



Alternative Forms of Synthesis or Accounts
Designed by Catherine Denial
Assistant Professor of History ✧ Knox College, Galesburg IL

While requiring students to write papers is one way to have them synthesize their learning, there are other means by which they can consolidate their skills – and other means of assessing their progress in your course. Here are three alternatives that might be useful.

1. Using primary sources in exams

- a) Select a visual or written primary source that you have not processed in class. Include this in your test booklet or on your question sheet.
- b) Ask the students to analyze the source, and to contextualize it within the material you've covered in the course.

You can decide how much guidance to give students in answering this question depending on the learning level of your general student population, whether your course is introductory or upper level, and how much time is set aside for the exam. If you judge that your students need a lot of support in answering such a question, provide prompts for their answers:

- Who created this source?
- Where?
- When?
- What is the source about?
- Why was it created?
- What other events were taking place at the same time?
- How might they influence what you're seeing in this source?
- How does this source help us understand this period of history?

If your students are working at a higher level, make your question open-ended. For example:

- *Tell me everything about this source that you can*

This will not only test their ability to identify key components of the source (who, where, what, when, and why) but their understanding of the need to contextualize sources in the wider breadth of history.



2. Oral Presentations

Presenting a historical argument in an oral presentation is a very different skill from writing a paper, particularly because of time constraints. Presentations are particularly well suited to upper-level research courses, but can be adapted to any class in which students are synthesizing a range of evidence into an argument.

- a) Set a time limit for the presentation that is appropriate to the length of your class period and the complexity of the work your students have undertaken. (In my upper-level research classes, students generally have five to seven minutes, with time for questions afterward. Presentations are spread over two classes.)
- b) Require that your students not only provide a summary of their work, but also articulate a thesis.
- c) Consider giving your students some freedom to decide how else to proceed. They might decide to focus on a specific piece of evidence that's been important to their work, to talk about one person who figures prominently in their research, or to expand upon one section of their argument at greater length. The key is to for them to engage their audience, educate them, and provide an overall sense of the work they've been undertaking.
- d) Encourage students to think broadly about making a presentation. How will they set up the classroom? Will they provide handouts or other visual aids? Does it make a difference how they dress? How do tone of voice, pacing, and eye contact have an impact on their work?
- e) Give your students a clear idea of how they will be assessed, since this is a different situation from writing a paper. I generally offer the following guidelines:

As I grade your presentation, I will take the following into consideration:

- Are you easy to understand? Do you speak loudly enough; is your voice clear?
- Do you seem comfortable with the task of making a report? Do you show evidence of having rehearsed your speech? Do you make eye contact? Does your body language suggest competency?
- Is your research sound? Can you explain yourself if questions are asked?
- Have you considered how to make your research topic easily understood?
- Do you stick to the time limit?

These guidelines also offer one way to structure your feedback.



3. Make an Exhibit

Students are usually acutely aware of the gap between history as learned outside college, and history as learned within it. Most students have visited museums and monuments at some point in their life, through school trips or family outings, and sometimes because of a genuine interest of their own. Many students are consumers of popular history through movies and television shows. Asking them to bridge the gap between the history they've learned in the college classroom and the history their friends, family, or community might want to absorb is a good way of encouraging them to think about audience, evidence, and narrative.

The simplest way to have students 'exhibit history' is to make them personally responsible for a small presentation, fixed to a three-panel cardboard display (the kind used in science fairs. These boards are cheaply available at major office supply stores.) At the other end of the spectrum, you might have the entire class work together on one large exhibit, designed from the ground up. If your college or university has a gallery used for visiting exhibitions, consider reserving it for your class. When such space is not available, have students design and build the architecture for the exhibit, as well as the content of the panels, so that it can be displayed in any large open area – a lobby, an empty classroom, or even outside.

Regardless of the size of the exhibit, be sure to discuss the goals of presenting information to the public, and the pitfalls and opportunities inherent in this line of work. One quick and easy way to prompt this discussion is to have students examine exhibit reviews in journals such as the *Journal of American History*, and reflect upon those qualities deemed laudable by reviewers.

Finally, always provide students with clear guidelines for their work. For example:

In designing this exhibit, you are responsible for:

- gathering information on the design needs of this exhibit / event
- brainstorming the best options for accommodating those design needs
- creating a budget with a proposal for any design solutions that will need funds
- drafting exhibit designs
- finalizing exhibit designs in light of feedback
- arranging the purchase of necessary supplies
- construction