Writing to Learn History: Annotations and Mini-Writes

By Chauncey Monte-Sano

What Is It?

Pre-writing strategies that help students understand content, think historically, and prepare for culminating writing assignments.

Rationale

Typically, essays are written at the end of a history or social studies unit, if they are written at all. This structure misses opportunities to help students engage with the material and learn how to read and write about primary and secondary sources. Integrating writing throughout the curricular unit allows students to grasp the content, learn how to think historically, and practice writing.

In annotating a text, students become active readers, asking and answering historical questions, making connections both to prior knowledge and other texts, and summarizing—all widely endorsed reading comprehension strategies.

Mini-writes give students the chance to think through a topic. Since writing is thinking, a series of mini-writes lets students build their understanding in achievable stages, one document at a time. During this process they become familiar with available evidence and deepen their historical understanding.

Description

Annotating involves highlighting, underlining, and making marginal notes while reading a document. Some students have little experience

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annotating, or focus solely on reading comprehension. In such cases, explicit prompts to consider the source's author, perspective, and historical context can lead to better historical understanding. This may be done through teacher modeling followed by guided and independent practice.

Ideally, informal writing exercises allow students to think through a historical document on their own, on paper. Mini-writes can be assigned at the beginning of class or as homework, and are used throughout the unit to develop student thinking and background knowledge.

Preparation

- Choose a historical question to investigate over the course of a unit. It should be open to interpretation, go beyond summarizing, and be an appropriate focus for a final essay.
- Select documents to help students respond to the unit question.
- Identify aspects of each document that help students understand the document and the larger unit question.
- Create annotation guidelines and mini-write prompts that highlight the aspects of the document that help students understand the document's time period, and key historical actors, events, and issues central to the unit question.
- Arrange students in pairs or groups to work on annotations and exchange mini-writes.

In the Classroom

- Model the best ways to annotate documents.
- Have students annotate individually, in pairs, or in groups.
- Ask students to complete mini-writes independently and then share conclusions with a partner or the entire class.
- Invite students to explain *why* they reached certain conclusions, using excerpts from the documents.

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- Ask students to write a final essay in response to the unit question; if annotations, mini-writes, and final essay are properly aligned, they will serve as scaffolds for the final essay.

Common Pitfalls

- Students may have little experience annotating, i.e., actively thinking with pen in hand. Using an overhead, model how to annotate a document for the purposes of increased historical understanding. Examples of useful annotation include: asking questions and answering them while reading; summarizing passages; considering an author's point of view; analyzing word choices; and making connections between a document and when it was written. Good modeling can display a degree of expertise, while demonstrating that even teachers learn by asking questions and pondering a text.
- In their annotations or mini-writes, students may focus too much on reading comprehension, by defining words or summarizing a document's main idea. However, the point of writing about a document is to understand the author and his or her times. To push students beyond summary, prompt them to consider an author's purpose, the context of the author's life, and their perspective.
- Students who are unsure of how to respond to a document can be helped by highlighting phrases or asking questions like, "What does the author mean when he says this?" or "Why would the author say this?" Breaking a document into components is a more concrete and manageable approach than trying to respond to an entire document. As students become more comfortable with document analysis, increase the challenge by assigning a full page of text or an entire document.
- If students make only vague references to a document in their mini-writes, ask them to cite a particular passage and to explain their interpretation. Teachers can get students into the habit of making specific references to the text by prompting them during a discussion or in written feedback.

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Example:

The Spanish-American War unit from Historical Thinking Matters investigates the question:

Why did the United States invade Cuba in 1898?

To answer this question thoughtfully, students need to consider a range of evidence, multiple causes, and perspectives from the time period. As they analyze documents in writing, students become familiar with the causes of U.S. imperialism in 1898.

Handouts help students to use annotations and mini-writes in responding to three documents that relate to the central inquiry question and lead to an evidence-based essay. Handout 1 models how to annotate a document and offers sample guidelines. Handout 2 provides guidelines for annotating a second document. Handout 3 gives a mini-write prompt in response to an additional document.

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