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The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment witho [2 (t) -2 (a) -2 (l) -ld ht [t o TmnTc ET BT -0.00

- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

INFORMAL WRITING IN COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY SURVEY COURSES: AN
EXPERIMENT IN THE USE OF INFORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN
“INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN CIVILIZATION” AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA,
1989-1990

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While writing is essential to the practice of history, teaching the writing of history is not often regarded as the proper function of introductory history courses. Concerns about the deteriorating quality of student writing in upper and lower division college courses have kindled interest in “Writing Across the Curriculum” programs at many colleges and universities. John Patrick Donnelly of Marquette University recently argued that the requirement of term papers in introductory history courses is the best remedy for this problem because freshmen put into immediate practice the principles they have learned in their composition courses.¹ History instructors, aware that most students in introductory history courses need guidance through the writing process, have considered ways writing can be used in history courses.² Some have emphasized the value of “prewriting” and “informal assignments” to teach historical writing as a process. Informal assignments, because they are ungraded and do not expect the stylistic polish of formal essays, have been seen as an excellent tool for teaching and learning history. In theory, informal writing, by alleviating students from the anxieties of grades and correct usage, helps them to relax and to feel free to explore ideas and express opinions. In the process,

they learn to think about history and this helps them with writing more formal history papers.³ As part of a proposed “Writing Across the Curriculum” program at the University of Minnesota, the Department of History developed two new survey courses with a special writing component. These two courses, HIST 1021, 1022, 1023, “Introduction to Western Civilization,” and HIST 1011, 1012, 1013, “Introduction to World Civilization,” use a combination of “informal” and “formal” assignments to teach the process of historical writing. “Introduction to Western Civilization,” the first of the new surveys to be introduced, became the “laboratory” for testing the effectiveness of informal writing as a learning tool in comprehensive history survey course. This paper concerns this experiment. It discusses the purpose of informal writing, the types of assignments used in the Western Civilization survey at Minnesota, and the students' evaluations of these assignments.

Teaching a Western Civilization survey course in a regular academic year of approximately 30 weeks of class time, with the addition of informal and formal writing elements, created particular problems. Most students in introductory Western Civilization must be seen as blank slates because at least 50% of high school students have never studied either World History or Western Civilization.⁴

- the teaching of historical writing entails the teaching of historical analysis. Students should also learn the part imagination plays in historical writing, how historians, through the mind's eye, reconstruct from a variety of records and artifacts past societies and events. Imagination can restore the uncertainty of history from a rigid, positivistic determinism by revealing the possible unrealized alternatives of realized events.⁷

In 1977, the British Historical Associati

ability to synthesize data, a

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should participate in the students' process of comprehension. The Council of Subject Teachers' Association Commission urged that "attention and value should be given to rough 'thinking out' work and to problematic writing, i.e. searching for solutions."¹⁷ Journals are ideal for just such thinking out work, for, as Henry Steffens and Toby Fulwiler have said, they provide "a place to think in and a tool to think with."¹⁸

Formal and informal writing has been shown to be an effective teaching component in history courses; yet at Minnesota the history faculty lacked experience using informal assignments in combination with formal writing at the introductory level. Consequently, the first year of the new Western Civilization became an experiment in the use of different types of informal assignments to discover which designs worked best for students at Minnesota.

The course consisted of two weekly lecture periods of 75 minutes each and two weekly recitation meetings of 45-50 minutes each. Three members of the History faculty took turns teaching each quarter sequence.¹⁹ Depending upon course size, five to seven graduate TAs conducted the recitation meetings, which were discussions of course readings and related issues.²⁰ To ease the burden on the TAs and allow them more time for each student, the maximum load for each TA was reduced to two sections of 20 students meeting twice a week from three sections of 35 students meeting once a week. The writing component for HIST 1021 consisted of two ungraded informal assignments and two short formal papers of approximately five pages in length based on course source readings. Students were required to prepare a first draft and a revised version for each formal paper. Course requirements also included mid-quarter and final essay examinations.

had much success with the informal assignments as a form of "free writing" to get students to think out their formal paper topics and to develop a thesis statement.

Professor Tracy's informal assignments focused on reading comprehension and retention. He asked his honors section to read the selections from Plato's Dialogues

belief that journals are very useful in teaching history.²¹ Still, the Minnesota experiment suggests some difficulties of using journals in a survey course that depends upon graduate students to share in the teaching duties in addition to doing the course grading.

