

COMMONPLACE BOOK PROJECT

ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW

"The use, not the reading of books, makes us wise."

THIS PROJECT IS DUE ON BLAZEVIEW BY 11:59 PM ON MAY 5

Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, and other social media platforms seem to offer a revolutionary new idea: they provide us with ways to curate information, save quotations or images, and document our thoughts. Yet, to some extent, these technologies merely function as an updated form of the *commonplace book*. Readers in early modern periods would often produce commonplace books (i.e. notebooks) in which they recorded the best examples of wisdom and style from what they read for easy access and recall. In other words, readers would take the words that compositors, typesetters, printers, and booksellers produced as commodities and make them into a personal account—not words to buy, but words to *live* by. In a course like this, there is perhaps no better way to reflect on the consumption of literary works than by assembling your own *digital* commonplace books. While I will ask you to think analytically and to organize your commonplace book by theme, I am primarily interested in this assignment serving as a record of your experiences and your journey through this course. When this semester comes to an end, my hope is that this project will allow you to take inventory of your knowledge and to create a small database of your thoughts and reflections.

GETTING STARTED ON THE COMMONPLACE BOOK PROJECT

- **CHOOSE A FORMAT.** While you do not need to finalize the format of your project until the end of the semester, having an idea of what you want to create may help you to locate suitable content throughout the semester. Will you develop a Pinterest board? Will you create digital collages? Will you focus on quotations and your own written reflections through Twitter threads? Do you think you might create a TikTok account where you work through select passages and thoughts? Will you attempt to illustrate or create visual representations of your chosen quotations or themes?
- **COLLECT PASSAGES.** Early modern readers, including one anonymous contemporary of William Shakespeare, believed that a key step was to “note down everything worth storing . . . from what they read in their texts, apportioning their excerpted material into clearly defined categories.” To do this, you have to begin by locating passages you deem worthy of storing. *Fortunately, you will already be engaged in this process as you annotate the assigned readings on Perusall.* You can always ignore some of these passages later, but it will make your life more manageable if you collect favorite quotations in a document or notebook regularly throughout the semester.
- **ORGANIZE INTO THEMES.** Returning to the above quotation, the next step after collecting passages is to develop clearly defined categories (or themes) that can help you to organize your commonplace book. You should be creative in thinking about these categories, and allow yourself to make connections between texts that may not immediately seem related in any way. These themes will help you to reflect on and respond to your experiences at the end of the semester.
- **ANNOTATE AND ELABORATE.** Collecting and organizing your chosen content is only one aspect of assembling a commonplace book. You should also annotate your passages or write up some brief reflections as you collect them. Doing this semi-regularly will help you to identify *what* you found valuable in them and *why* they matter to you. By elaborating on what you have selected, you are engaging in an interpretive act that allows you to use your passages to create meaning. *And, once again, you will already be doing some of this annotation work in Perusall throughout the semester.*

¹ The epigraph above comes from Geoffrey Whitney's 1586 book, *Choice of Emblemes*.

CORE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COMMONPLACE BOOK PROJECT

- I will not be requiring a specific number of pages or words for this assignment, as I want you to have maximum flexibility in your choice of format. What I *will* ask, however, is that you produce a **minimum of 12 entries** in your final version of the commonplace book. What constitutes an entry is very flexible, especially on digital platforms, and you can run ideas past me at any time.
- In addition to your entries, you should include a **500-word reflection** at the end of your commonplace book. Depending on your chosen format, this might be spoken or otherwise shared via the digital platform you have selected, or it may be submitted as a separate document on BlazeVIEW. This reflection should examine your creative process as well as the purposes of commonplacing. In other words, *I want to know what you have learned from this practice.*
- The final version of your commonplace book needs to be **organized by topic or theme**. That does *not* mean, however, that you must organize it geographically or chronologically as I have with the course syllabus. Keep an eye out for themes that extend beyond such traditional categories.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE COMMONPLACE BOOK PROJECT

- Ideally, you will add something to your commonplace book several times a week, but at minimum **you should add to it at least once a week**. There will be no graded submissions of your work before the end of the semester, but I *will* be asking you to share your progress in a discussion forum at various points throughout the semester to help us collaborate and to keep us accountable.
- It may be helpful for you to **date your quotations and entries** along the way—even if some of that work does not make it into your final version of the commonplace book. Having a sense of *when* you were drawn to a particular passage may be helpful as you reflect on the process.
- Since you will be annotating all of our assigned readings on Perusall, you may want to begin to **develop hashtags** as you annotate that will help you (and your peers) to locate passages that are connected thematically after the fact. Engaging in this practice from the beginning of the semester will help all of us to identify common themes and topics across readings.
- When you are reading, **feel free to doodle** if you are an artist or are visually-minded.
- When you are reading, **consider jotting down how certain passages make you feel** or why you, personally, find them interesting. Reading is an *affective* practice as well as an *intellectual* one.
- You should consider some **informal freewriting** on the topics or themes that matter the most to you. Doing so may provide you with a starting point for some or your micro-essays or, conversely, you may find ways to connect your micro-essays into other texts as you assemble this project.
- **Keep an eye out for images or texts outside of class** that resonate with the various themes or issues that surface as we read these texts. Perhaps you will find your commonplace book allowing you to put our assigned texts in conversation with contemporary concerns, events, or ideas.

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Research has shown that assigning creative projects can shed light on non-academic modes of reading and writing, and can help students to develop their multimodal writing skills. As a non-traditional form of media, the commonplace book project invites you to consider a broad spectrum of narratives, while also promoting rhetorical awareness and self-expression. I have assigned this project to help you engage more deeply with the course content, while still allowing you to take ownership of how you *use* those readings. By taking texts that were circulated orally and in print form, and then remediating those texts by binding them together with others, you will be adapting and repurposing them to shape their meaning in new ways; ideally, you will find yourself deconstructing the relationship between literary form and meaning.