The Un-Essay, and Teaching in a Time of Monsters

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> "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."
> -Antonio Gramsci, 1919[1]

> "Students are not taking history classes because of the work and effort that goes along with having the history major. A lot of us just aren't as motivated after the pandemic. Therefore, the history major's decline is due to students not wanting to go that extra mile. Becoming a teacher, curator, lawyer etc takes a lot of effort . . . Just to graduate you would need to research and write a thesis. When students hear that they want to run the other way. Also, it is hard to find a job in history. Students tend to get into healthcare because jobs are available. But most importantly, since the pandemic, doing work online is an easy way out and research/writing takes a lot more effort than using chegg for multiple choice answers. History takes a lot of effort to learn and digest so the lack of motivation is most likely the reason for the fall of history. We have options. No offense.
> -Anonymous student, University at Albany-SUNY, 2022[2]

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that people go broke in two ways: "Gradually, then suddenly."[3] His words capture something essential about the nature of change, and teaching history—as a career in higher education—has changed fundamentally during the past decade. After the 2008 recession, students began drifting away from the major, prompting the American Historical Association (AHA) to coordinate a project that articulated the core features of historical study.[4] The discipline then came under fire after 2016, as activists and pundits attacked the profession's commitment to multiculturalism from wildly different standpoints.[5] Then things fell apart in 2020. As the COVID-19 pandemic sent classrooms online, faculty adopted new instructional modalities, and most of us are still picking up the pieces two years later, navigating our students' mental health crises while clamoring for the normalcy we took for granted.

Is the history classroom broken? Are *we* teaching in a time of monsters? The un-essay—the subject of this special issue—resonates in this context. Learning requires motivation, and there is little consensus on how to motivate young people in the current environment. Some authors suggest we should return to the past, replacing online instruction with small in-person classrooms, so every student enjoys a rich emotional relationship with each faculty.[6] Others clamor for flexibility, insisting that faculty should possess the authority to toggle between modalities because the COVID-19 pandemic is not over.[7]

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[1] Quoted by Slavoj Žižek, "A Permanent Economic Emergency," *New Left Review* 64 (2010), available: https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii64/articles/slavoj-zizek-a-permanent-economic-emergency.

[2] Anonymous student survey response, Humanities Connections: Exploring the Past, Reimagining the Future, National Endowment for the Humanities, May 2020, possession of author.

[3] Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner's, 1926).

[4] "Tuning the History Discipline in the United States," *American Historical Association*, available: https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline.

[5] Conor Friedersord, "1776 Honors America's Diversity in a Way 1619 Does Not," *The Atlantic*, 6 January 2020, available: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/inclusive-case-1776-not-1619/604435/; Matt Karp, "History as End," *Harper's Magazine*, 14 June 2021, available: https://harpers.org/archive/2021/07/history-as-end-politics-of-the-past-matthew-karp/.

[6] Johnathan Malesic, "My College Students Are Not Okay," *New York Times*, 13 May 2022, available: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/13/opinion/college-university-remote-pandemic.html.

[7] Sahalie Donaldson and Chelsea Long, "As Covid Cases Break Records, Instructors Are Asking for More Flexibility," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 January 2022, available: https://www.chronicle.com/article/as-covid-cases-break-records-instructors-are-

These arguments make common ground elusive because they pit student wellbeing and public safety against each other, and the un-essay invites a different kind of conversation. By focusing on what happens in the classroom when we implement unorthodox assignments that advance our department's learning objectives, we can put attention squarely on student motivation. We can build common ground. And common ground is necessary because today's undergraduates have an overabundance of options and no shortage of opinions. This essay frames the un-essay as an instrument that constructively engages student cynicism about what we do, and it explores how we might enhance the relationship between effort, understanding, and success in the classroom.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Good courses help students succeed at hard things, and writing about history is exceptionally difficult.[8] On the one hand, students receive different kinds of feedback as they move through our curriculums. Some of us focus on grammar and style; others emphasize organization and logic; others still respond to tone and inference. Reconciling this feedback is not easy. Even the AHA revises the history discipline's core regularly.[9] On the other hand, nonfiction writing is relational. Identifying an answerable question is tricky, as is tracking down relevant sources, but nothing compares to narrative-making, uncovering the beginning, middle, and end of an opaque tale, and then balancing background with action to persuade a reader that your interpretation is correct and distinct. To accomplish this task successfully, students need to converse with archivists, librarians, other authors, and reviewers. And somehow this melee works. If you teach your department's capstone, you surely know the satisfaction of mentoring a young person though the process of writing that dreaded senior thesis.

