

STUDENT COMMONPLACE BOOKS AND VERSE MISCELLANIES, CA. 1516–2022

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LIKE MANY OTHERS who attended university in the seventeenth century, Christopher Wase made a commonplace book that eventually turned into something else as well. Initially, he gave his book everything that it would need to satisfy even the strictest definitions of a commonplace book.¹ He made an alphabetical list of topics.² When he read a passage worth preserving on one of those topics, he skipped ahead several leaves and rewrote the topic along the top of a blank page, so that his headings would appear in roughly alphabetical order. He then placed the quotation immediately below. These are the same elements that make up a commonplace book in my courses: quotations, topical headings, and either an index or an approximately alphabetical arrangement in a hand-made book. I require students to add two more ingredients to their commonplaces as well: a very short citation and the date of the class meeting from which, or for which, they copied the commonplace. I inform students of these core requirements on the syllabus; in the written instructions that conclude this chapter; in video instructions publicly available online; and in periodic, graded responses to PDFs of their hand-made books.³

Wase's method of commonplacing left a lot of leaves either mostly or entirely blank. Like many owners of commonplace books, he eventually started filling in these empty spaces without regard for the volume's original organizational structure, often copying complete poems.⁴ My students do something similar. More or less like Wase did at his college, they make books by hand (often with gatherings of irregular size), and they start organizing

1 For the exemplary definition of the “commonplace book” that we follow in my courses, see Peter Beal, *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 1450–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82–83.

2 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. poet. 117, fol. 15r–v.

3 Both the video and written instructions are available on the website for my university's student and alumni organization for paleography, the Superscripts: <https://rampages.us/superscripts/how-to-make-a-commonplace-book/>.

4 Bodleian MS Rawl. poet. 117, fols. 22r, 24r, 25r, for example.

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quotations from their reading under the topical commonplace headings that they devise. When the syllabus turns from prose to verse, they often follow Wase's next step, and start filling in the blank space with poems.

Although, like Wase did, my students now begin by commonplacing, and only then start copying complete poems, I began this assignment the other way round. In 2009, in an introduction to the English major, I started asking students to compile their own manuscript verse miscellanies. I had just finished writing a book about manuscript verse miscellanies. I enjoy reading them. And I imagined that seeing how my students produced and used their hand-written poetry books would help me better understand how their predecessors had done similar things. More importantly, I figured that copying poems by hand would improve students' preparation for, and participation in, class.

Although it did not work perfectly for all students, the initial version of the assignment worked well enough that I expanded it the following year by adding the commonplace component and trying it in early modern courses. Although many library cataloguers and scholars have defined the commonplace book broadly enough to include complete poems and much else, my students and I observe the distinction that Peter Beal has made between these two types of manuscript making: "Verse miscellanies are sometimes also described as 'poetical commonplace books', which is not a strictly accurate term unless they are systematically arranged under subject headings."⁵ Accordingly in my courses, we consider copying poems to be a distinct activity from commonplacing, unless a student adds the equivalent of commonplace headings to small sections of a poem in the margins.

Adding the commonplace component to my verse miscellany allowed me to involve all of the course's reading—both verse and prose—in the manuscript book assignment. While it has remained under constant revision, the assignment has continued to grow. In fact, it has become the central project in my survey of early modern English literature and, indeed, of most of my introductory and intermediate-level surveys of literature, including *British Literature I*, *Women's Writing in Early Modern English*, and *Shakespeare's Poems and Publishers*. I teach these courses at a large, urban, state university. Each course typically has about 30 students, most but not all of whom are English majors. Occasionally my early modern survey has about 60 students, but only when the department can fund an exceptional graduate teaching assistant who is specializing in early modern literature.

5 Beal, *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology*, 429–30.

This chapter reports on what my students and I have done well, and not so well, with our commonplace books and verse miscellanies, and how I have modified the assignment in response. It tells a first-person account of how one instructor has devised, revised, and expanded an assignment, based on challenges that arise in the physical or virtual classroom. One set of challenges had to do with relating this relatively unusual assignment to subsequent writing assignments. I thought that copying poems and quoting prose by hand would improve students' ability to quote and discuss literature in their other assignments, in general. But I wanted to come up with new assignments that proceed more clearly from the work that students were doing in their hand-made books. Later in the chapter, I describe two of these assignments. One of them was successful right away: a dialogue composed of quotations from the writings of Sir Thomas More and William Tyn-dale. The other assignment took me over a decade to get right, even though it sounds pretty simple now: an essay that introduces the major theme or themes that students had identified in their commonplace books, illustrated with explications of some of the passages that they had already common-placed.

