenging) the enabling assumptions of a societal system and the organizations, institutions, and groups that constitute (or are excluded by it), or of a system of belief, thought, knowledge, or communications and the organizations, institutions, and groups that use (or marginalized) by it. I also mean revealing (and maybe challenging) the blind spots of those systems, ways of knowing, and institutions.

The conclusion functions well.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- Connects specific conclusions to more abstract or general concerns relevant to our study of CT and/or the world  Yes  Somewhat  No
- Pays off readers' effort with a significant, productive, and insightful walk-away point  Yes  Somewhat  No

Discussion of Relevant Sources from the Field of Conspiracy theory Studies

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- Identifies scholars who would be interested in this research:  Yes  Somewhat  No
- Uses specific passages from their work:  Yes  Somewhat  No
- Identifies scholars who would be challenged by this research:  Yes  Somewhat  No
- Uses specific passages from their work:  Yes  Somewhat  No
- Explains how this research contributes to the field of conspiracy theory studies:  Yes  Somewhat  No

Implications of this Report for the Future of the Project

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Identifies new but related research question or develops richer more nuanced versions of existing research questions:

- Yes  Somewhat  No

Identifies what the author needs to learn to make a better more nuanced case:

- Yes  Somewhat  No

Identifies the limitations of the study:

- Yes  Somewhat  No

Research and Analysis:

The report accurately and sufficiently synthesizes a coherent collection of varied and sufficient primary sources into a productive object of study.

*Your collection of primary sources appears to be*

- Varied:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All
- Coherent:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  No
- Sufficient:  Yes  No

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

*Individually, your primary sources are handled*

- Accurately:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All
- Sufficiently:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All
- Productively:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

Overall

The body of the report is effectively organized.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All

The report conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this CT and the lived contexts in which they appear.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

The CT:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All  
Lived Context:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

The report demonstrates that you have suspended judgment about the conspiracy theories about which you're writing until you understood them in a lived context.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

The writer has developed a serious, engaging, and authoritative voice.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Serious:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Engaging:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Authoritative:  Yes  Somewhat  No

The report is free from grammatical and typographical errors.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Grammar/Typos:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All  
 Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All

Stylistic choices are appropriately made and well executed.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Appropriate:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All  
Well-executed:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All

The report properly uses an academic citation system.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

In-text page references:  Yes  No  
Works cited:  Yes  No

**Total Quality Points:** /96 **Percentage:** **Grade:**

**A=85-100**

**B=61-84**

**C=37-60**

**R/F=<37**

***Theorizing Conspiracy:  
An Initiation into Academic Conspiracy Theory Studies***

Complete Draft: April 17

Final Essay: May 3-May 10 (depending on presentation day)

Final Portfolio: May 4-May 11 (depending on presentation day)

Length: 3000-3500 words

**Assignment Goals:** To learn how to read, assess, and synthesize scholarship; to learn how to engage other scholars in the field through original primary research; to learn how secondary research shapes scholars' understanding of primary materials; to develop facility using the advanced research tools of Gelman Library. To engage deeply with other scholars working in Conspiracy Theory Studies; to draw conclusions about conspiracy theorists', conspiracy enthusiasts', and conspiracy debunkers' engagement with society by means of conspiracy theory; to draw original, situated conclusions about the psychological and societal functions of conspiracy belief and debunking.

**Readings:** Everything you've read in the course so far; Michael Barkun, "New World Order Conspiracy Theories I," in *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U California P, 2003); Robert Alan Goldberg, "Jewish Devils and the War on Black America," in *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); WA Chs. 4, 12-13; whatever primary and secondary sources you need to complete your research project.

**The Tasks:** Synthesize, review, and critique the ideas of other scholars working in Conspiracy Theory Studies in light of the findings of your research report; rethink your research report in light of a deep engagement with the work of other scholars; conduct additional sufficient and varied primary and secondary research; present your work to peer researchers at a conference; write a research essay for a new anthology featuring the first post-9/11 generation of conspiracy theory scholars, thereby making an explicit contribution to the field of conspiracy theory studies.

**Grading Criteria:** The research essay situates original primary research findings in both a societal and a scholarly context; it reflects on the meanings and implications of conspiracy theory as a widespread societal phenomenon, a rhetorical form of writing, and a particular set of ideas; it is conversant with, uses, and engages the work of conspiracy theory studies scholars; secondary sources are made to "speak" (WA, p. 300); secondary sources are used to ask questions not just to answer them (WA, p. 301); sources are put into conversation with one another (WA, p. 303); sources are accurately quoted or paraphrased (WA, p. 307); analysis is integrated into description and paraphrasing of sources (WA, p. 307); ideas are properly and clearly attributed to their author (WA, p. 312); you have found your own role in the conversation among secondary sources (WA, p. 307). The essay includes an accurate, sufficient, and productive representation of the field of contemporary conspiracy theory studies since 1990. It uses significant ideas and passages drawn from work written by at least seven (7) conspiracy theory scholars, at least two (2) pieces of which the student-researcher has found on her/his own. The essay uses ideas from at least two (2) scholars from another field relevant to his/her project.

