In most colleges and universities, a World History survey course is an essential part of the liberal arts curriculum. It is the belief by many colleges and universities that a student taking one or two world history courses (as well as other parts of a core curriculum) would be challenged to examine the ultimate meaning of life, their place in the world, and their responsibility to others. Moreover, students, having historical context, would have a better understanding of the human experience and garner appreciation of other cultures. In essence, students would be more knowledgeable and analytical of their past historically and could then become more productive citizens.

However, while this rhetoric fulfills college handbook statements on what is necessary to fulfill a liberal arts education, most students do not embrace this ideology. For most students, a world history course is studying events that took place “back then” and for this reason it is “boring.” This perception is furthered by the image of history courses taught by professors who lecture endlessly for 50 to 75 minutes while the students sit listlessly taking notes and appearing to process the material. For many undergraduates, history is all about facts and lacks any true critical or reasoning skills. Similarly the idea is that history is “taught” to them, lacks any real active learning, and is simply part of their general requirement.

Thankfully, times are changing and the pedagogy of world history is evolving. The focus now is making world history surveys less “boring” and more “engaging.” In
fact, recent studies in pedagogy are working to make students of history “active learners” and “critical thinkers”; not simply automatons taking copious notes without any sense of what they are absorbing.¹ The plan is to have students utilize their innate critical and analytical talents. By doing this, students will in turn accrue a more holistic and global experience of world history.

However, implementing these goals in a classroom is not easy. Nevertheless, with some inventive thinking and action, there are ways to encourage college students to write well-thought out essays that contain analytical processing and coherence. There are some strategies that can be used to induce students perhaps to “care” or find the history of the world interesting. Moreover, there are strategies not to simply teach students what “facts” are, but in reality have the students assess what happened in the past and come up with conclusions on their own.

I will share some of what I have done over the past several years teaching world history by having my students write small, but quality papers. Much of my teaching is still a work in progress, as I am constantly revamping my pedagogy. However, I believe that there are certain strategies and rules for collegial composition that have proven to be successful in an ever-changing student environment. There are many different options out there, and I hope to evolve year by year.

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Presently, I teach World History I and II surveys. My students are mostly freshmen with a mixture of sophomore, junior, and seniors. Most of the students are not

history majors, which makes the job even more challenging. For many undergraduates, this is simply a required course that they need to complete their core requirements in history, and they in turn treat it as such. Since there is no prerequisite to take this study, I am unaware of their previous writing skills or historical knowledge. Many students come to my college from a wide array of educational institutions where the emphasis on writing strongly varies.

I make it clear to the students that the study of history is more than just memorizing facts and discussing what happened “back then.” History is a discipline that encompasses written expression, communication, and critical thinking. It is an interactive study that teaches students both academic and life skills. In life, as in the classroom, effective oral and written competence is an essential part of being a productive person. Thus, my class is constructed in three areas: discussion, lecture, and, more importantly, written tasks. For this paper, I will focus on developing students’ written expression. I have the students respond to the course in three different techniques: book responses, Internet reading analyses, and film reactions. All of these three obligations require the students to use different historical tools to learn and comprehend the past.

The first component I will discuss is the book response. The students are asked to compose a paper based on a primary source the entire class is reading. The assignment will be a three-to-four page paper. At my college, the primary sources are the same for all World History I courses. For example, we use Sophocles’s plays in the trilogy “Oedipus the King” for our World History 101 course. “Oedipus the King” is an ancient Greek drama commonly used in many survey courses. I emphasize to the students that
this is a primary source, a key piece of evidence from the past, and works in conjunction with the textbook they are reading simultaneously for context. I lecture on ancient Greece to give the students context for the period; this helps the students more effectively situate the book within the time it was written.

Before I hand them the assigned topic for their paper, we discuss the book as a group. They are required to have read it before class discussion. To ensure that it is read, I administer a quiz on the book, testing the students’ critical thinking on the basic facts of the play. Once the quiz is over, it is then important for me to know that the students have a solid grasp of the play’s general themes.

For class deliberation, I have the students form groups and give them topics to consider, such as “women in the plays,” “political power in the plays,” and “role of the gods in the plays.” Each group discusses one of these ideas and consequently writes a response using evidence from the book. I require one student in each group to be the “recorder” and jot down what the group is agreeing upon in reference to the topic. After I mill around the class listening to the various groups of students talk out aloud, I then have the whole class openly discuss their findings. Each cluster of students is asked how they would respond to the selected theme. I hope that at least two to three undergraduates per group are willing to talk about their topic with the rest of the class. In essence, they are, without knowing it, already starting to think about concepts related to the play and how to organize their thoughts on paper. The skills the students are exhibiting are: critical thinking, assessment, and deliberation. I usually have good discussions where each group elucidates the most salient themes the Sophoclean drama. This exercise is also a great way to hear different students talk aloud in class. After the exchanges, I have them
pass in outlines, so I can see how they worked together. This lesson encourages critical thinking and consultation, which are essential before composition.

