

**Title:** Teaching Essential Skills through Primary Sources and Small Group Discussion  
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**Summary:**

A history professor assigns more primary source documents and reformats class time in order to more effectively teach students essential reading, writing, synthesizing, and critical thinking skills they can apply to a wide range of future careers.

**Background:**

The Civil War is my bread-and-butter class. It is my research field, I teach it every year, and I love teaching it – particularly getting students to think about the war in different ways than those they are familiar with. Because it is a topic with an existing audience, many – sometimes most -- of my students are not history majors. I generally have at least a few ROTC students, who come in with a different set of expectations and interests (they want more on generals and battles) than civilians.

Before joining the Collaborative Humanities Redesign Project, my course was quite heavy on reading monographs and lighter on primary sources (see the course syllabus prior to CHRP here). The format of the course was very traditional: lecturing Mondays and Wednesdays, and sending the students off to discussion sections with my TA(s) at the end of the week. The year before CHRP started, I asked students to write three take-home essays over the course of the semester.

Lest this sound overly staid, I'll be quick to say that I have been tinkering with this class since the first year I taught it: swapping in new lectures, changing the readings, working with different assessment tools (quizzes, exams, papers with prompts), adding new video material from documentaries, the web, and television. *The Daily Show*, for instance, has the best bit out there on the cause of the Civil War. For all my alterations, I still had the nagging sense that not a lot of the material was sticking as well as I would like. That was Itch No. 1.

Itch No. 2 came from teaching the department's capstone class several times. I was discouraged at having so many history majors come to the course, after four or five years at KU, with limited skills in finding and interpreting primary documents and even more limited skills in writing about them. I wanted like to help turn that around, ensuring that our majors arrived at that capstone course with lots of experience in analyzing primary sources, at least some experience in finding them, and a great deal of practice in academic writing.

Itch No. 3 was relevance. In an era where our department's enrollments are declining and where we need to be able to make a powerful argument about the value of the liberal arts in general and history in particular, I want to make sure that my students acquire skills that they can use in virtually any white-collar job. The collapse of interest in the humanities has been very apparent in this class: where it drew 85-100 students annually as recently as 2012, 16 finished the class in

spring 2016. Yet I may be uniquely qualified in the history department to talk about the non-academic world since academe is my third career, following one in journalism and another in politics. My experience, and what I have seen among my friends in other arenas, leads me to believe that many jobs that attract college graduates rely on similar competencies: writing, analysis (whether the document is composed of words or numbers), synthesis, and problem-solving. History lends itself to helping students hone their abilities in the first three categories.

CHRP gave me the opportunity to scratch those itches and put together a course that was more effective in building those skills. Here, then, are the targets I wanted my students to hit:

- Reading, understanding, and synthesizing multiple sources of information
- Thinking critically about those sources
- Writing cogently and succinctly

I also wanted them to internalize two ideas fundamental to discipline: change over time and the idea that nothing in history is inevitable — that historical events have certain causes.

## Implementation:

Let me begin my narrative of **Year 1** by describing the class. This particular year I taught the course one day a week at KU's Edwards campus. This is relevant because the class was quite small – seven students completed the term – and all but one of the students were nontraditional. Most were not history majors. Because the Edwards campus is targeted to working adults, the class met once a week for three hours. The size, location, length, and demographics of the course dictated what I could do and how I could do it this semester.

For this first iteration under CHRP, I slashed the number of secondary readings. I have been concerned for some time that the reading load meant that the students were doing little to none of the homework, while students who did the work didn't get the intended takeaway. By whittling the readings, I hoped they would actually do the assignments. So rather than have the students read a textbook, a novel, secondary readings and a handful of primary documents, the revised syllabus had just two secondary works and more primary documents.

