This course aims to familiarize students with three forms of nineteenth-century British writing. The first is a sub-category of the Victorian novel—the “industrial” or “social problem” novel—which appeared around mid-century in response to contemporary crises in class-relations. Industrial novelists from Dickens to Disraeli used fiction as both a stage on which to dramatize the plight of the working class, and as a laboratory in which to develop some possible antidotes. In discussing the industrial novel, we will look closely at how middle-class and upper-class writers represented working-class characters, at their rhetorical handling of class conflict, and at how the plots of their novels imagine romantic, narrative, and affective solutions to widespread structural socio-economic problems. We will examine both the power and the limitations of the aesthetic—traditionally a space of consolation and distraction rather than agitation or rupture—in representing suffering and compelling readers to demand political and economic change.

Having asked such questions of working-class representation, we will turn to genres of self-representation, particularly working-class diaries and autobiographies. How did Victorian working-class writers construct their subjectivities without, or even against, the strategies and conventions of middle-class fiction and autobiography? How do these autobiographies and diaries construct the writing self differently from their middle-class analogues? How do such texts frustrate or alter the novel- or memoir-reader’s hunger for closure, symmetry, suspense, diversion? How might such frustrations or alterations have been, or be, politically productive?

Finally, we will look at how several nineteenth-century political and social scientists (particularly Engels and Mayhew) used emerging sociological and political economic methods to chronicle the lives of the working poor. Their texts will help us to ask one of the central questions of the course: what is the relationship between manner and matter, between taxonomy and lived reality—that is, between classification and class?

This question will lead us into the terms “material,” “materiality,” and “materialism” in their many tangled senses—physical (material versus spiritual), industrial (raw material, yards of material), philosophical and historiographic (materialism versus idealism), legal (“material testimony”), gendered (in such etymological and conceptual cognates as “maternal” and “matrix”). Over the course of the semester, we will look at different ways Victorian writers bodied forth their ideas about materiality in print; at the materiality of the signifier; at the relations among things, objects, stuff, and property; and at the relations between “realism” and the “real.”
And we will consider what material (again, in all senses) conditions govern our own acts of reading, speaking, getting, giving, spending, and working.

Primary readings from among: Dickens, Gaskell, Kingsley, Disraeli, George Eliot, George Moore; William Dodd, Hannah Cullwick, Emma Smith; Marx, Engels, Mayhew.