Projects and Project Outlines
CPSC 532L
February 28, 2013
Our focus today: writing & argumentation

“What most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments.

(And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)”

from “Writing in College,”
Williams and McEnerney,
University of Chicago Writing Program
Picking a project topic

• Pick a topic related to something covered in class, but going beyond the exact topics we studied
  – course text and supplemental texts (AGT, Osborne & Rubenstein)
  – conferences (AAAI, IJCAI, ACM-EC, AAMAS, ...)

• For full credit, do a survey paper
  – survey 2-4 different approaches from the literature
  – you still need to have an opinion
    • describe strengths and weaknesses of different approaches
    • argue for your favorite and against others
    • synthesize ideas from different places
  – I encourage you to work in pairs

• For more than full credit, do some original research
  – a good idea if you hope to do ongoing research in the area
  – may dovetail with a project you’ve already started
  – you’ll probably want to work alone
Determining a thesis: generating ideas

• You need to start by reading
  – Consider more than one topic to make sure you pick a good one
  – Worst to be stuck with a project that doesn’t interest you!
  – Don’t read the whole paper carefully—look for the main ideas

• Come up with a thesis by letting ideas flow uncritically
  – freewriting
    • write without pausing, ignore grammar, set time limit
  – brainstorming
    • point form version of freewriting; again, don’t be critical
  – clustering
    • organize ideas visually
Finalizing your thesis

• easy to state in one sentence
• something you’re passionate about and want to argue for
• Some tips:
  – make sure your thesis is narrow enough
  – make sure it’s non-obvious
  – make sure it makes a claim rather than just stating a topic
  – make sure you don’t miss a better topic by choosing too early
  – make sure you pick something you’re interested in and have arguments about
Outline your argument

• a simple point-form summary of what you want to say
  – this is the place to wrestle with how your argument will go, before you start getting caught up in sentences/details

• high level:
  – start by stating your thesis/main claim
  – give background information you need to cover
  – make two or three arguments to support your thesis
  – anticipate arguments against your thesis and respond to them
    • this doesn’t weaken your argument—it strengthens it
  – conclude: sum up, tell us what it all means

• Once you’ve settled the high level, work out the arguments in favor in more detail

• Someone who reads your outline wouldn’t be surprised by anything in the essay
Today’s Class

• Your project outlines are due Thursday March 7, 3 PM
• Today we’ll work on your outlines
  – if you’ve read up on topics, start working on a real outline
  – if not, dream something up that seems plausible to you
• Talk with your partner and with others sitting around you
• When you think you’ve come up with a sensible outline, write it on the whiteboard
• When we have several written down, we’ll critique them together