

Online Discussion Assignment

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US Women's History
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I have created a three-part process for the online communication assignment that I believe will maximize students' learning experience while honoring different learning styles. I developed this process after analyzing student evaluations and assessments of student learning for past versions of this class and then participating in a UWB Faculty Institute with colleagues from different departments. The plan I developed was based on published research we read during the course and the suggestions of my peer group. (See the bottom of the page for a bibliography of the most articles used for this plan.)

Pre-step: The process begins in class, when your group meets to settle on a main historical "problem" to be solved using the weeks readings and 3-5 questions to help solve the problem.

The Process: For Step One, choose either an Initiation or a Response. Either choice will require a carefully structured short essay that conforms to the criteria listed below. (See [examples of excellent, competent, and poor postings](#) that are available on the course web site.) In general, choose Response when another student's posting stimulates your thinking. However, students should try to balance this choice over the length of the course as a courtesy to other group members, and choose the Initiation post from time to time. Your first posting (Initiation or Response) must be posted by Thursday at 11pm. Posting close to the deadline should be avoided if possible. It's probably best to post within 24 hours of Tuesday's class if possible, since your thinking will still be fresh. If you post just before the deadline and experience technical problems, that is your responsibility.

Step One/Initiation Post: You initiate the conversation by responding directly to one of the group's questions. However, if a group member posts on a topic that is closely connected to your own before you post, you will need to do a Response Post instead and alter your own response accordingly. Students choosing Initiation present a well-reasoned focused argument from their own scholarly perspective, using historical evidence and logic. The approach is the same as an analytical essay except that you are only proving ONE point. The point should be proven conclusively—the conclusion should not be open-ended.

Step One/Response Post: Students may choose instead to respond to an Initiation Post by **extending** and/or **challenging** a response. For Response Posts, students begin to develop a dialogue by presenting an alternative perspective that **either** challenges or extends the argument of the first posting. Again, the point should be proven conclusively.

Step Two/Informal Follow-up: After you have posted your structured piece you should then post at least one more informal piece (Step Two) that can include personal experiences, information from sources outside the course (other courses, online material, news reports, etc.) but which must remain engaged with the original postings and maintain scholarly rigor when

dealing with historical phenomena (see examples posted on the web page). This step enables students to “listen” to each other in ways that should promote more complexity in their thinking. The follow-up posting must be completed by Saturday, 11pm.

Step Three/Conclusion: In Step Three, one student from each group (chosen during the in-class meeting) will then be responsible for providing concluding comments for the week’s discussion, to be completed by Sunday, 11pm. This step closes the circle on the process—now that students have had a chance to share perspectives, the concluding statements provide a way to move the discussion forward so that some sense of closure to the exploration of the original problem can be reached. No group member should complete a concluding comment for a second time if another group member has not yet completed his or her first conclusion.

All of the postings should be seen as a traditional writing assignment, and will be assessed using specific criteria (see below). In considering time spent on the course, realize that this assignment replaces a 4-5 page paper and the argumentative analytical essays for the midterm and final exam from the previous version of the course. The more freewheeling discussion section, and the time taken to read all posting, replaces the Thursday in-class meeting and the time necessary to prepare for it. The advantage to this approach is described in the second paragraph above. It also means, however, that it is essential to attend the Tuesday session. More than one absence will reflect negatively on your participation and cooperative learning grades (see criteria below). Please report unavoidable absences to me AND your group (via email) and make sure to follow-up with online responsibilities as needed.

Your performance will receive three official assessments from me during the course—after the second week, before the midterm exam, and before the final exam. You will be assessed according to the Learning Goals rubric (below). Also, as noted above, you should consult the examples of excellent, competent, and poor postings that are available on the course web page. These examples are drawn from students in past courses. You should use the rubric to assess your own performance before each posting. If you find that my assessment and your assessment seem very dissimilar and my comments do not adequately explain the reason for the difference, you should contact me so that I can explain my assessment more clearly. You will receive a “transitional grade” with the first two assessments. These grades let you know where you stand at that moment, but they are not “absolute grades” to be averaged at the end of the course. Instead, your final grade for this assignment will be based on the overall “learning trajectory,” in which I write a final assessment and provide a grade by examining the entire collection of postings within the context of the group discussions. (This approach is similar to a portfolio assignment.) While excellent performance throughout the course will receive a higher grade than a performance that is rated excellent in the last few weeks, the latter will receive a higher grade than simply the averaging of all the postings if the student demonstrates fairly constant improvement throughout. Because of this approach, students are better off concentrating on improving their postings than in fixating on how an early assessment translates into a grade.

As the course develops, we will be tailoring the group identified problems to aid your performance in your exams and your final paper, which will be a 6-8 page argumentative essay. You will be developing your writing question and tentative thesis from your online conversations,

enabling you to “scaffold” your learning by building up the skills and honing the ideas you will need to succeed in the course.

Learning goals:

Asynchronous discussion skills:

- Post in a timely manner by honoring deadlines.
- Post in an effective manner by engaging other participants constructively, reading other germane messages before posting, and using appropriate subject lines and response strategies.

Cooperative learning skills:

Besides the skills connected with cooperative learning above:

- Complete reading assignments in a timely manner and demonstrate your command of the material in your group.
- Contribute productively to group activities in class and online.
- Complete group assignments such as posting questions in a timely manner.
- Assess yourself and group members thoughtfully and fairly.
- Be aware of group dynamics and respond appropriately as outlined in the *Tips and Criteria for Cooperative Learning* handout.

Historical investigation skills:

- Master historical concepts, including chronology and periodization, characterization, compare and contrast, continuity and change, cultural diversity and similarity, motivation, and evaluation.
- Comprehend and analyze the specific content of scholarly historical writings.
- Comprehend the main themes and essential content of the course as described in the course syllabus from readings, films, and lectures.
- Master historical argumentation skills by using logic and evidence, bringing together the above historical investigation skills in your written and oral work, including the synthesis and evaluation of readings, films, lectures, and the postings of other students.

Writing Goals

- See [Additional Criteria](#)

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