

THE NEW YORK TIMES ASSIGNMENT

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Sometimes teachers develop favorite assignments that they use regularly in any number of their courses.¹ I have used and still use “*The New York Times Assignment*” in every history class I have taught since graduate school, whether at the college or high school level. This is probably the assignment I have changed the least, and it is certainly the most consistent assignment in my collection, because it continues both to be effective in accomplishing the three main objectives that I have for it, and because student feedback on the assignment, at all levels, has been consistently positive.

The Assignment

“*The New York Times Assignment*” is a simple yet powerful tool that I use to help students accomplish the three major goals that I have set for all of my history courses: to help students make sense of what they are learning, to realize the importance of historical study, and to develop the critical thinking skills of the historian. The assignment is as follows: Find a current news article that is connected to something we have discussed in class. Cut out or print the article, write a one-paragraph summary of the article, and write a one-paragraph explanation of how the subject matter illustrates one of the topics or ideas we have discussed in our class. For some classes, I’ll add a third paragraph, explaining how the article illustrates as well one of the major themes of our course. As will become clear—or less clear—below, what I mean by “something we have discussed in class” is open to interpretation. Naturally, depending on the nature of the course and of the students, I modify the assignment to be more or less specific as needed. Otherwise, you now have the gist of it.

The Objectives

I have three basic objectives for “*The New York Times Assignment*” that I announce to my students. (Were my syllabi already not too long, I would include these objectives there as well.) One purpose of the assignment is, frankly, to have an easy grade available. Although, particularly in the classes I teach to adults, it turns out to be far more difficult for them than it sounds, this assignment that recurs throughout the semester offers a relatively painless opportunity to earn a good grade. This buffers the

¹Before I describe “*The New York Times Assignment*,” I must give credit to Professor Tom Schwartz of Vanderbilt University for this idea. I learned of this assignment quite a few years ago as his Teaching Assistant, and have modified it since. Professor Schwartz required the use of *The New York Times* for this assignment, thus its name, although I no longer make that requirement of my students.

blows of the quizzes, tests, and other written assessments that prove, by design, far more difficult. A second intent of the assignment is to encourage students to stay abreast of the news. This is especially important for adult students, because I find on the whole that frequently they are not, in fact, avid readers of current news sources. Third and most important, the assignment serves as a way to move our class "outside the box," that is to say outside of our classroom during the time our class is designated to meet. I really work hard through this assignment and other techniques to get students to think about history, and particularly what they are learning in my history class, at some time other than when they are sitting in class with me. "The New York Times Assignment" is an effective way of doing this. If students do read the newspaper regularly, this assignment encourages them to think more carefully about what they are reading, as now they are searching for parallels to what they have studied in their history class. In any case, the assignment encourages students to take what they are thinking about in their history class and discover contemporary comparisons. Either way, I think, "The New York Times Assignment" helps history become not just something that happens "at school" or "in the textbook," but rather something both in the past and in the present.

The Connections

When I say "something we have discussed in our course," I do intend to be quite vague, because I want students to think big and I also want to give them the chance to think creatively. Too often, students will be very literal in their connections: We discuss "middle passage" and they will choose an article on the restoration of the ship *Amistad*. This is on the mark, but a bit simplistic. I want to press students to think bigger. I explain to students, for instance, that the obituary of a Florida governor whom we have discussed just is not a very interesting connection, despite its intimate connection to our course, whereas the obituary of a lesser known Floridian whose life illustrated the ideas, say, of agricultural development and the struggle for racial equality that we explored is a much more stimulating and, I think, rewarding connection. Other students, and this is what I most hope for, are wider ranging in their selections and their thinking. One student last year, for example, connected our discussion of the feudal labor system in Japan with an article detailing the lives of local migrant workers. The student noted specific similarities in living conditions, debtor status, and so forth, but pointed out as well dissimilarities such as government regulations of the work environment (perhaps *de jure* rather than *de facto*) and the mechanization involved in the process of farming. In this way, the student came to understand some universals of the human condition, with respect to labor and power, but at the same time the student got a richer understanding of both Japanese history and of the local community.

