

Creative Writing Assignments  
by Sondra Cosgrove, Ph.D.

These writing assignments achieve many purposes. First, they force students to write in the first person, pushing them to understand history from a personal, bottom up perspective. This helps them to understand motivation in new ways. Second, this format demands creativity and therefore works against rote repetition and cut and paste plagiarism. Third, and most important, such assignments require students to accurately recreate historical context; and context is the synthesized sum of all the names, events, and facts students digest in the process of doing research.

1. The Historical Letter

Students select a person, event, or thing from a designated time period and then research that period and person/event/or things' historical context. They then write a letter to the future describing who or what they are and their circumstances. The letter is in the first person and must be very detailed; including climate, available foods, clothing, language, and societal rules. Student subjects can range from Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, a French fur trapper, to one of the World Trade Center Towers on 9/11.

2. The Archaeological Dig

Students imagine they are an archaeologist at an active dig. While excavating they come across an object; as they touch the object they suddenly go back in time. Invisible, they witness their object's creation and use. Their papers must be very detailed and demonstrate a clear understanding of the culture that produced the artifact. For instance, students must know whether the producer was male or female, the object's utilitarian functions, and its possible supernatural significance.

3. The Movie Review

Students watch a movie from an approved list; they then write a movie review in the style of Ebert and Roper. Students must explain whether their movie is historically accurate and whether it fosters a greater appreciation for historical events, people, and ideas.

4. The Fairy Tale/Tall Tale

Students select a person or an event and then write a paper that examines their topic in the style of a fairy tale or tall tale. Students must understand their person or event well enough to provide an accurate description, while at the same time exaggerating some of their details. For instance, a student could write that it was really one enormous man named Concrete Pete who built all of Hoover Dam and then detail how he did it.

5. Captain History

Students become a superhero who picks an historical event or idea they would like to go back in time to change. They must explain why they picked their event or idea, how they would change their topic, and then the ramifications of altering history. For instance, if a student keeps slavery from establishing itself in the Southern colonies, he/she must then provide a cogent model for an alternative economic system that could have taken hold. Or, if a student stops Hitler from coming to power, he/she must explain the ultimate cause that allowed Hitler to seize Germany and how to alter that cause.

6. Historical Vacation

Students pick a person who would benefit from going back in time to meet four people or participate in four events. They must first explain how this person would benefit, and then provide a summary of their vacation. Throughout the paper students go back in time to meet their designated people or participate in events. Students can go back in time to meet family members; participate in watershed events like the March on Washington; or witness world altering happenings such as a man walking for the first time on the moon. For each person or event the student must explain why it is important and then give a detailed description of what they do, see, hear, and say.

7. History Channel Producer

Students become a producer for the History Channel who is tasked to develop a new program/series for the next Fall season. Students must select a topic for their program and explain why they picked their topic. Then,

students write a proposal to get their program approved. They must include the rationale for their subject, how they will create and produce the show, and how they believe their audience will benefit from their show.

#### 8. Museum Curator

Students become a museum director who has an idea for a new exhibit they would like to premier in one year. To get needed funding, students must write a proposal for their museum's board of directors. In their proposal they must include why their subject is worthy of an exhibit, how they will create and present their subject, and how they believe will interact with and learn from their exhibit.

#### 9. Visitor from Overseas

Students imagine they are living in a certain time period in a country outside of the United States and have decided to visit America. The writer then explains why they want to go to America, where they are headed for, and then what they do for a week while visiting the US. In their papers the students describe America from an outsider's perspective.

#### 10. Artist

Students imagine they are artists during a certain time period. Each wants to create a painting that will capture the spirit of America in their time; so, they select a person, place, object, building, or event to paint. Students must explain why they selected their subject, why it is important historically, and how they will paint their subject. They need to include such information as: Will painting your subject require you to travel? Will you need to use special paints or other art supplies? What will be the best place to display your painting? How do you think others will react to your painting?

#### 11. Author

Students imagine they are authors living during a certain time period. Each student must pick a subject from their period to write a book about. They must explain why they picked their topic, and then what genre they will use for their book. Each student must provide a detailed account of the process of writing their book, who it will appeal to, and what readers in the future will think of their book.

#### 12. On the Oregon Trail

This paper covers the time period 1840 to 1865. Students can imagine they are an emigrant on the Oregon Trail and then write a paper detailing their reasons for going west and the hardships they face while traveling. Or students can be an animal who lives somewhere along the Oregon Trail who describes what they see as emigrants pass on their way west. Students must include how emigrants change the natural environment.

#### 13. Frontier Soldier's Journal

Students imagine they are a soldier on the frontier some time during the nineteenth century. They must write journal entries that explain who they are and why they joined the military. Students then describe where they are stationed and what their duties entail.

#### 14. Fur Trade

Students imagine they are a Native American participating in the fur trade. They write as if they are at the end of their life and are sitting around a fire explaining to their grandchildren why they decided to participate in the fur trade and whether they still think it was the right choice.

#### 15. Immigration

Students imagine they are a new immigrant who has just arrived in the US. They write letters home that explain why they decided to leave their homeland (the Push) and why they decided to come to the US (the Pull). Students then provide their family back home a detailed account of what happens to them as they try to become established in the US.

## Paper Discussion

Once students finish their papers they then post them to the Discussion Board in Webct. Students read three other papers and post responses. I provide response guidelines. These include a length of at least seven sentences, identifying what was historically significant, and something they learned from each paper. Not only does this allow students to learn from each other, but it also improves the quality of the papers. The most creative students usually post their papers to the Discussion Board first, which allows more hesitant students to read good examples of each assignment. This encourages weaker students to write better papers. Plagiarism is not an issue as long as I rotate Paper options from one semester to the next.