At this point, the undergraduates should be fairly comfortable with the material, discerning both the historical context of when it was written as well the basic narrative of the plays. The next step is the written assessment. I usually offer a choice of two or three options. My paper topics invite the student to ponder issues and not simply have them recount the narrative of the play. I make it clear to the students that they are now beyond high school where they summarize stories; in college, critical thinking has now replaced that expectation. One sample question I proffer is, “Given what you know about women historically in ancient Greece, how does Sophocles portray women? Were there any powerful female characters? If yes, how so? Did any characters fit the traditional paradigm of women’s social and legal status in ancient Greece historically? Explain.” Another potential question could be, “What is the nature of political power in these three plays? How does one attain and maintain power? Can power corrupt someone? Last, do the gods of Greece play political roles? Why or why not?” These kinds of queries do not call for a summary or a quick response. Rather, these prompts contain different angles for the students to contemplate. Moreover, it gives the students agency to take a position. I point out that the answers to the questions can vary—what matters is how they argue a particular side and utilize the text for clues and evidence.

Historical questions such as these require an outline. Even though this is not an English class, I expect the students to have basic writings skills, such as organization and coherence. I pass out an outline that is almost completely bare, listing only what an introduction, middle, and a conclusion contains. I emphasize that a thesis statement
provides a crucial “road map” for the reader to follow when examining one’s paper. On the outline sheet I also include roman numerals, capital letters, and lower-case letters to encourage the students to use this framework.

This layout is passed out a few weeks before the essay is due. The students are to make it as detailed as possible; I am essentially asking them to give the paper some serious consideration before composition. Mapping out their papers creates more intellectual rigor in their papers, for it induces them to think out what they will write. Once these outlined sheets are returned to me, I quickly read them over looking to see how they are sculpting their product. This exchange with the students allows me get in contact with those who probably would not ordinarily have sought me out for help when composing this paper. I can then see, when they turn in their final paper, how they have progressed from the outline to the final draft. The goal is to convey to the students that this is indeed a multi-step process that involves precision and thought.

An important ingredient to this paper is the need for support, i.e., factual evidence. This is an important skill to learn not only for history writing, but also in other collegiate disciplines. My students are asked to find contextual clues in the plays of Sophocles in order to back up their assertions. For example, if a student believes that women played a minor role in the Greek drama, I ask that they show proof from the play, citing a page and quote. This requirement encourages students to avoid the pitfalls of plagiarism and to engage the book in a closer manner. We all use the same edition of the primary source; this decision makes it easier for me as their professor to double check quotes if necessary.

A key requirement before they turn in the final draft is format. I encourage
fairness and professionalism in the students’ papers. I have them turn in a final draft that requires a specific font, margins, spacing, citation, etc. This scheme helps to produce uniformity in grading. Likewise, it hopefully inspires students to think of collegiate writing as one that takes effort, care, and attention.

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In contrast, my World History II class, which covers roughly 1500 to the present, reads Elie Wiesel’s Night as their primary source. The same format is used with World History I: a quiz is administered, a group discussion is conducted, and an outline is created with my approval. What is different between these two courses is that I show them primary visual evidence, something that is often lacking in a World History I course. For Night, I show the French documentary Night and Fog on Auschwitz (or another Holocaust film) to give the students a visual image of the camp that Elie Wiesel lived in during the war. The twentieth and twenty-first century, with which students often identify more so than other periods, is rich in film and photographs of historical events. My task is to link up those more modern periods with written sources and visual imagery.

Instead of writing a straightforward question as I do with my World History I course, I have the student use their creative skills. The undergraduate has to hone in on the main character in Night, Eliezer, who is based off the real story of Elie Wiesel. In the book, Eliezer survives the war, however, nothing is mentioned of what happened to him after the war. Therefore, my task is to have the students think beyond this moment in history and “outside of the box.” I ask the students to write an original narrative of what happened to Eliezer after the war. The students have to reconstruct a story of what they
think might have happened to him after the camps. Did he leave the camps immediately? Did he go home? Was there a home to go to? What I often find is that students know a lot about the Holocaust, butfew have any knowledge of what happened to the survivors after 1945.

