

# Reconceptualizing the Early American Literature Survey Term Paper

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# Samples of Term Paper Types

- Single research paper due at the end of term
- Series of short papers on unrelated topics
- Single research topic assigned early and divided into different sections due throughout the term

# Goals for Current Term Paper

- Make students responsible for and expert in a single primary text that is not on the course syllabus
- Assign several sections to the paper so that parts build on each other and students' knowledge of text and context deepens
- Encourage genuine research and inquiry
- Find primary texts that are intrinsically interesting
- Get students to take ownership of what amounts to an undergraduate research project.

# Primary Texts: Captivity Narratives

- Why captivity narratives? Because they are engaging and exciting and American literature and culture seem particularly drawn to them.
- Sub genres within the main “captivity narrative” form include Indian captivity narratives, slave narratives, convent captivity narratives, Barbary captivity narratives, imprisonment/ confinement narratives, spiritual autobiographies, execution narratives, and pirate captivity narratives, which constitute an array of texts, authors, and plots that are representative of the early period.
- I ask students to choose the type of captivity narrative they prefer from the above categories, and then I assign a primary text within the period for them to work on throughout the semester. The entire paper is worth 50% of final course grade.

# Sections of Captivity Narrative Paper

- Section 1: Questions & issues after first reading the narrative (1 p., 5% course grade)
- Section 2: Biographical context of author and/or historical editor and/or main subject-character (1-2 pp., 5% course grade)
- Section 3: Historical context of the capture (2 pp., 10% course grade)
- Section 4: Literary & bibliographical context—a) themes of narrative, b) publication overview (3-5 pp., 20% course grade)
- Section 5: Literary context & evaluation—a) half-page summary of the three most useful resources, b) assessment of why they are so helpful, c) evaluation of how this narrative fits into a survey course on early American literature (3 pp., 10% course grade)
- At the end of term, students hand in a folder titled “A Case Study of X” with all five sections

# Sections Teach Skills in Literary Criticism, Research Methods, and Critical Thinking

- Section 1: Reader Response
- Section 2: Biographical Criticism
- Section 3: Cultural Studies, New Historicism
- Section 4: Close Reading, Textual Analysis, History of the Book
- Section 5: Bibliographical Research

# Sample Primary Texts

- James E. Seaver, Narrative of . . . Mary Jemison (Indian captivity narrative)
- Venture Smith, Narrative of . . . Venture (Slave narrative)
- Maria Monk, Awful Disclosures. . . (Convent captivity narrative)
- Eliza Bradley, An Authentic Narrative (Barbary captivity narrative)
- Ethan Allen, A Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen . . . (Confinement narrative)
- John Marrant, A Narrative . . . (Spiritual autobiography)
- Samson Occum, “Sermon on the Death of Moses Paul” (Execution narrative)
- William Fly, The Vial Poured out upon the Sea (Pirate execution narrative)

# Satisfied Customers (Mostly)

- “I absolutely loved this project. I have taken many English college level courses and none have made me research and struggle the way that this project has.”
- “I think that it was great for you to have us ‘piece’ our paper together. . . . I do not think I would have done as well on the paper if I had to write it as one big paper.”
- “I was thrilled with the format in which we were allowed to write our papers. I am a huge procrastinator, and this whole process has taught me a method to use that can free me from that horrid sin. . . . Overall, I give the experience an A+.”
- “I have really enjoyed this assignment because it forced me to pull this narrative apart and look at it from many angles. . . . Rather than have a huge paper due at the end of the semester, I was able to look at this one part at a time.”
- “[The assignment] kept me reading and rereading the narrative.”



# Students' Tips for Improving the Assignment

- Combine several sections but keep the same amount of work
- Choose less obscure texts and authors
- Provide model answers for each section
- Give more direction on finding literary criticism about specific texts
- Use the sections as systematic jumping off points for a full-fledged research paper (i.e. provide a means to integrate the disparate parts)

# A Few Pedagogical Observations

- My Early American Literature survey class tops out at 35
- I have to give each student personal direction since each narrative is so different and the assignment requires genuine research
- I teach all my courses in a smart classroom
- I spend at least one class period having students access secondary material for their project through databases like the MLA Bibliography, Project Muse, J-Stor, and LION
- I require students to submit all parts of the paper to the anti-plagiarism site turnitin.com
- If there is time at the end of term, students-as-experts talk for five minutes or so about their narrative.