Occasionally, students become creative—and sometimes it works. One example that comes to mind is the student who submitted a weather map of Europe. At first, I thought the student was trying to demonstrate some sort of loophole in the assignment

or thwart my purposes. In fact, it turned out that the assignment was done very well. In that particular class, we had spent a great deal of time discussing the D-Day invasion. (It was a summer class, just when the movie *Saving Private Ryan* debuted—we went to see the movie as a class.) Coincidentally, some time not long after that discussion, the weather pattern in Europe was remarkably similar to the weather that was a contributing factor in making the preparations for the D-Day landing so difficult. The student crafted a thoughtful and lengthy discussion of the weather, the landing at Normandy, and how weather today in that region might or may not cause problems for military or civilian activities. It was a pretty cool connection. It is always nice to see students go out on a limb to perhaps “stretch” their connections.

Other creative connections that occur with some regularity are advertisements, following the installments on advertising in the Gilded Age and the 1920s that are a part of my U.S. survey course. Still it is important to stress to students that they must be explicit in the explanation of the connections they see. It is not uncommon for students to submit the assignment and leave me to figure out what connection they are trying to make (see “Assessment” below). Thus, the breadth of connections tends to vary—from the obvious and simplistic to those that are much more interesting, thorough, and imaginative.

Variations

I use several variations of “*The New York Times Assignment*” depending on the class and the aptitude of the students. In my high school Advanced Placement classes, the assignment is generally part of a substantial collection of written work, due four times per semester. In each case, students are confined to the period covered by that piece of writing. For example, in AP World History, when the large writing assignment is a series of primary source readings and responses on the period 500 BCE to 500 CE, students must find a news article that they can relate to something from that period. Sometimes from the beginning or sometimes only after the first couple of assignments in a course, I will add a third paragraph to the assignment to focus on themes, in addition to the article summary and the connection in our class. The third paragraph, in the case of AP World History, will ask students to describe how the article also illustrates one or both of the two major themes we have in our course: contact & exchange and identity.

In my History of Florida class, the title of the assignment changes to “The ‘Florida in the News’ Assignment” and the themes are geography and diversity. Similarly, in U.S. history courses, I might ask for a third paragraph connecting not only to a specific subject or idea we have discussed, but also to one of the “five themes” I identify as crucial for understanding the story of America: sectionalism, the context of class, the heterogeneity of Americans, American exceptionalism, and the role of morality in American life. These themes are recurrent throughout each of my American history courses, and I expect students to wrestle with them throughout the course.

Including this third paragraph helps students develop definitions of these themes and better understand them and their value in both historical and contemporary contexts.

With adult students, I have found that requiring more than this or limiting what they can discuss by time period (or by week of the course) is too challenging. I would like to require my History of Florida students to select articles only from the local or state section of the *Miami Herald*, but they have struggled too much to see connections in this limited number of stories. As of yet, I have not developed a modification that will both focus the assignment a bit more and make this more doable for them. Additionally, because my adult classes only meet eight times in total, there is not time to develop this practice with them. Perhaps with more time and therefore a larger number of assignments, by the end of the course I would be able to make the assignment a bit more specific. Thus, I leave the assignment open for them; literally they can find an article that is connected to anything we have discussed in the course, from the beginning to the end, so the assignment essentially gets easier as the course progresses.

With my high school students—who admittedly are a bright lot—I can make them focus a bit more. In fact, the assignment can be modified easily to match the abilities of most students. So, with my Latin American Studies students for example, they are required to hand in “*The New York Times* Assignment” weekly, but they are restricted to news articles specifically about Latin American life or affairs and to connections to ideas we are discussing in class in the current week. This increased specificity forces them both to be more careful and thoughtful about what they choose, but also to develop more sophisticated and deep explications. This also discourages repetition of the same idea by one student over and over, as sometimes happens in more open-ended assignments. The more specific requirements of the Latin American Studies assignment is also my way of forcing students to keep up with current events—by making them read relevant news stories at least for the purposes of this assignment—in the region that we are studying, which is an important aspect of our course.