Instigations

When I first asked students to make their own verse miscellanies, the goal was to help them to prepare for class in an introductory course: to help them choose a poem to discuss, and to slow down and prolong their engagement with that poem before each class. During that first semester, the assignment seemed to be helping some of my students prepare for class, but not all of them. When the due date for the manuscript books arrived, it became clear why. Some students turned in their books late; several submitted work that appeared to have been done hastily and quite recently. The obviously late books had not prepared students for the class discussions that had taken place weeks ago. On the contrary, the books demonstrated why their compilers had been so quiet in those discussions. These students had allowed their manuscript books to become another task to rush through at the end of term, like cramming for an exam or staying up all night to write an essay. I responded, the following year, by making the verse miscellany due half-way through the semester, and the commonplace book due at the end of the course. Instead of one hastily made manuscript, then, from some students I simply received two. While several students had used their manuscript books to prepare for class, others were still procrastinating until the due dates. The haste evident in some of these student productions by no means

disqualified them from being commonplace books and verse miscellanies. Hurried writing abounds in historical examples, including Wase's book. At the time, the problem seemed only to involve class discussion: with their hastily made commonplace books in hand, I could see more clearly why their makers had been reticent, or had sounded only so well informed, in class.

That was the first big problem, but the early version of the assignment posed a few minor problems too. Although I had encouraged students to make their own books, I also allowed them to purchase blank books, ready-made, as many early modern students had likely done. I suggested Moleskine products. I also told students that they could keep their books, rather than turn them in, if they scanned them and each submitted online a PDF showing the entire volume. No one scanned their books, though, and very few made them by hand. That first semester, I received a lifetime supply of partially used Moleskine notebooks. I responded by requiring students to make their books from then on. I wanted them all to experience first-hand the freedom involved in making a simple book from scratch, as opposed to filling in a mass-produced notebook: choosing whatever paper and format they wished, using as many sheets per gathering as they liked, adding a gathering when they were running out of room, flipping the book over and writing in reverse. I thought that this would accomplish two learning objectives. For one, it would allow students to learn from experience how the people whom we were studying selected, reproduced, and reused literature. For another, it would improve their understanding of and engagement with the readings. In other words, I would answer yes to two of the questions that Nicole Hagstrom-Schmidt asks in her excellent chapter at the start of this book:

- Do you want your students to understand commonplacing as a historical method of reading and writing? and Do you want them to read their assigned texts more closely?

Yes, I do; this is exactly what I want out of this assignment. In retrospect, this requirement to make books by hand may seem to have taken encouragement from the rise of “maker culture” and “makification” in education.⁶ Like the tinkering and building that the “maker movement” promotes, book-making allows people to learn by doing, rather than reading. Unlike most projects in maker culture, though, the goal of my assignment is still reading.

6 Jonathan Cohen, W. Monty Jones, Shaunna Smith, and Brendan Calandra, “Makification: Towards a Framework for Leveraging the Maker Movement in Formal Education,” *Journal of Education Multimedia and Hypermedia* 26 (2017): 217–29.

Furthermore, the maker movement tends to focus on the opposite of college courses in literary history. It concentrates, in other words, on “K-12 education” and on “engineering practices, specifically, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics...more generally.”⁷ Published scholarship on the maker movement regularly encourages teachers to allow elementary and secondary students to turn away from books and written words in order to make other things. While books do count as technologies, my students make them after completing their K-12 educations, and usually after deciding against a college education in a STEM field. Moreover, while folding and stitching paper may give my students temporary breaks from the reading and writing that occupies most college English courses, one main goal of the assignment is to get them to attend especially carefully and slowly to the alphabetic text that they are copying. A college student closely reading old literature hardly exemplifies the new sort of hands-on learner than the maker movement champions.

Nevertheless, scholars have addressed the value of various sorts of making for college students of early modern literature. Alyssa Arbuckle and Alex Christie define “critical making” as “producing theoretical insights by transforming digitized heritage materials.” Although, in other courses and other assignments, my students and I engage in this sort of digital making, this definition excludes the analogue book making that I ask students to attempt in my commonplace book assignment.⁸ Andrew Griffin has explained the value of making for students of early modern literature, specifically of printed ballads. The hand-printing project that he describes has some similarities to other projects that my students and I have undertaken in more advanced courses (in which we replicated manuscripts or a gathering of a particular printed book). But the ballad-making project at UC Santa Barbara is much more thorough and exacting than my commonplace book assignment.⁹ Occa-

7 Lee Martin, “The Promise of the Maker Movement for Education,” *Journal of Pre-College Engineering Education Research* 5 (2015): 30–39; quotation on p. 30. See also Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Kimberly Sheridan, “The Maker Movement in Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84 (2014): 495–504; Michael Schad and Kurt Stenhagen, “Combating the Commodification of Knowledge: the Maker Movement,” *The Commodification of American Education: Persistent Threats and Paths Forward*, ed. T. Jameson Brewer and W. Gregory Harman (Gorham: Myers Education), 107–24.