A few TAs used the first informal as a way to ease students into the process of writing and developing logical arguments. John Bedell first assigned his students to write a paragraph explaining their expectations about college education. Christopher Simer started by asking his students to write a short paper making an argument for some proposition.

Most TAs assigned used at least one informal as an analysis of historical sources. Kevin Haukeness had students read the Laws of Hammurabi and write out what this law code revealed about families and women besides criminal penalties. For the modern period, Haukeness had students study part of a Nazi propaganda pamphlet by Joseph Goebles and, from what they had learned about Nazi Germany, analyze its function. In HIST 1021, John Bedell had good results with an informal source analysis assigned as an in-class writing activity. This assignment was a form of

similarities between Athenian and Spartan societies. He used a similar assignment in HIST 1023, which covered the modern period. The students read and summarized arguments in Sieyès' "What is the Third Estate" and Metternich's secret memorandum to Tsar Alexander I and contrasted the liberal viewpoint of the early French revolution with a conservative reaction of the post-Napoleonic era.

Some informal assignments encouraged students to use their imagination. In HIST 1022, the second quarter sequence covering the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, Schoenfeld designed an assignment to go with Eileen Power's Medieval People. In this book, Power, drawing from a variety of medieval sources and writing with vivid language, builds imaginative constructs of the social and mental worlds of selected ordinary people. Schoenfeld assigned his students the chapter on the peasant Bodo. Then, encouraging the students to emulate Power's approach, he asked them to imagine that they were a great-grandson or great granddaughter of Bodo and a second child without any chance of inheriting the family plot. Based on what they had learned about medieval life and society, the students wrote out a plan for their imaginary life following one of three options: marriage with someone in the village who would inherit a plot, acceptance of an offer to resettle on newly cleared land in the Polish frontier, or escape to a town to become an apprentice. This design worked very well. It stimulated students to reflect on the conditions of peasant life in the middle ages, and helped bridge in their imagination the gap between the past and the present. In the previous quarter sequence, Bedell had his students imitate Plato's construction of the ideal city in speech by writing about their vision of the perfect state.

Michael Bitter experimented with informal writing in class discussions. He organized his class into groups of five or six students and divided the course reading among the various groups. Responsibility for leading the class discussion of assigned readings rotated between the groups. Before the section meeting, each member of the designated group prepared as their informal paper a summary and analysis of the assigned source reading. They then read their papers in class and answered questions from their classmates. According to Bitter, this made the class discussions lively, and the students seemed to enjoy listening to papers given by their peers. However, the exercise encouraged students to study only the material assigned for their oral presentations.

Gordon Bynum experimented with having students read and comment in class on an

informal paper of oneon59 TT /TT7 1 T32 (n) -0.2 (p) -1.1 (o) -0.2 (r)-0.2(l) -0.2 (o) -0.2 (o) -0.2 (o) .2 (o)

In HIST 1022, the evaluations were given out at the last section meeting of the quarter with the departmental TA evaluations. Results from the evaluations are summarized in the following tables. Each quarter sequence is tabulated separately. Respondents are grouped by class and calculated as a percentage of each class and as a percentage of total student responses. Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 give the total course enrollments for each quarter sequence, the total number of student responses, the responses as a percentage of enrolled students, and the class breakdown of the student respondents.

Total Course Enrollment:	175
Total Student Responses:	134 (76.6% of enrolled students)

Total Course Enrollment:	128
Total Student Responses:	87 (68.0% of enrolled students)

Class Breakdown of Respondents

Freshmen:	38 (43.7%)
Sophomore:	32 (36.8%)
Junior:	6 (6.9%)
Senior:	7 (8.0%)
Other:	4 (4.6%)

Despite the variety of designs among TAs, the students had little difficulty comprehending the assignments. Over 90 percent of student respondents in each quarter sequence understood the informal assignments; less than three percent understood none of the assignments, and less than seven percent understood only some. (Table 2)

	All	Some	None
Freshmen:	58 (92.1%)	3 (4.8%)	2 (3.1%)
Sophomore:	42 (91.3%)	3 (6.5%)	1 (2.2%)
Junior:	14 (87.5%)	2 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Senior:	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Other:	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total:	122 (91.0%)	9 (6.7%)	3 (2.3%)

comprehending course readings than the lectures. Still, many liked the lecture summary. According to one student, the summaries “helped to put the material into context with other aspects of the course, and to think of things as a whole.” Some students believed that more informal would have helped them to better arrange the course materials, and one student suggested informal assignments for each chapter of the text.