Problems

I have encountered only a few significant problems with this assignment, primarily with students who were not already regular readers of a newspaper or other news sources. For these students, there were flaws in the assignment’s instructions that I have now remedied. The first problem is that for quite a while, rather than demanding that students use *The New York Times*, I allowed them to use any “news source.” I explained that this could be our local *Miami Herald* or *The New York Times*, but could just as well be *Newsweek* or CNN on-line. I explained just as clearly, so I thought, that *Seventeen* and *US Weekly* were not “news sources” for the purposes of this assignment. I thought some flexibility would be good, and would allow students to continue relying on whatever source was theirs for the news. What I found out in some classes, however, was that students had no source that they relied on for news. Rather they did

not consume the news at all. Moreover, I found out that many students did not understand the distinction I made between *The New York Times* and *Seventeen* or between CNN on-line and Wikipedia. I similarly found out that students did not understand the notion of “news” as they gave me articles not only from Wikipedia and the like, but also from websites that were neither reporting the news nor providing information for any general education purpose (i.e. trade websites, pages from books, journal articles, etc.).

This leads to a second problem. How, you can ask, would one come up with a connection from a book or journal article for this assignment? Simple enough, I found out. A number of students did not embrace the assignment as intended, that is read the newspaper—or a preferred “news source”—and come upon a connection to our class. Rather they simply did a Google search for “Florida” or “Teddy Roosevelt” and, as students often do, printed out whatever was high on the hit list and short in length. They gave little consideration to whether or not what they were using was “news” much less to the objectives of the assignment. Some provided articles from legitimate news sources, but ones they obviously did not read regularly. Living in Florida, I do not expect that a student giving me an article for this assignment from the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans finds that newspaper to be his preferred “news source.” Others provided articles that they clearly had not read during the time of our class, citing articles dated years before our class, for example. This again led me to realize that students were simply doing Internet searches to find their articles rather than reading the newspaper. The solutions here were obvious: Restrict the definition of “news source” to a newspaper (either print or on-line) and insist that the news article be current. This latter requirement might vary some depending on the intervals of the assignment. For classes that submit the assignment only a few times in a semester, I require that each article be dated since the last assignment was due; for classes that submit the assignment on a weekly basis, I require that articles be dated within two weeks of the date they are submitted to me with the assignment. I am sure there are still students who use the search technique, but I hope the restrictions at least make that technique more difficult, and, if nothing else, require them to do a bit of reading of news sources within their searches such that they are at least approaching the fulfillment of the objectives of the assignment.

The other problem has been defining “connection.” In some courses—and again this tends to be the case more often with adult students than with high school or traditional college students—it simply takes time for students to understand that the main purpose of the assignment is not to find a story in the newspaper and merely explain that they personally find the story to be a compelling one. One student in my History of Florida class, for example, when asking me why she had received such a low grade on a particular assignment, had cut out and summarized an article on dogs. She had done nothing in her written piece to connect the article to our course, nor was there, as far as I could tell, anything in the article that could be related to our course (we had never discussed dogs or pets of any kind). When I explained this to her, she was

distraught because she insisted that the article was “interesting” and I was simply giving her a low grade because I clearly did not like dogs. Certainly, one objective of the assignment is to encourage students to follow the news, but more than simply following the news is required.

More frequently, though, students at least attempt to make the connection. The question then becomes, what is a “good” connection? Or at least, what is a connection that will be rewarded with a high score on the assignment? It is enough, for example, having discussed slavery in class, to select and write on a news article about slavery, perhaps a travel article on historic plantations or on the *Amistad* as a historical relic. Admittedly, there is some subjectivity to the assessment of this assignment. I hope that my assessment rubric (see below) addresses some of this. I try to encourage students to develop their ideas as fully and richly as possible and tell them that just seeing the same words that we have talked about is probably not a sufficient connection—or at least not one that is going to earn the highest possible score on the assignment. Sometimes, though, the connection is there and is developed specifically, and I must reward the student with a grade that is probably not consistent with the effort put into the assignment. I guess I haven’t figured out the answer to this dilemma yet—that is, a way to define “connection” such that students must think beyond simply first-level similarities.

Assessment

The grading rubric for “*The New York Times* Assignment” for my “America in the Twentieth Century” class follows. This class, offered in the School of Adult and Continuing Education at a local university, meets only eight times (once per week for four hours). The assignment is due at each of the seven class meetings after the first:

Grading Rubric (possible 10 points)

The key to earning full credit on this assignment is to be sure that you *make a connection between the content of the article you have selected and something we have discussed in our class and that you explain how the article illustrates one of the five themes!*

- 5 points: You turned something in, but it was not thoughtful and did not do what the assignment asked at all.
- 6 points: You turned something in, but it was not thoughtful and did not do what the assignment asked at all or barely did these things, but I was in a good mood.
- 7 points: You summarized the article you selected, but did not attempt to relate it to our class or a theme, or did so in a very superficial and remote manner.