However, convincing undergraduates to go on this journey is getting harder. Social media has changed how publics interact, and we live in an information environment that downplays many of the principles we teach in the classroom. With a Twitter account, I suspect I could pull together the main points of what you are reading now into posts that receive more readers in a fraction of the time without the back-and-forth of peer review. If the implications are unclear, google the word "un-essay" right now. You will find a blog by historian Cate Denial that attributes the concept's origins to tweets from historian Christopher Jones.[10] This special issue is responding to a conversation on the internet. We are all imbricated in a new normal.

Seeing ourselves in context is important. For many historians, the traditional essay—the bedrock assignment of the history classroom—is a counterweight to unwelcome change. The essay asks the student to substantiate an opinion with well-digested evidence from another time and place, and writing a traditional history paper requires slow-thinking and the close study of documents that evince competing truths—skills in short supply.[11] So, how might the un-essay help historians teach these skills more effectively? How could we leverage the technologies that saturate our everyday lives to build inclusive, interactive learning communities

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asking-for-more-flexibility-in-the-classroom.

[8] For context on good courses, Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs, *How College Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[9] AHA History Tuning Project: 2016 History Discipline Core, *American Historical Association*, available: https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core.

[10] Cate Denial, "The Unessay," *Cate Denial Blog*, 26 April 2019, available: https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/the-unessay/; Christopher Jones, Twitter post, 18 April 2019, available: https://twitter.com/ccjones13/status/854449018272751618?lang=en. Other examples include Jodie Mader, "The Unessay Experiment: Moving Beyond the Traditional Paper," *Faculty Focus* (22 July 2020), available: https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/the-unessay-experiment-moving-beyond-the-traditional-paper/; Cara Ocobock, "The Un-Essay," available: http://sites.nd.edu/cara-ocobock/un-essay/; Hayley Brazier and Heidi Kaufman, "Defining the 'Unessay,'" *DH@UO*, available: https://dh.uoregon.edu/2018/04/02/defining-the-unessay/; Marc Kissel, "The UnEssay," *Marc Kissel's Website*, available: https://marckissel.netlify.app/post/on-the-unessay/.

[11] Mary Lindemann, "Slow History," *The American Historical Review* 126:1 (March 2021), 1-18; Sam Wineburg, Mark Smith, and Joel Breakstone, "What Is Learned in College History Classes?" *Journal of American History* 104 (March 2018), 983-993; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

that motivate our students? In our fast-changing present, how might historians use non-writing assignments to achieve learning objectives better?