Grappling with this kind of inquiry into a subject is not easy and the students’ responses need to be grounded in historical accuracy. Therefore, I ask the students to research the stories of Holocaust survivors and reconstruct a fictional story based on what they have learned. They will have to consult Internet sources or books by Holocaust survivors who survived the war. The idea is to focus on what happened after they left the camps and include in their paper references to certain organizations (such as the United Nations), places they actually went to afterwards, and the impact of the war on them mentally. This assignment invokes analytical thinking, research, and creativity. The students are not just reading survivors’ accounts, they have to ponder the validity of those accounts and create a fictional narrative of what might have happened to Eliezer, after the camp was liberated in 1945. This assignment is geared to give the students a more nuanced understanding of this moment and allow them to use a bit of creativity, often not considered in a history course.

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The second area I work to sculpt student composition in both World History surveys is with the use of Internet sources. The Internet is a tool that all students use—it is hard to avoid it in the classroom. Online there is a plethora of websites that offer students insight into primary sources. One of the best I have found is the Fordham Internet History Sourcebooks Project (http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/) edited by Paul
Halsall.\textsuperscript{2} This website has a collection of ancient, medieval, and modern history pieces, which are excerpted and condensed. Furthermore, the series is a goldmine for world history students and teachers alike, as it contains excerpts from all parts of the world and all time periods. The website’s strongest areas are in European and American history, but the website is growing with its efforts to be more inclusive of African and Asian sources.

Students use this website to look up assigned readings. For example, I have them read a sample of primary accounts from Ancient Rome. They could be reading a selection from Livy, the Twelve Tables, or Herodotus’s account of the Greek-Persian Wars. Or, perhaps the students would view a website that illustrates Etruscan art. The goal is to write a one-page response to the Internet reading. For example if they read a selected excerpt of Herodotus, I ask them to think about how he is framing the history, what the passage is about, and who the audience is. The students are not thus simply describing the text, they are critically thinking about what the passage encompasses as a whole. The idea is to have them exhibit the skills that historians use in scholarship: assess, analyze, and discover.

Some of the readings are not easy and a few undergrads are quickly dissuaded by difficulty. However, I do ask the student to read despite certain words or concepts that are foreign to them, as this is a world history survey. I insist that the student is not responsible for knowing every word or reference in the passage, but rather the importance is understanding its overall historical significance. I ask the students to think always “what is this passage telling us about history?” To help alleviate some of the discomfort of the excerpts, I have a discussion of the readings, usually either before or after the

\textsuperscript{2} This website was created in the mid to late 1990s. It has been recently updated in 2006 to remove old web addresses. The purpose of this website is to be a “collection of public domain and copy-permitted historical texts presently clearly (without advertising or excessive layout) for educational use.”
papers are turned in. The goal is to relate the readings not only to the lecture, but also to the study of world civilizations as a whole. This assignment thus reinforces the importance of the Internet for history, but challenges them to think and assess readings that they might have never come across before in their lives.

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My final tool of written composition in the survey course relates to film. Televisions and computer screens permeate our everyday life. The twenty-first century is a visual culture and colleges need to be aware of this dynamic in academia. I use film in both my World History I and II courses. Outside of the classroom, students already have the option to watch documentaries and films on cable channels such as A&E and the History Channel or watch something online, such as YouTube. What I hope to do with this is capitalize on the visual media we have and induce students to think differently about what they see on screen. For World History I, I use films on ancient Rome, China, Islam, etc. Some of the films that I have found useful are the History Channel’s series *Engineering an Empire* and *Lost Cities*. These films include a wide variety of investigations into ancient civilizations and the students like the modern feel of the videos. For World History II, I look for films that are more modern and highlight historical moments, such as biographies on major historical leaders, primary documentaries (such as *Triumph of the Will* or Cold War propaganda films), and more Hollywood-esque films such as *Amistad*, *Schlinder’s List*, and *Gandhi*. Given the different times of the classes and the days of the week that they fall upon, I sometimes show the films in whole or in parts that are relevant to the lecture.

However, I do not just have the students watch the films. Rather, they have to
take notes and synthesize what they are viewing. The questions they have to answer while they watch the film are: what is the main point of the film, what evidence is used, the role of actors, how accurate is the film, and what did and did not interest them. I ask the students to write up an one-page evaluation.

They are not simply rehashing what the film revealed, but they are evaluating it for its historical accuracy and clarity. In essence, they are critically thinking about what they watch and what messages are being conveyed. The students seem to enjoy this type of essay, as it gives them agency in order to discern the validity of the film. I always get the most feedback from visual aides. I grade this paper based on their responses to the areas listed above. I do not expect all of the students to like the films, but I do believe they are of the age when they can take a step back, contemplate, and analyze something they see on screen. This is an exercise they should be doing in their everyday life, questioning what they see, read, and hear.