In addition, the essay accurately and adequately synthesizes a collection of sufficient and varied primary sources into a productive object of study; it describes and interprets a set of conspiracy theory texts, the people and groups who circulate them, and relevant background information about the moment(s) in which the theory circulates; it offers a plausible, productive, well-documented argument about the relationship between the aspects of society this conspiracy theory is explicitly and implicitly theorizing; it situates your research in the field of conspiracy theory studies; it conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this conspiracy theory and is conversant (WA, p. 111) with the works of other scholars doing relevant work, explaining how it is a contribution to the changing field of conspiracy theory studies.

Further the essay demonstrates that its author has suspended judgment until s/he understood the conspiracy theory under study. Two productive and contestable theses (one about a specific set of conspiracy theories, the other about conspiracy theory as a societal phenomenon) are identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive (see box in WA, p. 164, see also p. 197); the theses evolves (WA Ch. 6). The first instance of each working thesis is underlined; subsequent reformulations of the theses are marked with double-underlines. In support of the theses, an analysis of conspiracy theory texts has been conducted: patterns of repetition and contrast have been noted and discussed; anomalies have been noted and discussed;

indirectly suggested meanings have been made explicit (for more on each of the preceding criteria see *WA Ch. 2*). Specific well-described passages from conspiracy theory texts are analyzed as evidence testing the thesis; specific well-described information about the people who create and circulate these theories are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the texts. Specific passages from secondary sources in the field of conspiracy theory studies and relevant fields are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the texts. Specific passages from secondary sources in the field of conspiracy theory studies and relevant fields are used to challenge or develop significant ideas important in the fields. The set up and conclusion function well (*WA Ch. 8*); the writer has developed a serious, engaging and authoritative voice; the essay is effectively organized (see *WA Ch. 6* for more); the essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors; it properly uses in-text page/paragraph references and a works cited list. The essay includes a bibliography of every primary and secondary source consulted for the project, separated into sections labeled “Primary Sources” and “Secondary Sources.”

# UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The George Washington University: Fall 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

## “Theorizing Conspiracy” (Research Essay) Assessment Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The introduction functions well.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |  |                              |                                   |                             |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Positions the essay as a response to some topic of current debate in CT scholarship: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Establishes the topic of the essay:  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Develops the topic of the essay:   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Meets/challenges readers’ needs and expectations:                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Proposes initial hypotheses/research questions:                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Describes the research parameters of the project:                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

The primary thesis (about the meaning(s) of your specific CT set) is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |               |                              |                                   |                             |
|---------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Identifiable: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Original:     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Interpretive: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Productive:   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

The secondary (about CT and CT studies more generally) thesis is identifiable, original, interpretive, and productive.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |               |                              |                                   |                             |
|---------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Identifiable: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Original:     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Interpretive: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Productive:   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

In order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your theses, your essay noted and discussed the meaning or effects of significant patterns of repeated and contrasting elements (ideas, images, terms, binaries, uses of evidence, or rhetorical strategies) found in your CT set.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |            |                              |                                   |                             |
|------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Noted:     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Discussed: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Implicit meanings found in your CT set have been made explicit and discussed in order to test, support, and complicate/enrich your theses.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |                |                              |                                   |                             |
|----------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Made explicit: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Discussed:     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Specific, well-chosen, well-described examples from the motifs, themes, characters, plots, settings and other elements of the CT are analyzed as evidence relevant to the thesis. They are set up and paid off.

Quality Pts. Earned: [ ]

- |              |                              |                                   |                             |
|--------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Well-chosen: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Set up:      | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Described:   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Analyzed:    | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Paid off:    | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Specific, well-chosen, passages from relevant secondary sources in conspiracy theory studies and other relevant fields are used to develop and complicate your interpretation of the conspiracy theories. They are set up and paid off.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Well-chosen:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Set up:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Described:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Analyzed:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Paid off:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The evidence you offered persuasively tests, supports or complicates/enriches your theses.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*Primary thesis: The evidence offered*

Tests thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Supports thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Complicates/enriches:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

*Secondary thesis: The evidence offered*

Tests thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Supports thesis:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Complicates/enriches:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The primary thesis evolves (questions, explanations, and interpretations are reformulated as your analysis develops).

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Some       A little       Not at All

The secondary thesis evolves (questions, explanations, and interpretations are reformulated as your analysis develops).

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Some       A little       Not at All

The essay accurately and sufficiently synthesizes a coherent collection of varied and sufficient primary sources into a productive object of study.