What follows are some reflections about my failures in this regard, woven together around the counterintuitive argument that un-essays can help students write better historical papers. Let's jump into the weeds by considering the topic from the inside-out:
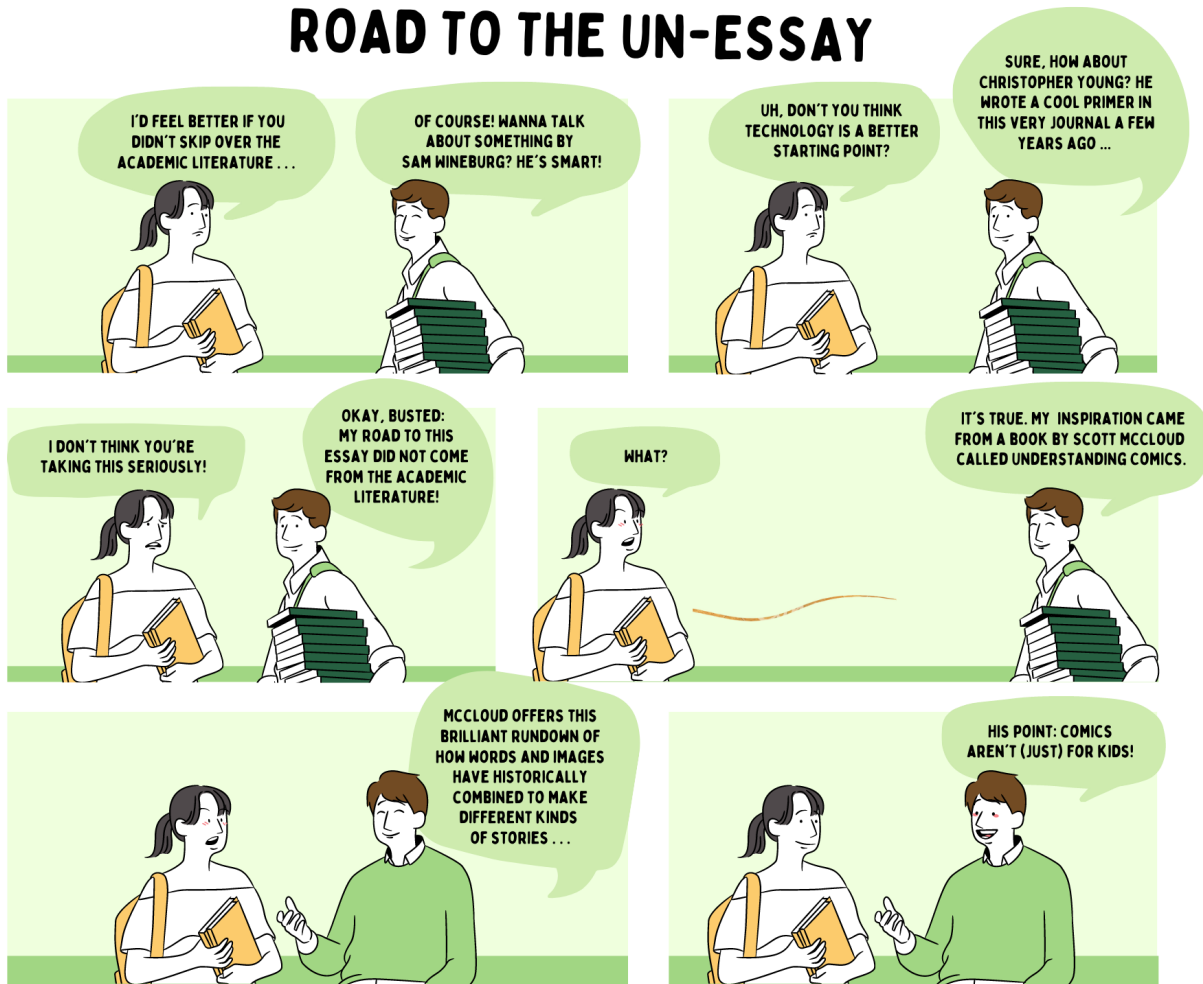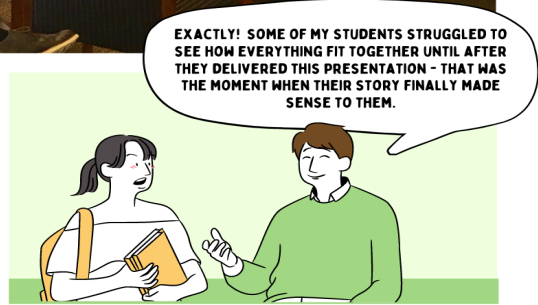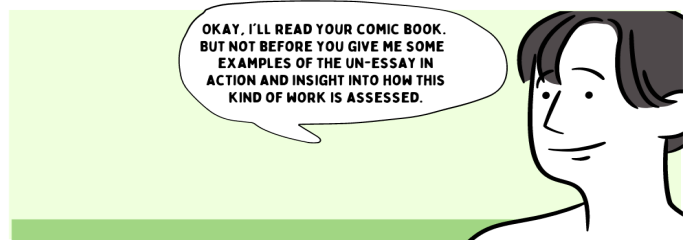
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First, let's define the un-essay. Should anything be out of bounds?

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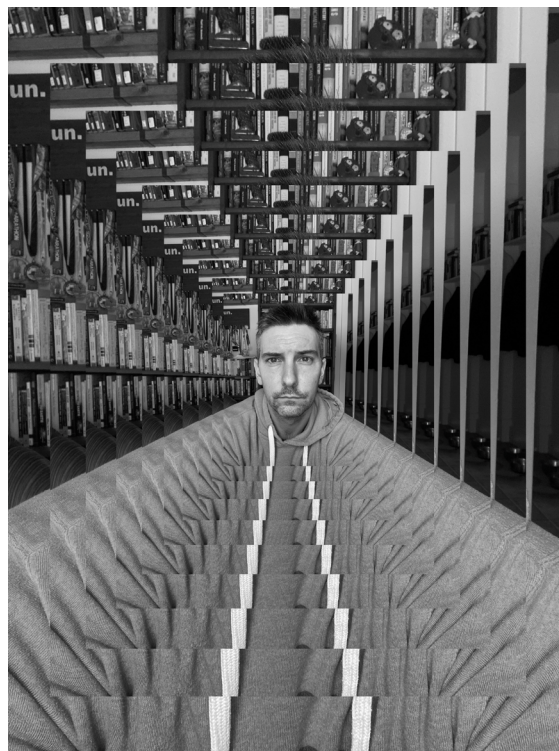
creativity as an end in itself - is not an un-essay. Not in my opinion.

