

Commonplace Book Assignment

Weekly entries on your own; full commonplace book due at end of semester.

20% of final grade

Select a notebook of your choice. Your “notebook” may be paper-based or digital. Make sure it is an object that is appealing to you and gives you pleasure. You should look forward to even thinking about making entries in your commonplace book. You are also welcome to experiment with different media and change things up from your typical routine as weeks pass, so don’t feel beholden to the first format you try. Anything can be cut, pasted, and transferred over time, so long as they all end up in one collection and follow your own organization system. I encourage you to choose pages that are unlined to allow for more free-flowing and non-linear thinking.

Each week before class, choose two passages from the week’s reading that stand out to you. They may be lines from a poem, a single quote, a dialogue from a play, or a paragraph of prose. Copy them over in your commonplace book. Be intentional about how you do so – where you place it on the page, what shape it takes and how much space, whether it is centered or bordering something else, and what color ink and handwriting or font type you choose. How does it suit the passage you’ve chosen? How does it reflect your reaction to the passage?

Reflect: Why did you choose this passage? What is the tone of it? What is its meaning to you as you spend time with it and give it space? What type of energy or inspiration does it transfer to you? Does it remind you of other authors or other passages?

Underneath, near, or surrounding the passage, create your response. This should be at least 10 sentences long. Your response may include images or photos or drawings; it may cite other authors or other texts as well. Add your own commentary, meditations, and reflections, making this passage your own. As you gather more entries, also consider how this passage relates to the ones that come before or after them. Draw through lines; compare and contrast; free associate. Add your own stamp to this passage and think about how it functions in your own space of commonplacing. What power do you gain from this act of commonplacing? How have you made it your own? Whom might you later like to share this passage with?

Every few weeks, I will ask you to take photos or screenshots of your commonplace book to share via Dropbox. I will take a look at your commonplace book periodically throughout the semester. By the end of term, you should have at least 10 entries in your commonplace book by the end of term. Take the time to reconsider your means of organizing entries, assess your complete work, label sections, and decorate your cover before submitting the final book.

You may wish to check out some historical commonplace books here at archive.org and read the research material I’ve provided on commonplacing in the 18th and 19th centuries. You may also take inspiration from more contemporary scrapbooks and zines, including the ones I’ve linked on our course website.