

EXAMPLES OF OUTSTANDING 50-WORD-SENTENCE EXERCISES

*Assignments that ask students to perform some operation in a single 50-word sentences serve multiple purposes, perhaps the most important of which is teaching concision. One can say a great deal in fifty words, but one must choose those words carefully. Consider the following examples. In each case, the text retains the corrections I made on the original, which in these cases were minimal. Strikeouts indicate words or phrases to be eliminated; **text in red** indicates my inserted comments.*

1. Assignment: In one sentence NOT EXCEEDING 50 words..., summarize [David C.] Lamberth's argument about [William James's] The Varieties of Religious Experience.

The exercise does not ask students to summarize the author's exposition, i.e., the chapter's content, but rather his argument, i.e., the most salient point(s) the essay makes about James's text. In this instance, the student accurately describes Lamberth's interpretation; contra those scholars who read Varieties as merely a psychological study, it does make a cogent philosophical argument about religion. Needless to say, a single sentence cannot develop an argument's subtleties, but it does force one to GET TO THE POINT—which is, of course, the exercise's point.

I consider this particular assignment the most important one I give, because it can help students from wandering in the Wilderness of Trackless Ideation. The argument of any work—even one as long as James' Varieties itself, can be summarized in a sentence, at most two. I tell students to ask themselves as they write papers if they can summarize their own argument in a sentence. If they can, the paper is on track. If they cannot, they need to stop and think about what they are trying to say.

Minor Assignment #2

*Readers commonly misunderstand James' Varieties as merely a psychological study of empirical investigations describing religious experience as a strictly subjective phenomenon, while James' actual views on religion are better discovered through a more philosophical reading, ~~which~~ **that** offers an explanation of the meaning behind religious experiences and defines religion more objectively. **.50***

Bingo

Excellent

2. Assignment: Calculate the average number of times per year Virginian parishes celebrated communion and the average number of communicants per church. Then, in one sentence NOT EXCEEDING 50 words (need I say more?), present your results.

Consider the number of operations the student must perform: understand what "communion" and "communicants" mean; read a long (and superficially boring) series of reports to aggregate the data; perform the calculations; and present the results both intelligently and concisely. This exercise combines research and writing skills.

Minor Assignment #3

In 1724, Virginia parishes generally celebrated communion three times a year—on Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday (some celebrated on Michaelmas as well); **while and though** a half-dozen churches could boast over 100 communicants (these were often the same churches that could boast [vary wording] inducted ministers), the remainder averaged around 40.

brilliantly constructed sentence that fits in much data and provides qualifications too.

3. Assignment: Write a 50-word sentence explaining the principle(s) you used during the "Planning the Syllabus Exercise" to balance the demands of covering an adequate amount of material while maintaining a sufficiently brisk pace.

During the summer, Tom Howe, a teacher at Monona Grove High School, and I offer two courses to high school teachers, especially those involved with Advanced Placement U.S. History. In the practicum, I suggest using the 50-word sentence in their classes and, in an example of active learning, ask them to write such a sentence. In 2007, one teacher presented his own sentence and then indicated that he had written a second sentence as a reflection on the process. I do not collect the sentences during the practicum, so I made no comments, but I include the initial exercise and the reflection it inspired because the latter voices the kinds of sentiments students in my undergraduate classes often express when I query them about the experience. The fact that this teacher offered his reflection voluntarily and cast it in the 50-word format speak for themselves.

Assignment for Tuesday

The creation of the syllabus recognized the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to be successful in an “AP” sense and practiced in critical thinking vital to civic and historical literacy, so it provides an opportunity for all students to satisfy their mercenary wants (credits) while producing enlightened citizens.

(Reflection:) The sentence confronted me with one of the most difficult pieces of writing I have produced in some time, as it demanded a limit to my usually endless volume of prose through seemingly constant self-reflection as to “what” was important and necessary to demonstrate the process used in syllabus creation.