Both assertions above will generate debate, since they contrast vividly with the sentiments in Peter Sullivan's 2015 seminal article on this topic. For Sullivan, the point of an un-essay is that "creativity should be as important as literacy and treated with the same status," a premise that saturates many of the un-essay examples you will uncover with an afternoon of rigorous internet research.[12] My afternoon uncovered quilts, drawings, poems, meals, collages, murals, more meals, and some extraordinary paintings. Everything was interesting to look at and most projects celebrated the author's identity beautifully. Yet I rarely encountered satisfying explanations about how these projects taught learning objectives that aligned with my understanding of the historian's craft. "If a student turns in an unessay," Denial explains, "they have to turn in a three-page reflection on what they

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[12] Peter Sullivan, "The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom," *College Composition and Communication* 67: 1 (September 2015), 6-34.

learned," plus "a bibliography of sources consulted," so that "they cannot simply cook a meal or paint a picture without really thinking through why that better expresses their learning than a paper could."[13] In other words, if the choice can be justified the assignment will be graded.

What if we situated the un-essay in the interstice between the AHA's disciplinary core and a department's learning objectives? Each of us work in different institutional milieus, so the results would vary, but the conversation would change in subtle, important ways. For example, my department's foundational learning objective is argumentation. My colleagues and I want every student to engage critically with secondary sources, pinpointing how authors use evidence to advance arguments that interact with historiographies. Our second objective is information literacy. We want students to find and decipher relevant primary sources using appropriate search tools, so they can answer their own questions with the best information available. Most importantly, we want students to write well-crafted, self-aware narratives, since narrative is essential to the way historians communicate. Learning about another time and place is hard but formulating an original question and answering that question with an argumentative, well-evidenced story is *a lot* harder, and narrative represents the holiest of grails for our majors.[14]

The un-essay can foster artistic creativity, but it can also help students master these objectives faster and better. Since un-essays help students write better, there is no reason to follow Sullivan's lead by characterizing them as creative alternatives to literacy. To the contrary, the un-essay's value arguably arises from the way it teaches craftsmanship and self-awareness, two of the hardest parts of the narrative-making process. When wedded to established learning objectives, un-essays get students to that aforementioned "symposium moment" sooner, folding the eureka into the preparation so that everything comes together before the student crosses the curriculum's finish line.

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Let's talk examples.

Before the pandemic, I taught argumentation with written assessments and low-stakes journaling. These journals never received a letter grade—students either did them or didn't—and my prompts typically worked on three levels. First, the students would read the book's introduction and conclusion. I invited them to riff on the topic under discussion, sharing what they knew already and whether they thought they would like this book, before identifying the author's thesis and explaining a sentence that I lifted from the text. Second, we would dive into the chapters. Each week, I asked the students for a revealing or surprising sentence from the chapter under discussion. I would also give them a line or two to explain. But most importantly, I would invite them to analyze each chapter's title, so they were ready to talk together about how the book's narrative was advancing the thesis from the introduction. Finally, I would nudge the students toward higher-level thinking with freeform questions like, "How'd you describe *this* character to a friend over a beer?" Or "Does the book prove that *this* idea was always doomed?" Or "What will you *remember* about this story in a month?" When taken together, these prompts walked the students through the process of gutting a book.

This assignment had a lot of problems. Since the students were writing for an audience of one, their prose was often atrocious. For reasons I cannot explain, they sometimes wrote things they would never articulate in front of classmates—weird things. Less mysterious was the fact that everyone expected reciprocal recognition because these journal entries took time to complete, and I was too busy to respond to forty-eight journal entries every week. So, I swapped journals for Flipgrid during the pandemic. Although the prompts stayed the same,

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[13] Denial, "The Unessay."

[14] As context, the University at Albany-SUNY is an R1 public university that enrolls just under 18,000 students, accepting approximately 57% of undergraduate applicants and graduating approximately 65% of each class. Because of reforms to the SUNY system, half of our undergraduate population transfers from one of the SUNY system's community colleges, so many of our students arrive as juniors with credit from other institutions. For additional information: https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=SUNY+Albany&s=all&id=196060.

