Students and others on Reddit see not the "humanities crisis" (the forest) but critical problems and issues (the trees).

Although the humanities are no doubt in crisis, as evidenced in the [shrinking number of students enrolling as humanities majors](#), mainstream media generally does not take notice (see [KF-1-1](#)), leaving it to academics and campus newspapers to foreground the issue (see [KF-4-3](#), [KF-1-2](#)). In addition to studying news media, WE1S thus also turned to Reddit--an unofficial but robust media source-- to understand better how students discuss the humanities crisis.

We carved out from our overall [C-38](#) collection of Reddit comments from 2006 to 2019 mentioning *humanities*, *liberal arts,* and *the arts* a subset of posts that also included the words *student*, *major*, or *college*. This became our collection [C-39](#). An initial finding we made is that the number of Reddit comments in C-39 mentioning *crisis* is relatively low by comparison with those attending to *issues* and *problems*, which is congruent with our [KF-1-3](#) finding that campus newspapers in particular present a rich anatomy of problems in the humanities and higher ed.

Studying Reddit comments with topic models allowed us to corroborate that initial finding and understand it better in light of the full-throated, often unfiltered discourse of Reddit. Looking into topic models of both our C-38 and C-39 collections ([C-38.200](#) and [C-39.200](#), both at 200 topics), we observed that the word *crisis* appears prominently only once in any topic. Economic crises in C-39.200 [topic 12](#) relate to financial crises in general. But, other words semantically related to *crisis* such as

issues and *problems* do appear prominently in heavily weighted topics in our models.

Ultimately, we were puzzled by the relation between *crisis* and *problem* in the discourse we modeled. At that point we turned for guidance to the *OED*'s etymologies of [*crisis*](#) (Greek *krisis* = "decision") and [*critical*](#) ("of decisive importance in relation to the issue"). These suggested to us that *problems* and *issues* arise along a *critical* decision path. If a problem becomes critical at a decision point (such as where to allocate resources), it becomes a crisis. This led us to view *crisis* in terms not just of practical issues in universities and society but also of what the humanities call critical theory and critique.

We [concluded](#) that *crisis* is woven integrally into humanities disciplines (including the way students on Reddit discuss the humanities) through the way critical thinking locates and resolves problems. Despite the fact that the "humanities crisis" is a relatively rare story in the media, humanities discourse by its nature (often spoken in rawer, direct forms in Reddit) casts the problem of the humanities in society today as a critical crisis.

Document collection studied: C-38 ([start page](#)); C-39 ([start page](#))

Topic models studied: [C-38.200](#); [C-39.200](#) (200 topics)

Interesting sample topics in C-39.200: [12](#) , [135](#)

Representative Reddit posts in C-39.200: [a](#), [b](#)

Evidentiary documentation for this key finding: [2019 crisis in the humanities report](#)

Related resources: Benjamin Schmidt, ["The Humanities Are in Crisis"](#) (2018)