The discipline imposed by the informal was perhaps its most useful function. Many respondents from all three quarter sequences confessed that they would not have done the assigned readings if not for the informal. “When I was to do the informal writing,” wrote one student, “it forced me to really read [sic] the material and fully understand it.” Another student said that the informal not only got him or her to read the textbook but also “made me think about the course material more than I would have otherwise.” The students' remarks suggest that the informal forced them to keep up with the reading and attend class meetings.

Between 75 and 80 percent believed that the informal writings helped with the formal writing assignments and essay examinations (Table 4). For one thing, the informal helped students make up past deficiencies. According to one freshman, “I had not much experience in writing from high school, so the informal gave me a chance to see my own ability before writing a formal paper.” Informal papers also helped students learn how to develop a thesis statement and how to organize material in support of it, which some students believed helped them write the essay exams. A few thought the informal papers were less useful for essay examinations because they did not teach them how to manage the time constraints of in-class essay exams.

Students commented on what they liked best and least about the informal writing. While most respondents wrote down what they liked best, between 30 and 40 percent did not say what they liked least. (Tables 5.1 and 5.2) The similarities of student responses made classification easy. The relaxed, ungraded format appeared to be the most popular feature of the informal assignments. Between 34 and 40 percent of student respondents regarded it as the best feature. (Table 6) One student remarked, “I liked the fact that they

were not graded. This did not change the amount of effort that I put into the writing, rather it allowed for writing under no pressure. I believe that the writings were an excellent idea.” The students' responses suggest that the informal assignments succeeded in the task of easing students into the process of historical writing.

	Yes	No	No Response
Freshmen:	56 (88.9%)	7 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Sophomore:	31 (67.4%)	14 (30.4%)	1 (2.2%)
Junior:	14 (87.5%)	2 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Senior:	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Other:	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Total:	108 (80.6%)	25 (18.7%)	1(0.7%)

	Yes	No	No Response
Freshmen:	24 (75.0%)	7 (21.3%)	1 (3.1%)
Sophomore:	24 (72.7%)	9 (27.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	14 (73.7%)	4 (21.0%)	1 (5.3%)
Senior:	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Other:	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total:	66 (75.0%)	20 (22.7%)	2 (2.3%)

	Yes	No	No Response
Freshmen:	30 (78.9%)	8 (21.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Sophomore:	29 (90.6%)	3 (9.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Senior:	4 (57.1%)	3 (42.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Other:	1 (25.0%)	2 (50.0%)	1 (25.0%)
Total:	69 (79.3%)	17 (19.5%)	1 (1.2%)

Freshmen:	2 (3.2%)	Sophomore:	2 (4.3%)
Junior:	1 (6.3%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	5 (3.7%)

Freshmen:	4 (12.5%)	Sophomore:	3 (9.0%)
Junior:	1 (5.6%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	8 (9.1%)

Freshmen:	2 (5.3%)	Sophomore:	2 (6.3%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	4 (4.6%)

Freshmen:	23 (36.5%)	Sophomore:	19 (41.3%)
Junior:	6 (37.5%)	Senior:	3 (50.0%)
Other:	2 (66.7%)	Total:	53 (39.5%)

Freshmen:	12 (37.5%)	Sophomore:	11 (33.3%)
Junior:	4 (21.1%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	27 (30.7%)

Freshmen:	16 (42.2%)	Sophomore:	15 (46.9%)
Junior:	2 (33.3%)	Senior:	1 (14.3%)
Other:	2 (50.0%)	Total:	36 (41.3%)

One HIST 1022 student thought that the informal papers worked because “there was no pressure, and so I didn't feel stressed to write a really great paper, and they were fun to write. Then, when it came to writing the formal paper, I felt more relaxed.”

Likewise, a HIST 1023 student wrote: “The formal writings were not graded, thus the pressure to 'perform' was eliminated. We were encouraged to take a risk in our writing style and content. Specifically, to try to draw comparisons which might first seem non-related.” Others found the comparison and contrast papers good practice for the formal papers. A small percentage--not more than 15 percent--disliked not receiving a grade. (Table 14) Some said that they would have put in more effort if their assignments had been graded. They believed that a simple check mark was insufficient. One student suggested that the informal papers be given a “mock grade.”