*Your collection of primary sources (as evidenced by an annotated bibliography) is*

Varied:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Coherent:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Sufficient :	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No		

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*Individually, your primary sources are handled*

Accurately:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Sufficiently:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Productively:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*Your synthesis of sources accurately, sufficiently and productively represents your collection of sources and sets up the key themes of your essay*

Accurately:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Sufficiently:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Productively:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All
Sets up themes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> A little	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at All

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Use of primary sources conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of expressions of this CT.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The essay situates original primary research findings in a lived context.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The essay situates original primary research findings in a scholarly context

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The essay is conversant with, uses, and engages a varied and sufficient sample of the work of contemporary scholars in conspiracy theory and any other necessary fields.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*CT:*

Conversant:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All  
 Uses:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All  
 Engages:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

*Other fields:*

Conversant:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All  
 Uses:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All  
 Engages:  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

Uses secondary sources accurately and sufficiently with clear and proper attribution

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*They are accurately and sufficiently represented (paraphrased, quoted, and/or described)*

Accur.:  Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Hardly       Not at All  
 Suff.:  Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Hardly       Not at All

*Ideas and passages are properly and clearly attributed to their authors*

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

Secondary sources are well synthesized and handled

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*Sources are put into conversation with other sources*

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

*Analysis is integrated into description and presentation of sources*

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

*Sources are used to ask questions, not just answer them*

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

*Sources are made to "speak"\* in the essay*

Yes       Mostly       Somewhat       Not at All

Use of secondary sources conveys the impression that the author has substantial knowledge of a significant range of scholarship in relevant fields.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The author found a role for him- or herself in the conversation among secondary sources

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

*CT:*  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

*Other fields:*  Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The body of the essay is effectively organized.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes       Somewhat       A little       Not at All

The conclusion functions well.

**Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Makes an effective transition from the body of the essay  Yes       Somewhat       No  
 Offers more complex, nuanced and productive versions of the arguments of the essay  Yes       Somewhat       No  
 Connects specific conclusions to more abstract or general concerns relevant to our study of CT and/or the world  Yes       Somewhat       No  
 Acknowledges limits of the current study  Yes       Somewhat       No

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\* By "speak," I mean that sources are not treated merely as facts or information the meaning of which is imagined to be transparent and therefore not in need of set up, description, analysis, synthesis and pay off.

Pays off readers' effort with a significant, productive, and insightful walk-away point  Yes  Somewhat  No

Offers a persuasive and productive reflection on the meanings and implications of conspiracy theory as a widespread societal phenomenon. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Societal phen.:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

The essay offers a plausible and productive argument about what this particular set of CTs is explicitly and implicitly theorizing.\* **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Plausible:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All  
Productive:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

The essay demonstrates that you have suspended judgment about the conspiracy theories about which you're writing until you understood them in a lived context. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Suspended judgment:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All  
Understood in context:  Yes  Somewhat  A little  Not at All

The writer has developed a serious, engaging, and authoritative voice. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Serious:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Engaging:  Yes  Somewhat  No  
Authoritative:  Yes  Somewhat  No

The essay is free from grammatical and typographical errors. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Grammar/Typos:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All  
 Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All

Stylistic choices are appropriately made and well executed. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Appropriate:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All  
Well-executed:  Yes  Mostly  Somewhat  Not at All

The essay properly uses an academic citation system. **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

In-text Page References:  Yes  No  
Works Cited:  Yes  No

The essay offers readers an annotated bibliography of the entire collection of primary and secondary sources separated into sections labeled "Primary Sources" and "Secondary Sources." **Quality Pts. Earned:** [ ]

Yes  No

**Total Quality Points:** /124 **Percentage:** **Grade:**

A=85-100

B=61-84

C=37-60

R/F=<37

\* By theorizing I mean revealing (and perhaps challenging) the enabling assumptions of a societal system and the organizations, institutions, and groups that constitute (or are excluded by it), or of a system of belief, thought, knowledge, or communications and the organizations, institutions, and groups that use (or marginalized) by it. I also mean revealing (and maybe challenging) the blind spots of those systems, ways of knowing, and institutions.

## ***UW20 : CONSPIRACY THEORIES***

The George Washington University: Fall 2007

Dr. Eric Drown

home.gwu.edu/~edrown

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### ***Peer Review for “Research Essay” Assignment***

Due: As Assigned 11/29 - 12/7

Length: 500-750 words

**Assignment Goals:** To learn how to read and comment on a fellow writer’s work in order to help him or her develop his or her ideas into an intelligible, persuasive, interesting and productive essay; to provide peers with a considered intellectual response to their work with the goal of helping her or him meet the intellectual and compositional standards of the class and the field of conspiracy theory studies. To learn to apply such standards to one’s own writing.

**The Tasks:** Read, analyze and mark up a peer's draft using MS Word's reviewing tool and the “Marking and Analyzing Early Drafts” handout. Write a peer review letter aimed at helping make the essay more intelligible, persuasive, interesting, productive, and/or significant.

**Grading Criteria:** The review letter shows signs of a careful and considerate reading of the draft; it offers both an accurate overview of the essential argument of the draft (of about 150 words) and invokes specific examples to engage and respond to the author’s ideas; it helps the author locate the essential ideas of his or her draft; it helps the author develop ideas in their draft (through devil’s advocacy, problematizing binaries, offering alternative explanations or interpretations of evidence, providing richer or problematizing examples, suggesting new nuances or complications, qualifying claims or in other ways); writes something about the possible pitfalls and potential of the piece; **does not** take up issues of organization, style, grammar, and voice in the context of particular ideas.