the assignment changed because words no longer existed on the page. Since everyone could see everything everybody else had to say, the exercise became more dialogic. Some students who participated reluctantly in the actual classroom flowered on Flipgrid, and my high-performing students became co-teachers by modeling top-notch answers to their classmates, a dynamic I could quantify by tracking student views, since eyeballs gravitated toward the most thoughtful posts.[15]
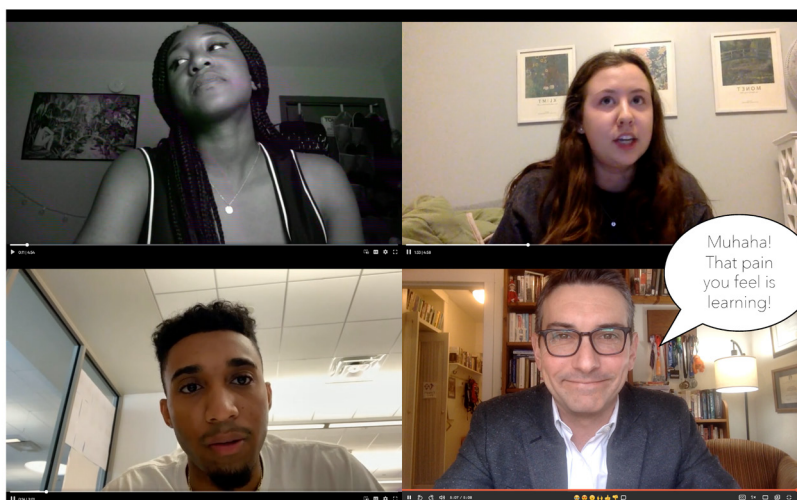
A handful of students tried to game the system, emulating their peers without reading the book, yet they still went through the motions on my terms, learning how the book's chapters advanced the author's argument. The performance motivated them in ways the journals had not. Best of all, for extra credit, the students engaged each other's posts, so the exercise evolved as the semester went on. The students not only expressed themselves naturally; they started listening to each other. And since our university had a mask mandate until April 2022, Flipgrid became the one place we could see each other's faces.

What happened next? The grades went up because the students wrote smarter papers. These preparatory videos—my first example of the un-essay in action—culminated in a reflective essay about the book's argument, which everyone understood because of this monthlong asynchronous conversation about the author's choices. Our conversation accentuated the relational nature of nonfiction writing, and the graded assignment asked the students to explain whether they accepted the book's argument. They had to engage the rival position respectfully and thoroughly before justifying their argument with well-considered evidence from the book and our supplementary reading material about the topic.[16] In this respect, the un-essay was not an alternative to writing so much as a tool to teach argumentation without the written word, fostering comprehension by making the learning process public. Honestly, these videos were like TikTok—and the students got farther faster by thinking together.

The point cuts deep. When my students arrive in my classroom, they often assume that history is a jumble of names and events to be memorized and regurgitated. Argumentation introduces the past as narrative, pushing them to recognize that historians organize stories around interpretations. Once an author's hand is visible, the student can trace narrative-making on the page to determine how the author is choreographing information to prove a thesis. These videos chop that process into small, doable steps, and for everyone involved, Flipgrid

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[15] Tim Green, Erin Besser, Loretta Donovan, "More than Amplifying Voice and Providing Choice: Educator Perceptions of Flipgrid Use in the Classroom," *TechTrends* 65:5 (July 2021), 785-795.

[16] For context, Samuel Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Rita Luís and Chrysi Rapanta, "Towards (Re-)Defining Historical Reasoning Competence: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Research," *Educational Research Review* 11 (November 2020), 1003-36.

became an interactive, visually dynamic supplement to our class work.

Here's a screenshot of a typical prompt:

February 25

6 responses • 15 views • 0 comments • 1.7 hours of discussion

Let's talk about how to "gut" a book. The key is engagement. You must find the thesis, explain the hierarchy of ideas, and grab hold of the main message. Let's practice:

Black Earth's intro is entitled Hitler's world. According to Snyder, how did Hitler see the world? Pick a sentence that provoked you and defend your pick. Here's mine: "Equating nature and politics abolished not only political but also scientific thought." What's Snyder saying here?

Let's jump to the conclusion. Did the conclusion change your understanding of Snyder's argument? Find a sentence that provokes you, justify your pick, and explain mine: "By combining what seemed like the pattern of the past (racial empire) with what seemed like a summons from the future (ecological panic), Nazi thinking closed the safety valves of contemplation and foresight. *If the past and future contained nothing but struggle and scarcity, all attention fell upon the present.*"

What's Snyder telling us?

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If video journals are a fun way to teach argumentation, podcasts can do something similar for information literacy. In my classes about historical methodology, I have always asked students to write papers about a research project they would write if our class asked them to write a research paper, which it does not. When everything was open and accessible, we would spend weeks together in the library, working with our university's research librarian to master the search tools that historians use to locate appropriate articles, books, and primary sources. Then the students would formulate a question, situate that question into a historiography, and organize a preliminary archive into an annotated bibliography using a software program called Zotero.[17] But the paper would always remain unwritten because the assignment was not about writing—it taught information literacy.

