

The Scholarly Conversation Project

Objectives: Students will understand how serial publications are presented in databases and how to read them chronologically, browse the *MLA International Bibliography's* indexing structures to perform an initial survey of a field of scholarly output, articulate the differences between a discipline-specific database and a general one, and gather evidence that may be used to draw conclusions about the ways that the “literary conversation” has changed over the last sixty years.

Course work or assignment under way: As an oral presentation, this project can be used as a midterm assignment. Alternatively, it can be adapted as classwork. In classes with less research experience, the instructor might consider scaffolding the assignment, that is, requiring that an outline and preliminary research be submitted prior to the final presentation.

Project summary: Working in groups of three to five, students will select a journal from the list below. The list features journals in the field of literary studies that have been published for at least sixty years. Some are more general in nature, while others focus on a specific field of interest. Students will trace the way that the journal's field of knowledge is defined over time by studying the subject terms assigned to the articles in one issue per decade for the last sixty years. Then each group of students will present what they've discovered and pose questions with potential for further research.

Questions for students to consider:

- How do you think the journal defines what it studies? (A current description of the scope for each journal can be found in the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*.)
- How has that changed over the last sixty years?
- How has the focus of the articles changed?
- Are there types of articles that appear now that wouldn't have appeared fifty years ago?
- Are there types of articles that appeared fifty years ago that wouldn't appear now?
- What do you need to know more about before you draw conclusions about why any of these changes has occurred?
- How has the way the *MLA International Bibliography* applies its subject terms changed over time? How might that affect the results of your study?

List of journals:

- *African American Review* (previously published as *Black American Review* from 1976 to 1992 and as *Negro American Literature Forum* from 1967 to 1975)
- *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*
- *Keats-Shelley Journal*
- *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (previously published as *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* from 1949 to 1986 and as *The Trollopian* from 1944 to 1949)
- *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*
- *Shakespeare Quarterly*
- *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*