Within the inquiry-based first-year English courses I teach, one of my goals is to help students learn to engage with complex, cultural studies issues at a college level, using a variety of detailed, specific evidence in sophisticated ways. Much of our work involves interpreting a range of texts (from graphic novels, to films, to theoretical essays), but I also believe students need to learn to generate their own texts for analysis, based on their lives and experiences. I have therefore developed several assignments that require action-oriented, primary research, where students turn the analytical eye directly to their own experiences, in a systematic way.

The technology journal is one such assignment that I have used for the past three semesters. Given the rapid proliferation of digital technologies within our culture, technology is an attractive topic of inquiry because of its complexity, relevance, and currency. In many ways, it can be the ideal cultural studies issue, but in my experience the analysis of technology can also be challenging for first-year students for three primary reasons: (1) it is such a nebulous term that almost anything comes under its umbrella, (2) it is essentially invisible to most students, and (3) it is too complex for the typical style of academic writing that seeks to simply find a claim and defend it. Thus, I am constantly fighting against the black-and-white notion that technology is either good or bad—both in class and in papers—while trying to teach a more nuanced, complex analysis. The technology journal assignment helps address all three of these problem areas. In fact, one of the first questions students often ask about this assignment is what qualifies as technology. I leave it to the students to define the parameters of technology so that they are actively engaged in making the distinctions that are often lost in general discussions, both in class and in public discourse.

There are two parts to this assignment, but the students submit only the second part. First, I ask students to keep a log of their technology use for seven consecutive days. Then, using only that log as evidence, students create a five hundred-word profile of the technology habits of an early twenty-first century college student, in whatever form they choose. I have had students write from the point of view of a reporter, anthropologist, and political commentator. The guiding principle of the profile, however, is that it is based directly, and only, on their documented experiences over the seven days of the log.

Some of the best, and most engaging writing I receive from students often comes from this assignment; I am almost always amazed by the insights they gain when examining their own lives in a systematic way. By keeping a concrete list of their activities the students see how personal experience can be something other than vague reflections of an event or an opinion. The log also provides them with more details than they can use in such a short writing assignment. I have had students who realized that they spend too much time on Facebook to the detriment of their schoolwork (a revelation with much more impact than if they had read it in an article I assigned), while others realized that their technology use was audience dependent (text messages for friends, phone calls for parents, and email for professors). These revelations are always unique to the students’ experiences, and thus serve the additional function of convincing them that there is no single answer, since the assignment is focused toward their own data.

As with all of the writing I assign, the technology journal is submitted electronically. It is a relatively low-stakes assignment: a mini-essay of which there are six across the semester with the best five accounting for 15% of the course grade. Mini-essays use the blog feature in the Blackboard Class Management System, but the technology journal could just as easily be submitted as a paper-based assignment.

I do not, by design, collect the actual log of technology use. Part of my purpose is to reduce my reading load, but also to change the mindset of many first-year students who view writing as merely a performance for their teachers. These logs are solely for the students’ own use, as other write-to-learn techniques are as well.

As a low-stakes assignment, my primary concerns when evaluating the technology journals are with whether or not a student has followed the assignment and how clearly the analysis is communicated. There can be no single right answer, so the quality of the writing and the inquiry are of central importance, which ties directly into the goals of writing instruction.

While I designed this assignment for a cultural studies-focused writing course, I can see it working in many interdisciplinary contexts. This assignment employs conventions used by several discourses including: data collected by observing human activity, analysis based directly on that data, and the rendering of experience. In addition, the proliferation of technology is an inherently interdisciplinary issue and one that is not likely to be resolved any time soon.

Appendix: Assignment Text
This mini-essay has two parts: (1) a technology journal; and (2) a portrait summarizing the technology habits of college students in 2007 based on that journal, and only on that journal. Think of yourself as a reporter, and your technology journal as the notes you took during an interview with your key source.

PART ONE: TECHNOLOGY JOURNAL

I'd like you to start gathering data on your experiences with technology. For at least seven days, keep a log of your interactions with technology such as cell phones, ATMs, iPods, Internet, etc. What are the purposes of these interactions? Are other people involved? What other options are available instead of technology? These are just some of the details I can envision you collecting.

While this is more of a log, I'd like you to also do some speculating on what patterns emerge and on what they might mean. I won't be collecting this journal, but the more attention and work you put into it, the richer and more complex the second part of this assignment will be.

PART TWO: PORTRAIT

After you have gathered the data, I'd like for you to not only summarize these technology habits, but also to begin to evaluate the cultural and technological trends they reflect and/or imply. Some questions that might help you focus your paper include:

2. In what ways does technology encourage interaction? In what ways does it inhibit it?
3. What factors go into the decision to use technology instead of other means to complete particular tasks?

This mini-essay should present readers with a specific, focused description of the role of technology in the daily life of a student. The form, however, is largely up to you: take on the guise of a reporter attempting to present a dispassionate report of the facts; or stay entirely in first-person narrative, taking readers through a selection of your experiences; or somewhere in between. This is an opportunity for you to indulge your creative side and take a risk, if you so choose.