The main point was not hard to grasp. Because Google is ubiquitous, some students assume that research is as straightforward as entering a keyword into a web browser, and this assignment scuttled that mindset by reintroducing the internet as a mélange of overlapping archived information. After highlighting the importance of offline repositories, we would explore the efficacy of different search methods and apply the lessons in this non-paper paper that doubled as a testimonial about each person's journey.[18]

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[17] Jason Pucket, *Zotero: A Guide for Librarians, Researchers, and Educators* (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017).

[18] Samuel Wineberg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018); Eric Schmidt, *Google: How Google Works* (New York, Grand Central Publishing, 2014).

Every paragraph of this assignment had a distinct job. In one section, the students described their questions and claims, explaining what the proposed topic revealed about them and their interests. In another section, they would talk about the ups-and-downs of their adventure, answering specific questions about how their keywords and search tools uncovered different kinds of information—and how these sources adjusted the project's ambitions. The third section would probe the relevance of this material to the original question and walk everyone through a revision process that culled the bibliography and updated the project's assumptions. Finally, the students explained how they would write the paper if they had to write the paper: How might they wrangle these sources into a narrative? What would come first, second, and third in a 20- or 30-page paper— and why? Had they uncovered any "smoking gun" evidence or were they reading along the "archival grain"? What had they learned from the process—and what might the biggest challenge be if they turned this project into their capstone?

Until I discovered podcasting, I thought this assignment was decent. Things only ever fell apart at the end when the students presented their findings to each other. Year after year—irrespective of my instructions—they would use these presentations to talk about what they now knew instead of sharing their reflections about the research process, which was predictable since they experienced their burgeoning expertise as the acquisition of once unknown information. Their technical skills felt banal once acquired and talking publicly about the process instead of the outcome invited a vulnerability that felt insincere because the project ended triumphantly. Understandably, most students wanted to finish the project with a performance. Who am I to blow against the wind?

Enter the podcast. Removing the stage became the solution, and podcasting was a tool that accentuated the exercise's true intentions, offering an intimate space where student "pods" cogitated together about their discoveries and growth. Basically, I made the preparatory work more interactive and ditched the final presentation. Instead of journaling about each of the non-paper's four sections, the students recorded podcast episodes that tackled these tasks collaboratively, which made their research experience more conversational. The first episode was called, "Who are You, Why Should I Care, and What Do You Have to Say?" The second episode became "The Quest: Tools vs. Keywords," and the third and fourth episodes were "The Road Behind" and "The Road Ahead." The students received discussion questions before each episode, but they had to choreograph the conversation beforehand, and a different pod-member played host each week. From there, they simply had to record their conversations on their smartphones in a quiet place at their leisure. Like those Flipgrid videos, these podcasts were graded by submission and shared with the class.

Like clockwork, the grades got better because the quality improved. The conversations were not groupwork in the traditional sense; they were a forum to think collectively about individual labor. Every student still had to submit that un-paper (about that unwritten research paper) at the end of the semester. Yet they started to put more work into the preparatory steps, presumably because they did not want to sound foolish in these recorded conversations with each other, offering a delightfully subtle lesson about the power of peer pressure. As the project unfolded, each episode dramatized the connection between effort and learning—some of them started narrating my talking points from a position of belief—and the experience enhanced their self-esteem by establishing a community around a once solitary journey. The students still struggled to meet my standards, but the podcast invited them to toil together playfully. Best of all, the low-stakes nature of these routinized conversations equipped them with a richer vocabulary to talk about the historian's craft, and the discussions convinced many students that they indeed possessed very special skills.

Podcasting is a second example of an un-essay in action. Again, this assignment was not a creative alternative to writing, nor did it displace any of my department's established learning objectives. This assignment merely used a technology that saturates today's information environment to teach something familiar better, motivating students by putting peer relationships at the center of the research process. And recording a podcast is child's play in the sense that my ten-year-old daughter literally taught me how to do it. My students required zero instruction—everything was completed with the smartphones in their pockets.