- 8 points: You summarized the article and attempted to relate it to our class and/or a theme, but did so poorly, or made a connection only to either something we discussed in our class or to a theme, but did not do both.
- 9 points: You summarized the article and did a decent job of relating it to our class and a theme.
- 10 points: Well done! Very thoughtful!

Response and Feedback

The response of the students to the assignment has been good. For the most part, I think at all levels my students enjoy doing the assignment, and once they embrace the goals I have laid out for them, it seems that they appreciate what I am trying to accomplish. For some students, I think, it is a game of sorts that is fun, that is to “find the connection” in the newspaper. Other students genuinely value the course more, it appears, because they are in fact able—by force at first but soon much more eagerly—to take our course “outside the box” and in fact into their everyday world. They clearly appreciate the ideas we are thinking about, talking about, and struggling with everyday. And I think they find interesting the ways that differences in time and place make grappling with those ideas different for people in different eras and settings. In this respect, the assignment really does help to demystify history as some inaccessible list of names and dates and make it into an inquiry into the life and times of people just like us (or, we might learn, just like us, but not quite).

Some students have noted that, having found contemporary parallels, they are better able—through comparing and contrasting—to understand issues in the past that were at first somewhat fleeting. For this reason, it is not uncommon for me to ask one or two students to volunteer to share their articles and connections with class on the day they are due. This activity frequently results in good discussions and often evokes further connections from other students. It is not uncommon for students to say “I wouldn’t have thought of it that way until now” once they are enlightened to a contemporary comparison or, just as important, contrast. The best discussions, in fact, are probably those when one student presents a news article and points out the many similarities to what we have studied and another student responds with “but those really aren’t similar at all because....” Sometimes the discussion becomes too focused on exclusively contemporary events, so when time or adherence to the syllabus is a factor, use caution when opening up this assignment for discussion.

For other students, the benefits of this assignment are that they come to realize the importance and pleasure of reading a daily newspaper and keeping abreast of the news in their world, country, state, and community. It would be difficult to count how many students have told me at the conclusion of the class that “one of the best things about your class is that I never really read the newspaper before, and now I read it everyday. And I’ll keep doing it!” This might not be the primary purpose of a history class, but if I can get students more engaged and more interested in reading in the first

instance and in their world on the other hand, I will count that as a positive accomplishment of the course.

Results and Reflections

Although some historians might cringe, I think the assignment helps high school and undergraduate students realize the importance or at least the value of knowing history. Of course, I am not hoping that students will come to learn that "history repeats itself," and admittedly that is a danger of this assignment that I must be careful to address. But, at the same time, there are many conditions, topics, themes, and ideas that arise in the historical record that continue to be a part of the human experience. By noting both points of comparison and contrast, students become both more invested in their study of the past and more curious about the present. I have also noticed that over time students become more careful and more creative readers. Especially when connections are shared in class, and thus the range of possibilities are revealed to everyone, students seem to accept the challenge of trying to draw connections that are less than obvious. When they do this, and consequently develop more sophisticated and analytical ideas about their chosen article and the issues we are studying, they reveal a much more precise and thoughtful reading of, in this case, the newspaper. But I can't help but think that this task helps them become more critical readers.

In a small way, "*The New York Times Assignment*" does all of the things a good history course should do. It offers students a venue to develop as critical readers and a venue through which to develop as articulate writers. It encourages them to think critically and to see history as something that requires interpretation, synthesis, and creativity, not merely memorization. "*The New York Times Assignment*" reveals that sources for historical information might be texts other than those assigned for class, and that historical understanding goes well beyond lists of facts. Not unlike the journal assignments that are common in history classes, "*The New York Times Assignment*" is complex enough to be valuable, yet simple enough to be assigned on a regular basis without placing an excessive burden on students. It forces them consistently to reflect on—and write about—what they are studying in a way that is not totally abstract to them, again without the burden that comes with studying for a test or quiz or preparing a lengthy essay. Naturally, the assignment is not perfect, and clearly I have made many minor modifications over the years. Yet, "*The New York Times Assignment*" has been a venerable and valuable part of my classes throughout my entire teaching career and will, I suspect, continue to be in my syllabi for years to come.