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The strategies I have listed in this paper are mainly used for history surveys that often include a large majority of non-history majors. Thus, teaching students writing and critical thinking skills in a history course is an essential part of their liberal arts degree and a basic life skill. In college, it is sometimes important to convey to students how to conceive a paper through the entire writing process. Although it does take more time on my part to grade and edit, I have found students grateful for the intensive assistance they have received for these and other assignments. The ultimate hope is that the skills they use expand upon in my course can be applied to another and vice versa.

The possibilities for inducing critical thinking in a classroom are endless. Get
your students interested, active, and critical of history. There are a variety of ways of cultivating that goal with written assignments. Primary sources such as novels are often a great medium to convey moments in history’s past. I have revealed two options on how to handle two primary sources: Sophocles’s Oedipal plays and Wiesel’s Night. These two assignments have been successful with certain classes in cultivating critical thinking.

However, we need to be aware that students are reading fewer books and are being drawn into more online or TV resources (and unfortunately this includes less engagement in textbook reading). Thus, as historians, it is important to capitalize on these developments and work to make the visual online apart of the written curriculum of history surveys. The most important part of the future is to make students critically think and question the nature of resources, such as the Internet, television, and film. The students need to assess a source instead of accepting it as fact. Furthermore, the idea should be to make students critical of online sources and work to assess the validity of certain websites. If these goals and others can be met, perhaps we will create a new future generation that will be mindful of what it means to have a true liberal arts education.

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For reference, below is a sample of the questions taken directly off the prompts I give to my students.

**Primary Source: Book Response to Sophocles’ Plays**

1. Political Power in Sophocles--how does one attain it? Maintain it? How powerful is it during Greek times? Is political power the downfall of the various characters in the plays? Does power corrupt? Is there a limit? What message is Sophocles sending in this play about political power?
2. The role of women in the plays of Sophocles--who are the main women in these plays? Are they similar or not? Why or Why not? Are they powerful or weak? What understanding do you obtain from reading these plays about the role of women in Greek society? Does the book reflect the reality from what you know?

3. Roles of Law (secular and divine) in the Sophoclean tragedy--what are the two kinds of laws at stake here in these two plays? Which one wins out in the end? What message is Sophocles sending us about religious (rule of the gods) and political laws and their relevance in Greek society?

4. Role of fate and free will. Does Oedipus have any choice in his life? Is he fated from the start? How does fate and free will relate to the role of the gods in Greek society historically?

Primary Source: Book Response to *Night*

What happened to Eliezer after the book ended?
You are to construct a story of what happened to this main character after the camps were liberated. What did he do? How did he feel? Did he go home? Was there a home to go to? It is a *fictional* account (your own), but your story should be historically accurate or plausible given what we know happened to many of the survivors. Do NOT simply copy/paste the true-life story of Elie after the war. This needs to be an “original” writing.
- Pick up when the camps are liberated
- Think of the years 1945-1950
- This should not be a tale of Eliezer living "happily ever after." In fact, the lives of Holocaust survivors became far more complex, painful, and disheartening.
You are to create a story of what survival was like after the camps. How does one cope? How does one live through such an event?
- You need to have your work grounded in some historical reference, which means you will have to do some light research (names, places should be included—of where survivors went and turned to after the war).
- What you need to do is to look at some stories of holocaust survivors. What did they do? How did they live? Where did they live? You need to consult some sources to verify exactly what happened.
- Use *MLA format*—add *a Bibliography* to the end of your paper
- You must cite at least 3-4 sources along with *Night and Things Fall Apart* (The second portion of the paper NEEDS citation as well)

Internet: Assignment for *Modern History Sourcebook Online*

These Internet websites from the Modern History Sourcebook database are listed under each week’s topics in the syllabus, such as ‘Ancient Greece’ or ‘Ancient Rome’. These readings are a required part of the course along with the textbook readings. I will announce which day we will discuss them. These readings are not long and can be printed easily off the Internet. You will turn in *hand-written responses* to these Internet
readings—these will count as credit towards your participation/discussion or quiz portion of your grade.
Please see http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/robinson-sources.html for reference on the importance of primary sources.
*As you write responses to the Internet readings, you are to respond to the following questions: What is the passage about? How does it relate to the week’s lecture? Did this article raise any important questions?

**Film: Response**

As you watch each film/documentary for this course, please address the following questions in your paper.

1. Provide a brief summary of the film. What was it about? What was the time period? Who was the focus of the film? What evidence was used?
2. State your opinion of the movie. What were its strengths and its weaknesses? What did you like? What did you not like? Provide specific examples (scenes, situations) from the film to back up your position.
3. What characters or moments in the film did you most identify with?
4. In your opinion, what was the director’s intention or message? Do you agree? Why or why not? Was it biased? Or even-handed? Explain.
5. How does this film enhance what we are learning in this course?

Other requirements:
Correct grammar/spelling
Typed
1-2 pages (at least one fully written page)
Double spaced
Bibliography