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So, I hope I have sold you on the premise that the un-essay can teach argumentation and information literacy. But what about narrative? Narrative is like the holy grail in my instructional universe—mysterious, elusive, important—and I am rather bad at teaching it. I know how to explain the fundamentals to a young person. Every story needs an arc, I'll say, and each part of a story must fit into a causal chain that carries the reader from Point A to Point B without too much fuss. Good stories need plots too, a point I try to bring to life with snippets from Hayden White's *Metahistory*, plus lively sentences that break as few grammatical rules as possible.[19] From the front of the classroom, narrative sounds straightforward to me, yet the breakdown follows when I stop talking and they start writing. As their sentences merge one into another, the missing links in their causal chains become more apparent, exposing problems that can only be resolved with research and reflection.

Earlier, I mentioned that my relationship to the un-essay began at my department's annual undergraduate research symposium, when I realized that my students resolved *some* of these problems when they turned their papers into lectures. This process made each link in their story's chain into a visual slide, and the act of moving the written word to a multimedia presentation helped some students think anew about the way each part of their story fit together. Unspectacular on the surface, this insight led me to think more critically about comic books, since they exist at the interface between word and images. As artist Scott McCloud explains,

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[19] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

two things happen simultaneously on the page of any given comic. First, the author moves the reader through ordered space time. Each panel exists in planned succession, and the author devotes considerable attention to the sequence of ideas and the reader's eye movement over the page. Second, the author harmonizes two icons—the word and the picture—by varying the imagery within each panel to control the flow of the story. Just as body language affects a reader's understanding of a sentence, a close-up embellishes an important point and a panorama changes its implications.[20] If the distinctions are unclear, flip back a few pages, and you can see how my own comic harmonizes words and pictures differently using these techniques.

My comic is not very good, but thankfully the point is not very complex: Comics create clarity through abstraction. Abstractions help authors think anew about the way readers experience their stories. Therefore, moving students from one medium to another—asking them to toggle from words to pictures and back—encourages them to be self-reflective about the craft of narrative-making.[21] If I were teaching this point to students, I might start with three versions of this essay's comic, varying small details to foster discussion. For example, why is the male character wearing a sweater on the bottom of page one—and where did he put his books? If that character had a different facial expression in the final panel on that page, would the transition to the next page be more dynamic? Why is the second page more interesting than the first? Once the conversation begins, folding the lessons into a discussion about written narrative is essential. Everybody drops a metaphorical sweater into their writing and stumbles through an imperfect transition, so my students and I will identify our missteps by revisiting something we've written. The comic's second page pops because the dialogue unfolds against a backdrop of images that enrich the points under discussion, and all narratives create dialogue between action and context. My students and I will find spots where that balance is off and add action/context as necessary. From my lectern, I bellow about all this and more—barking dirges about revision—but visualizing these principles helps many students understand what these ideas mean. Abstraction unlocks the seemingly mundane secrets of narrative-creation.

That said, teaching off comics is better than teaching through them. CanvaPro is a fine tool, but it is expensive and drawing is an unnatural act for most of us. Multimedia lectures make it easier to apply these insights, since they are more familiar and less costly.[22] For example, in my pre-McCloud days, if I were explaining a topic like John Tyler's foreign policy, I would probably use Tyler's face as background as I talked about his worldview, letting the students sort out the relationship between my words and Tyler's visage. Post-McCloud, this same presentation would weave together the visual and auditory experiences, using more slides to keep every student in the same instructional present.

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[20] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Mark Martin, 1993).

[21] Trevor Getz, "Getting Serious about Comic History," *American Historical Review* 123:5 (2018), 1595-97; Alicia Decker and Mauricio Castro, "Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel," *The History Teacher* 45:2 (2012), 169-187; Nicholas J. Aieta, "Teaching History through Comic Books," *Magazine of History* 24:3 (2010), 1-5; Ian Gordon, "Let Us Not Call Them Graphic Novels: Comic Books as Biography and History," *Radical History Review* 106 (Winter 2010), 185-192.

[22] An alternative approach is to assign something from Oxford University Press's Graphic History series, which is almost up to ten books. They're all superb and my personal favorite is Trevor Getz and Liz Clarke, *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Basically, thinking like a comic artist means you use movement and harmony to control the pace of comprehension. If you glance at the six slides above, the fragmented background imagery gives visual form to an argument about American political sectionalism in the 1840s. The word bubbles are akin to topic sentences in paragraphs of exposition and each slide roots the viewer in sequential space time. The presentation still is not perfect, but more students leave the lesson with a better understanding of Tyler's foreign policy.

