

“Not Reading”
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**Keynote speaker: Amy Hungerford, Professor of English and Divisional Director of Humanities,
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Reading is something we do a lot of. Yet every act of reading entails a decision, whether required or freely made, to not read something else. Sometimes this decision is a postponement, often an indefinite one. Time is finite, reading is slow, and the wealth of material we should or could read is inexhaustible; ultimately, it is unreadable. Not reading is therefore something we do a lot *more* of, yet we seldom talk or write about that. This conference aims to open up that conversation by inviting creative reflection on what is a necessary element in our scholarly work: not reading.

In this sense, not reading *is* something we think and talk a lot about: in our conversations with colleagues preliminary to the work of compiling an archive; in the way that we efface the entirety of a work as we explicate a select passage; in our hedging prefaces to comments in the classroom and at talks; in the pedagogical gymnastics of teaching unread material; and in our routine and rhetorically elaborate attempts to evade the embarrassments of not reading. Pierre Bayard’s 2007 manual of confessions of a professional non-reader, *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*, attests to a readiness to fess up, at least in the margins of the academy. Amy Hungerford has more recently urged academics to address the institutional politics of not reading with *Making Literature Now* (2016). The colonial, racial, and gender politics of the formation of the discipline and its canon have shaped whom we do and do not read today. Forty years after feminist thinkers like Adrienne Rich made “not reading” visible by challenging the bias towards white male authors, queer theory, critical-race studies, and posthumanism continue to rethink literary studies. Such work calls us to continue making space in our scholarship and syllabi for a more diverse set of bodies and thinkers, genres and modes. The ongoing disciplinary debate about how to “read better” only emphasizes this exigency across periods. The practice of distant reading entailed by methods in the digital humanities could be otherwise described as strategic not reading. Surface readers implore us not to read for hidden meaning. Even the enduring practice of close reading relies on the not-reading work of excerption. Therefore, we see not reading as a fact that warrants attention in our reflections on the methods we employ and the kind of knowledge they produce.

We encourage participants to explore phenomena, practices, and problems of not reading in both its historical forms and its current urgency. Potential topics include:

- Patterns of prominence and neglect in the history and canonization of reading literature
- Genre history, e.g. trends and fads
- The politics of not reading across lines of difference, e.g. race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability
- Recuperative scholarship
- Untranslated and untranslatable works
- Histories of literacy; the “common” or lay reader
- Oral traditions and literary performance
- Publication failures and restrictions (e.g. sales and censorship)

- Lost or inaccessible texts
- Time and opportunity cost-benefits
- Not reading and the digital humanities
- Visual cultures and cinema studies (reading images; reading films)
- Graphic literature
- Non or partial reading practices (close, surface, and distant reading; weak theory)
- Pedagogies of not reading; not reading in the classroom
- “Required” reading
- Books you haven’t read
- Books you shouldn’t read
- TL;DR

We are open to expanding this list with ideas from the submissions. Please submit an abstract of no more than 250 words (along with presentation title, institutional affiliation, phone number, and email address) to **notreading.uchicago@gmail.com** by July 2, 2017.