Then I revised the assignments so that they would do more to advance my goals. Instead of the three long essays I used to assign, I went to short (500- to 750-word) weekly essays based on primary documents. This would allow students to gain a great deal of experience in writing an argumentative essay based on primary sources. Here is how I scaffolded this series of work:

- Students received verbal instruction on how to read, understand, and contextualize documents.
- For students who need a refresher, I posted videos of how to read different kinds of documents on our class Bb site.
- The first assignment was to complete a documents worksheet, which is a list of questions that historians ask themselves as they analyze any source.
- The next assignment was to write an argumentative essay based on that week's documents. Students needed to make connections between/among documents and then put them in historical context. In subsequent iterations, I have posted examples of successful essays so the students have a good idea of what is expected. This assignment continued weekly for most of the rest of the semester.
- Starting the week after spring break, students were shown where and how to find their own sources if they chose to go beyond the material already posted on Blackboard. In weeks 9-12 of our 16-week semester, students had the *option* of finding their own sources, and they spent some class time each of those weeks hunting down primary documents. At the end of each this section of class we would had a quick review of an especially interesting document students found on their own, and where they got them.
- The final four weeks of the semester students no longer had the weekly essay. Instead, they were to write a longer essay on a questions of their choice. They were responsible for finding their own primary documents that would serve as the evidence for their arguments. I met with each one-on-one to help shape their research questions and talk about what kinds of sources would be most helpful to them.
- Meanwhile, I halved my lecture time from two hours/week to one hour. I thought

that two hours of my talking in one evening would kill my poor students. I continued to use documentaries and other video material, particularly to tell the story of how battles unfolded. I spent more time with discussion, but I was not certain that students got as much out of that as I would have liked. I thought the big block of time went best when we hit the second half of the semester, where we were working on how to hunt for primary sources.

In all, the semester went well. I was especially happy with the essays, which improved for almost all the students over the term. From the first assignment to the final project, the average grade rose by a third. This is all the more impressive since the final project was longer and more difficult than any of the earlier papers. While the number of students receiving A's and B's remained steady in these snapshots, one of the poor students worked himself into competency (view grading guidelines here). What was most satisfying for me was how much most of the students enjoyed their research, and their newfound appreciation for how time-intensive sifting through primary sources is.

Given how well Year 1 went, I kept the readings and the assignments similar in Year 2. I took advantage of the stipend that CHRP offered to hire a graduate student over the summer to find more primary sources. In its 2016 iteration, the class met twice a week for an hour and 15 minutes – no discussion sections. This class met on the Lawrence campus and comprised mostly traditional juniors and seniors. Fifteen people finished the semester. Once again, most of the students were not history majors.

I taught this course on a Tuesday-Thursday schedule several years ago and tried to include time in each meeting for a 25-minute discussion section. This never felt optimal to me. I had to carve important pieces out of my lectures, and the discussion sections never really took off because of the truncated schedule. I had taken the first steps toward flipping the class in Year 1, and this two-day schedule was the perfect opportunity to finish the job. My approach to teaching has long been to let a central text do the work of giving the broad narrative, while my lectures have gone deep into narrower subjects. I have been reluctant to stop lecturing entirely, as some proponents of flipping suggest, because the work that my readings and lectures do are so different.

A two-day-a-week class cut the intellectual knot for me. In Year 2 I lectured in the first meeting each week (almost always showing a video or two) and had students participate in reading teams the second. Borrowing/stealing an idea from my colleague Nathan Wood, I set up groups of five or six students. Each student had one of six assigned roles each week, and the roles rotated within each group from week to week (view description of roles here). The goal for these groups was to get students talking about the primary sources and then connecting them to what they had read or heard in lecture.

This approach was hugely successful. Students read and retained far more than ever before, and they were excited to talk about what they learned. Because these were small groups and everyone had a job within the group, students had obvious accountability and were highly motivated to look good before their peers. Strong students were excellent models for their peers in terms of how to read and situate primary sources. Discussions were deep and detailed, and only once, with one group in the semester, did I hear students talking about something other than the Civil

War. Most impressively, several of them, with no prompting, told me how much they liked the one-lecture/one-discussion distribution.

I introduced a grading rubric in Year 2, an innovation I first used in the fall of 2015 in my U.S. history survey. The rubric in that course resulted in an immediate and dramatic increase in grades. In that course, the average grade on weekly essays jumped by one full grade with the more detailed and standardized feedback. In the Civil War course the rewards of the identical rubric were less apparent. I can't entirely account for the difference, although I discuss one theory below. Because I was doing my own grading in the Civil War course, though, the shortcomings of the rubric I was using became increasingly obvious as the weeks rolled by.