Did Tyler just become this essay's metaphorical sweater? The point is that creating a comic book is hard—because the payoff is not apparent—but making a multimedia lecture is as simple as recording your voice over PowerPoint—and it is this essay's third example of the un-essay in action. In each of my foreign policy classes, students receive four weeks to prep the final lecture of the course. They select a topic and ask a question, and then annotate a bibliography and settle on a thesis. Together, we study comic composition, introducing the lessons I just explained, and since my lectures are recorded now, the students critique their favorite, pinpointing the question, argument, evidence, and causal chain.[23] Then they apply the takeaways in their own fifteen-minute recorded multimedia lecture. These presentations go live as the semester ends, and the final exam is a Flipgrid video, where each student analyzes three peer presentations and reflects on the lessons they learned that semester.

What does this assignment do? Well, my goal is to relocate that eureka moment from our symposium to a random class about foreign policy midway through the student's journey across the curriculum, and my hope is that this seed grows into a top-notch capstone project someday. Admittedly, everything gets harder when primary sources replace secondary sources on the bibliography, but that is likely another professor's problem. For now, the students learn something about narrative.

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In these past few pages, I have reconsidered the common premise that un-essays are creative alternatives to prose communication. Un-essays teach writing better by enriching the goals that anchor the historian's craft, and they can motivate students by disaggregating the learning process into small, doable steps that do not require extensive preexisting skills, thereby establishing a 1:1:1 bond between effort, learning, and success. Routinized low stakes assignments—the un-essay in action—squeezes instructional potential from commonplace technologies like TikTok, podcasts, and YouTube.[24] Historians often lament social media for

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[23] On composition and SoTL, J.M. Anderson, "Speak That I May See Thee, or the Elements of Effective Lecturing," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 36:2 (Fall 2011), 59-69; Richard Hughes, "New Guidelines for SoTL in History: A Discipline Considers the SoTL Turn?" *ibid.* 44:2 (Fall 2019), 34-43; Peter Burkholder, "Teaching Historical Literacy within a SOTL Framework," *ibid.*, 44-50.
[24] On low stakes assignments, see Mary Snyder Broussard, *Reading, Research, and Writing: Teaching Information Literacy with*

promoting distraction and disinformation. However, when used purposefully—when leveraged to teach argument, research, and narrative—these tools can also build inclusive, interactive learning communities that give young people more access points into our courses and help them build stronger relationships with their peers. Students have more options than ever before and they possess opinions about the appropriateness of coursework, and the best way to combat their occasional cynicism is to assure that they succeed—and find meaning in their triumph.[25]

On this point, the un-essay can enhance our effectiveness as teachers. Each of my examples generate an overabundance of measurable data to track student learning, and if you're inclined, you can use preparatory assignments to adjust your explicit instruction as the semester unfolds, closing comprehension gaps to build student capacity. If a class misses an essential point about a book or article, low stakes work can spot the problem, which you can address in the classroom, and if your students fall behind, you can pull them back into a course with personalized interventions. Moreover, giving students the space to work through their ideas informally—inviting them to learn together before committing their thoughts to paper—almost always leads to superior outcomes. And none of these low-stakes assignments require long hours of additional grading; they merely diversify the way students interact with a course.[26]

Pedagogically, the un-essay swaps compliance for engagement by using technology to create student-centered environments. If you believe that people learn when you criticize them, most of these exercises will feel pointless. But in my experience, affirmation and interaction generate student motivation. When the labor is public and collaborative, and everyone is asked to aspire toward common standards together, the resulting classroom can crackle with enthusiasm and humanity. Hopefully, I have stirred the pot enough to pique your interest in the un-essay's upside. We may live in a time of monsters—to borrow Gramsci's words—but there is no point howling at the wind. To repurpose another Hemingway quote, teaching history is hard, but "[we are] not made for defeat."[27]

Process-Based Research Assignments (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017); Jacqueline Herman and April Kerby-Helm, "Question of the Week: Can a Low-Stakes Assignment Improve Students' Attitudes?" *Journal of Statistics and Data Science Education* 30:1 (January 2022), 39-44.

[25] On the learning process, see Joshua Eyler, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018).

[26] On assessment, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice,* 5:1 (1998), 7–74; Maureen Murphy Nutting, "Correcting the Course: The Assessment Loop," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 33 (September 2008); Anne Hyde, "Five Reasons History Professors Suck at Assessment," *Journal of American History* 103 (March 2016), 1104–7; Gary Kroll, Jessamyn Neuhaus, and Wendy Gordon, "Slouching toward Student-Centered Assessment," *ibid.*, 1108-22; Jeffrey McClurken and Krystyn Moon, "Making Assessment Work for You," *ibid.*, 1123–31; James Grossman and Julia Brookins, "Assessment Is What We Make of It," *ibid.*, 1132–57.

[27] Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Scribner's, 1952).