

Time to Write

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The 50-Word Assignment

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History

Seeking the holy grail of an exercise that teaches writing, advances critical skills, adds only a modicum of time to students' weekly workload, and requires even less time to evaluate? The closest thing I have found is the "minor assignment," a 50-word sentence covering the week's reading. Employed frequently—I schedule from perhaps 4 in a typical undergraduate seminar to as many as 9 in an upper-division lecture—minor assignments are the most effective means I know for teaching students the quintessential communicative skill: Get To The Point!

A single-sentence exercise with a finite word limit counters students'

proclivity for aerating their prose with superfluities. Given at most 50 words, students must distill their arguments' fundamentals and phrase them concisely, for, as my syllabus warns, the 51st word and its successors face a terrible fate. (I have been known to cut out extraneous verbiage and turn the tattered remnant into a paper airplane—a prac-

tice that proved sound pedagogically if not aerodynamically.)

50 words might appear too many—the contests cereal companies run, after all, ask for only 25—but I prefer giving students sufficient rope. For one thing, the 50-word limit allows them to cope with the assignment, which often requires complicated responses. For another, it weans them from dependency on simple declarative sentences and challenges them to experiment with multiple clauses. Some can handle compound-complex sentences, but most require—and appreciate—tutelage in these. Nor are 50 words

too few; no student has ever complained about an inability to pare down the verbiage. Had Goldilocks stumbled into my section instead of the three bears' den, she would have found the word limit "just right."

Consider, for example, the assignment that I recently gave students in History/Religious Studies 451, entitled "Constructing a hypothesis": "Using the maps in the front of the packet, compare the distribution of churches within Anglo-America east

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The 50-Word Assignment

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of the Mississippi River in 1750 with the distribution in 1850 and, in one sentence NOT EXCEEDING 50 words (need I say more?), hypothesize the reasons for the difference." To complete the exercise, students must examine a series of maps, aggregate data presented graphically and convert it into written form, analyze that data and develop a hypothesis to explain patterns they may have found. They must attend carefully to the material (not the least of the minor assignment's benefits is its capacity to monitor students' preparation), read the maps against each other, and offer a succinct but accurate conclusion, thereby rehearsing several critical skills simultaneously.

The quality of the responses varied, as one might expect, but the best submission hit the mark exactly, intellectually and, at 50 words, quantitatively: "The maps show a relative decline in Anglican and Congregational Churches in relation to the growth of other churches between 1750 and 1850, which reflects the shift towards the disestablishment of state churches and the demand for a constitutional guaranty of religious freedom that occurred during the American Revolutionary Settlement." Even more impressive, English is not the writer's native language.

50-word sentences cannot help improve the organization of paragraphs and compositions, but that is why God invented essays and term papers. Meanwhile, minor assignments' brevity conceals their degree of difficulty; they require far more intellectual effort than may first appear. At the same time, because I comment on the sentences as profusely as I would a full-scale paper (at far less cost in time—another benefit, one that makes minor exercises effective tools for writing instruction in even large classes like

History 101) but do not grade the exercises individually (although failure to complete them lowers one's class participation score), students receive my attention without having to "perform" for an evaluation. They may mess up without cost, for the value of minor assignments lies ultimately not in completing any single task but in repeating them, by which students habituate themselves to really *looking* at what they write.

And they do. I explain the philosophy of minor assignments during the first discussion section, and in many subsequent sections, I devote a few minutes to them. That I take the assignments seriously means that students do so too, and they quickly grasp the exercises' multiple intents. "They change the way you read," one student said recently, with others chiming in that they "focus" the reading and help one grasp the "big picture" rather than drown in the details. They influence how students approach larger projects; the concentration put into the sentences has helped

at least one student craft his essays so they "get more to the point." Finally, they keep students on their toes. You can fake 1- or 2-page papers on reading assignments, a student confided, because you can read a couple of pages and expand on them, but trying to compress one or more readings into 50 words means that "you can't make it up" and, in the process, "eliminates [male bovine feces]." •

For a good example of a student response to the 50-word assignment, see http://history.wisc.edu/cohen/50-word_example.pdf.

For more examples of Professor Cohen's minor assignments, see his syllabi at <http://history.wisc.edu/cohen/>.

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