Another change in Year 2 was that I started grading within Blackboard. The upsides: this was hugely efficient – a great timesaver, especially in conjunction with a rubric. I could quickly tick off the appropriate box for student performance, and students could immediately see their areas of strength and weakness from the rubric. The downside was that most of my students never saw the comments on their papers. It turns out that they have to open their papers in Bb a particular way in order to see the line editing and many of the comments I made, and neither I nor most of the students knew this. I didn't find out that they were need seeing detailed feedback until three-quarters of the way through the semester, just as they were about to start working on their research paper. In looking at fig. 5, though, it appears that student work did not suffer for the lack of line comments.

Despite their enthusiasm for the reading teams, Year 2 students as a group performed worse on average in their essays than Year 1 students. My hunch is that the maturity level in Year 1 meant the students were generally more serious, focused, and committed to improving. However, the story depicted in fig. 4 is not quite as disappointing as it appears in the graph. The last assignment is the final project, which is a longer and more demanding version of the repeating essay.

Drilling deeper into the numbers yields a more heartening result. Despite the final project's additional challenges, the number of Year 2 students who received A's or B's on the assignment was higher than the other snapshot weeks with Paper 1 and Paper 4. Unfortunately, although the number of failing papers dipped in the middle of the semester, it returned to the same level as the first assignment with the capstone project. So further investigation shows that the *average* grades masks the real improvement that many of the students made over the semester.

## Student Work:

This section includes samples from students in 2015 and 2016. I believe students saw greater gains overall in the first year than in the second, even though the assignments and the preparation were identical. Two factors come to mind that could account for this difference:

- Year 1 was taught at the Edwards campus and drew more nontraditional students. The average age in the course was significantly higher, by my estimate, than in Year 2.
- Students received detailed feedback on their papers in Year 1. They did in Year 2 as well, but did not realize it because of oddities with the Blackboard system that I did not learn about until about week 12.

The first case study is from a very talented junior I had in Year 1. The paragraph below is from the first assignment of the semester. The problems with this introduction are that the student has no thesis, uses a direct quotation inappropriately (better to just take the info and paraphrase), and asks a question without answering it.

*Wealthy owners of large plantations in the South were relatively few—“those owning more than a hundred [slaves] numbered less than 3,000 in the whole South” around 1860, yet the pro-slavery mentality was widespread in the region. The number of Confederate soldiers who actually owned slaves is “slightly more than one in ten.” The disparity between the Southern overarching enthusiasm for the war versus the reality of how few slaveholders who actually profited vastly from slave labor raises the question of motivation: why did the majority of the South so promptly vowed to do all it could to protect slavery? If the motivation for most was not directly financial, we must then look to other possible reasons.*

This student responded very well to input and turned out to be a gifted writer and historian. By week 10, she was willing to take on a prominent historian – who is now the president of Harvard -- and argue with the scholar’s conclusions. This intro still needed work, though, in that the student did not lay out the ways in which she disagreed with the historian.

*In her article entitled “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” Drew Gilpin Faust broadly describes the role of Southern women in aiding the Confederate army, their contributions and sacrifices to the Cause. The surprising conclusion to her work states that “it may well have been because of its women that the South lost the Civil War.” Ms. Faust explains this conclusion thus: “Refusing to accept the economic deprivation further military struggle would have required, resisting additional military service by their husbands and sons, no longer consecrating the dead, but dancing while ambulances rolled by, Southern women undermined both objective and ideological foundations for the Confederate effort; they directly subverted the South’s military and economic effectiveness as well as civilian morale.” I contend that this assessment of the extent to which Southern women influenced the South’s defeat in the Civil War is unfair and inaccurate on different levels.*

By week 13, she had found firm footing. In this introduction she laid out a clear case based on evidence gleaned from primary documents. This intro was followed by a long block quote, which was less appropriate for an introduction, but her lead-in had the flair of someone now drawing on

her talents as a writer and merging them with her growing analytical skills:

*Once General Sherman successfully occupied Atlanta in early September of 1864 and captured Savannah on December of that year, he set off on a march to South Carolina with the intent of destroying anything of military value in his path. It was his objective to break the Confederacy's spirit once and for all and thus force it to surrender, and the way to achieve that was through total war. In a letter to General Hood dated September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1864, Sherman wrote: "You, yourself burned dwelling-houses along your parapet, and I have seen to-day fifty houses that you have rendered uninhabitable, because they stood in the way of your forts and men." It was now his turn. General W. T. Sherman seemed to be taking a page out of Hood's book—as his men marched towards Savannah, and onward to the Carolinas, Sherman would instruct his soldiers to do the very same. In the same letter, he outlined the wrongs perpetrated by the Confederacy, and his tone bespoke of more than just defeating an enemy to maintain the integrity of the Union. It was most than mere justice; it was revenge: [long block quote followed]*