Freshmen:	26 (41.3%)	Sophomore:	18 (39.1%)
Junior:	7 (43.6%)	Senior:	1 (16.7%)
Other:	2 (66.7%)	Total:	54 (40.3%)
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Freshmen:	12 (37.5%)	Sophomore:	12 (36.4%)
Junior:	4 (21.0%)	Senior:	2 (66.7%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	30 (34.1%)
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Freshmen:	12 (31.6%)	Sophomore:	13 (40.7%)
Junior:	2 (33.3%)	Senior:	5 (71.4%)
Other:	1 (25.0%)	Total:	33 (37.9%)

Between 21 and 30 percent thought that informal assignments helped best with class discussion, with understanding course material, and with review. (Table 7)

Approximately 22 to 25 percent of student respondents liked best the selection of topics, the opportunity to express their opinions, and the exercise in analytical thinking. (Table

8) The students who cited these things as the informal's best feature enjoyed the

Freshmen:	16 (25.4%)	Sophomore:	8 (17.4%)
Junior:	3 (18.8%)	Senior:	2 (33.3%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	29 (21.6%)

Freshmen:	9 (28.1%)	Sophomore:	6 (18.2%)
Junior:	5 (26.3%)	Senior:	1 (33.3%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	21 (23.9%)

Freshmen:	13 (34.2%)	Sophomore:	5 (15.6%)
Junior:	2 (33.3%)	Senior:	1 (14.3%)
Other:	1 (25.0%)	Total:	22 (25.2%)

Freshmen:	2 (3.2%)	Sophomore:	1 (2.2%)
Junior:	1 (6.3%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	4 (2.9%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.1%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	1 (5.3%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	2 (2.3%)

Freshmen:	2 (5.3%)	Sophomore:	1 (3.1%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	1 (14.3%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	4 (4.6%)

thought that the assignments were unclear or complicated (Table 13); roughly 6 to 15 percent resented the lack of a grade (Table 14); and about six to seven percent liked least the time it took to do the assignments. (Table 15) In HIST 1021, which had two informal assignments, 4.5 percent of respondents mentioned too few informal papers as the worst feature. The percentage of respondents who felt this way declined slightly after informal assignments increased to three. (Table 16) Between approximately two and four percent thought the one to two page length of the assignments to be the worst feature. (Table 17) Other dislikes were cited by smaller numbers of respondents, of less than three percent and usually representing about one percent of respondents. These responses are summarized in Tables 18-18.6 and Table 19.

Freshmen:	7 (11.1%)	Sophomore:	4 (8.7%)
Junior:	2 (12.5%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	13 (9.7%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.2%)	Sophomore:	3 (9.0%)
Junior:	3 (15.8%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	7 (7.8%)

Freshmen:	5 (13.2%)	Sophomore:	2 (6.3%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	7 (8.0%)

Freshmen:	4 (6.3%)	Sophomore:	4 (8.7%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	8 (6.0%)

Freshmen:	4 (12.5%)	Sophomore:	4 (12.1%)
Junior:	5 (26.3%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	13 (14.8%)

Freshmen:	2 (5.3%)	Sophomore:	1 (3.1%)
Junior:	1 (16.7%)	Senior:	1 (14.3%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	5 (5.7%)

Freshmen:	4 (6.3%)	Sophomore:	4 (8.7%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	1 (16.7%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	9 (6.7%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.1%)	Sophomore:	1 (3.0%)
Junior:	2 (10.5%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	1 (100.0%)	Total:	5 (5.7%)

Freshmen:	3 (4.8%)	Sophomore:	1 (2.2%)
Junior:	1 (6.6%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	5 (3.7%)

Freshmen:	0 (0.0%)	Sophomore:	1 (3.0%)
Junior:	2 (10.5%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	3 (3.4%)

Freshmen:	1 (2.6%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)

Freshmen:	0 (0.0%)	Sophomore:	1 (2.3%)
Junior:	1 (6.3%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	2 (1.5%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.1%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	1 (1.1%)

Freshmen:	1 (2.6%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	1 (1.2%)

Freshmen:	1 (1.6%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)



Freshmen:	0 (0.0%)	<hr/>	Sophomore:	1 (2.3%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)		Senior:	0 (0.0%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.1%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	1 (1.1%)

Freshmen:	1 (2.6%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	1 (1.2%)

Freshmen:	1 (3.1%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	0 (0.0%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	1 (1.1%)

Freshmen:	0 (0.0%)	Sophomore:	0 (0.0%)
Junior:	0 (0.0%)	Senior:	2 (28.5%)
Other:	0 (0.0%)	Total:	2 (2.3%)

at the introductory level. If viewed in this context, then the use of informal with formal writing in comprehensive history survey courses is worthwhile.

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