

Narrative:

The Geography of the United States and Canada (48301) is an upper division geography course that is designed to familiarize students with the regional geography of those two countries. This includes an overview of the settlement history, natural resources, economy, politics and culture of each region. Students are encouraged to think about epistemological concerns such as the validity of regional classification, the effects of scale, and the role of the observer. The writing process is a valuable tool in this endeavor as it requires students to think critically about geography and organize those thoughts in meaningful ways.

Students are required to write about geography in three specific contexts in this class: two term papers, and a notebook that is kept on the readings in preparation for the exams. The first term paper students write is on the interpretation of landscape in cinema or literature (see attachment). Students are asked to examine an author's use of landscape by analyzing the inclusion and exclusion of specific landscape elements. Students are asked to consider how the author's selection of landscape elements contributes to the narrative and how the temporal setting might impact the portrayal of landscape. Students are required to submit a first draft which is peer-reviewed using a standardized evaluation sheet (see attachment). The peer review process is extremely valuable, in part, because it offers students an opportunity to receive constructive criticism. More importantly, it also gives students insight into how others have grappled with the same question and ultimately informs their own work.

The second paper is a standard research paper on the settlement history of cities on the American frontier (see attachment). The specific question students are asked to consider is why certain towns became state capitals as opposed to others--a seemingly simple geographic question that generally proves to be much more complicated. Students are asked to consider the relevant site and situation factors that made the area desirable for initial settlement, as well as the political factors that weighed in the decision to locate the capital one location versus another. Finally, students are asked to determine how much of an impact the bestowing of capital status had on the development of the area in relation to other urban areas in the state. Like the first term paper, students are required to submit a first draft which is then reviewed by their peers (see attachment). Because the information in a research paper is much more case-specific, multiple students are assigned to each topic so that they can more effectively edit each other's papers and share ideas.

The notebook is kept in conjunction with a series of questions that come directly from the readings (see attachment). It has been my experience that while writing is but one means of engaging with the material, it is one of the most effective ways of retaining information and forcing oneself to think critically about the material. The notebook itself is maintained on an honor system. Most of my exam questions are based on the questions that are asked from the book so my feeling is that students ultimately receive credit for their notebooks by performing well on the exams.