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COMMONPLACE BOOK ASSIGNMENT

4 SEP
2014

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A few weeks ago on Twitter I mentioned I was working on a new assignment for my US History survey (titled at Framingham State “United States History to Reconstruction”). In the interest of sharing, I’ve decided to post the assignment below as it was distributed to students on the first day of classes.

I should note that as I was thinking about how to structure the assignment, I read several pieces on using commonplace books in the classroom, including a [model assignment](#) by Vimala Pasupathi, along with [an article](#) she wrote about using it for the *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, a [page about commonplace books](#) created by the Harvard Library, and [an essay](#) from *The Atlantic* by Alan Jacobs about the resonances between commonplace books and Tumblr.

Depending on what I learn I may post about the experience here or at [The Junto](#) at the end of the semester.

Commonplace Book Assignment

Commonplacing was a common practice during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in both the North American colonies and England in which an individual would create a book of quotations that they found meaningful in their reading. Creators of such books used them to copy down (by hand, of course) passages that they found enlightening, enriching, and occasionally confounding. Commonplacers then typically offered their own commentary about what they had read, reacting to texts, creating a conversation, or explaining why they had chosen it. Commonplace books frequently also included indexes so that their creators could easily locate quotations relating to common themes or issues.

This semester, you will create such a commonplace book using our course readings as your set of texts. In keeping with the practices of early America, you should keep this book as a handwritten journal separate from your other notes (so that you can turn the book in).

The goal of the exercise is two-fold. First, you will work to inhabit the worldview of early American colonists by engaging in the same practices that they did (and with some of the same texts). There are, of course, barriers to thinking like a seventeenth-century Massachusetts colonist, not the least of which is the massive technological advantage that we have. Nonetheless, it should give you some idea. Second, this assignment is designed to encourage you to develop and hone your own notetaking skills. By working each week to identify important quotations, think about what inspired or frustrated you in readings or discussions, and engage with both readings and class, you will more effectively remember material as the semester goes along, and—if all goes well—create a collection of quotations that you can utilize in writing your papers.

Requirements

1. Before each class session (see note below about exceptions), you should copy out *by hand* at least two quotations from the readings assigned for that day using the criteria explained below. On days when more than one reading is assigned, you should not select both quotations from the same text. For each quotation, include brief information about its location in the readings. Number your entries sequentially for easy reference. NOTE: There will be several days marked on the syllabus on which you will not have to enter any quotations into your commonplace book. Please see the schedule of classes for details.
2. Provide a brief annotation (20-30 words) that explains why you selected each quotation and 2-3 index terms.
3. Please bring your journal to class every day. During the course of the semester, I will be conducting unannounced spot checks to check on your progress. If your journal is not up-to-date, you will lose 5 points from your final grade on the assignment.
4. As you go, you should compile a draft index on the last page of your notebook that includes the terms you've selected with references to the numbers of the entries that address that topic. At the conclusion of the semester, you should create a clean copy of the index for final submission.
5. You will submit the full commonplace book on Monday, December 8, at which point it should include all entries and a finalized index.

Selection Criteria

Each entry should address at least one of the following areas. In your annotations you will explain how it meets one of the following in your own words:

1. An illustration of the author's central argument or main point.
2. A passage that confused you in some way.
3. Connects clearly to other readings or to classroom discussions.
4. Uses particularly evocative language.

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