

Material Culture Writing Assignment

On the first day of class, after our introductions, I present each student with an object we will study over the course of the semester; for example, I circulate a pair of stonewashed designer jeans; pink and blue infant clothing; and a piece of bright green Tupperware. I ask each student to write a 6-8 sentences in which she or he must identify the object, describe it, and explain its significance for American culture. I tell the students that the assignment is un-graded and that I am interested in sampling their writing at the outset of the semester. I collect the assignments, photocopy them, and retain the copies for my records. Most students offer paragraphs that emphasize basic descriptions of them item; some gesture at analysis.

At the final exam, each student receives a personalized test that includes the photocopy of their original piece of writing from the first day of class stapled into the test booklet. Additionally, I have the objects with me for them to work with again. The first test question requires them to reassess and revise their initial piece of writing, taking into consideration the readings and lectures of the course.

Typically, students enjoy (it's true: they enjoy this question! Some have smiled and grinned and beamed at the sight of this question) this question because it provides them a chance at the final exam to recognize and demonstrate the skills they have developed over the course of the semester. Having prepared readings and participated in class discussions about these artifacts, by the final exam, students approach the object more systematically; they describe it in greater detail; and they raise more thoughtful interpretative issues about the object and its significance for American culture. It also gives them a chance to revisit their own writing and to improve it.