The next case study is from a middling student from Year 2. As with the previous case, the first example is the introduction from the first essay of the semester. The problems with this are fairly obvious: most of his statements were generalizations, and he never really got any traction – the paragraph did not move forward. Less apparent to a reader unfamiliar with the course is that while he has an argument – that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was responsible for bringing on the Civil War more than a decade later – he had not yet had the exposure to events all through the 1850s that might have made him change his mind. He made this claim before he had all the relevant information. Here is his introduction:

*It is a widely recognized fact that the Civil War was fought roughly between 1861 and 1865. This fact about the Civil War is one that most people know and agree upon, but what the point in history when it was inevitable; "The Point of No Return" is up for discussion. History has a snowball effect, and many different events built upon each other to push America to a Civil War. In my opinion, the Fugitive Slave Act was that one event that made the Civil War inevitable.*

This paper received a C+, the grade that he earned on most of his submissions. At one point the student earned a B-, at another point he fell to a D+, and he failed to turn in a couple of essays as well.

The following excerpt is from the same student in week 11. He had slightly more concrete detail in the first sentence, but that was quickly followed by statements that were bland and vague. Unlike his first effort, this introduction contained no argument.

*Throughout the Civil War, more than 50 major battles took place in America between 1861 and 1864. During this time period, both the Union and Confederate armies alternated between victories and losses in battle. In a span of three days, one battle in particular crushed the Confederacy during the summer of 1863. The Army of Northern Virginia produced a vast amount of casualties, morale was down for everyone in the South, and Robert E. Lee lost his "first" battle. At the small town named Gettysburg is where the Confederacy was crushed.*

I admit that this kind of introduction baffles me, especially three-quarters of the way through the

course. Every week includes a short briefing about writing mistakes that I see multiple students making, and I talk almost every week about the need for an argument or an evidence-based opinion in the introduction – not just the observations illustrated by this piece of writing.

**Reflections:**

I'm very happy with how this course is progressing. I expect it will always be a work in progress, but trimming down the number of secondary readings, boosting the level of exposure to primary documents, doing just one lecture a week, and completely changing the way discussion works has been very successful. Students have said they love the one-lecture/week + small-group discussion, and I believe it. They look like very happy campers. More importantly, they are obviously deeply engaged and *learning*. It's been very rewarding. For Year 3, I'm anticipating tweaking the course rather than the significant changes I've made in the previous two years. I would also like some suggestions for how to address more effectively the writing deficiencies such as the one just above this section. That I say and write the same things again and again on student work and they continue to make the same mistakes suggests that I am ineffective and/or they are not paying attention. While many of my students benefit from my input, I would like the improvement to be more broadly experienced among my students.

***A Peek into the Future***

For CHRP's final year I intend to revise my grading rubric substantially. Given the technology issues, I will also limit my comments to the box provided and avoid line editing. If students want feedback on that level, I will ask them to make an appointment with me.

Even with the rubric, I find that my students make the same mistakes again and again. To prod students to read and then integrate my comments, I will have them revise and resubmit the first couple of essays. Both the original work and the revised will be graded. For the third essay, I plan to ask them to add an extra page of reflection on how they applied what they learned in the first two essays/revisions to this piece. I will also make it mandatory after spring break for students to start locating their own primary sources for their short papers (this has been voluntary) in hopes that the experience will result in better grades on the longer final project.

Using some grant money I received from CTE last summer, I rehired my graduate student and had him add more material to my growing pool of primary documents. At this point, the collection includes diary entries, letters, speeches, census information, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, and the U.S. and Confederate constitutions. I am in the process of pulling this material into clusters that I can assign throughout the semester. Moreover, I have accumulated enough source material to open a conversation with a publisher about putting together a new kind of source book on the Civil War, one that relies on smaller mix-and-match modules rather than lengthy chapters' worth of documents. This in turn has allowed me to apply successfully for two research assistants from the Emerging Scholars Program. They will help me find more documents for this class as well as the monograph I'm currently writing.