8 Alyssa Arbuckle and Alex Christie, with the ETCL, INKE, & MVP Research Groups, “Intersections Between Social Knowledge Creation and Critical Making,” *Scholarly and Research Communication* 6 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.22230/src.2015v6n3a200>.

9 Andrew Griffin, “Why Making?” *The Making of a Broadside Ballad*, <http://press.emcimprint.english.ucsb.edu/the-making-of-a-broadside-ballad/why-making>.

sionally, a student of mine makes a commonplace book using a goose quill and ink made from an early modern recipe, but even such an exceptional student exercises great freedom over her own production. And most of my students use more readily accessible tools and materials.

My version of the commonplace book assignment invites students to play a role that is more visible in historical scholarship than it is pedagogical scholarship. Experts on commonplace and other reference books, including Ann Moss and Ann Blair, have made clear that there's nothing unprecedented about the commonplacing that my students do. On the contrary, it's basically an anglicized, literary version of what the leading educational theorists of the early modern period prescribed. Erasmus and Melancthon, for instance, both encouraged early modern educators to have students produce commonplace books, although principally in Latin and focused on ancient literature.¹⁰ Peter Beal turned attention from what educators proposed in print to what commonplacers produced in manuscript.¹¹ Earle Havens followed the long history of commonplace books into modern times, in part by including in his exhibition on the subject several manuscript books made by Yale students.¹² (See Hagstrom-Schmidt's chapter in this volume for much more about this.) By making their own manuscript books, my students join this long tradition, not just reading but also actively reproducing early modern literature, more or less as our historical subjects did.

Requiring students to make books by hand took care of one small problem. Or, rather, it modified the problem: my office shelves were now filling up with unique hand-made books, virtually none of which had ever been scanned or photographed. And I still had the big problem to solve: each term, a significant portion of the hand-made books flooding my office still showed evidence of last-minute production. In an effort to correct both problems at once, I started requiring students to scan their books at various points in the semester, and to submit a PDF showing their progress at each

10 Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 101–91. Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 69–70, 131–32.

11 Peter Beal, "Notions in Garrison': The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book," in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), 131–47.

12 Earle Havens, *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2001). For exhibition labels and records of the books made at Yale, see New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS Osborn pf1.

due date. At first, I tried three due dates a term. I should have known what would happen: while the more conscientious students would again produce their books piecemeal before class, as instructed, others would rush to catch up just before the due dates. Now, instead of two, I received the results of three last-minute book-making sessions from procrastinating students. I kept increasing the number of due dates each semester until, one term, in an unusually large section of the course, I went so far as to require a PDF every week. That made it difficult to keep up with the grading, but it helped students keep up with the assigned readings, and let me see who was falling behind, and when. It also helped students who accidentally destroyed or lost their books: they did not need to remake any part of their books that they had already scanned.

Frequent due dates also led me to stop insisting that students use their manuscript books to prepare for class. To be sure, I still encouraged them to copy their poems and commonplace their prose readings before class. But I also started welcoming them to continue, or even begin, the week's copying in class. Regardless of whether they were transcribing or discussing a text first, the two activities could easily support and reinforce one another. A student who copied a text before class would understand it better in class. Another who copied it in or after class would better understand what she was copying, having already seen and heard it in class.

I simply asked students to date any copying that they did in class, by adding the month and date beside it. If they had already completed all of the transcripts required for the week, they could copy something from each class, whether they read it on the screen or heard it spoken aloud. In either case, a dated entry in a student's book became a necessary part of full participation in class for that day. Students thus started using their manuscript books to show their engagement both with the readings and with class discussion—even if they did not speak in class. This was especially valuable (and, arguably, ethical) in a section of the course that had too many students for all of them to talk consistently. It helped quiet, shy, or uncertain students demonstrate their engagement in class and earn credit for it. It helped me recognize the wide range of thoughtful responses that my students were making without voicing them aloud. In my first few years of teaching, the more outgoing, talkative students received the higher participation grades, even when they were not the best prepared or most insightful. This assignment has changed that, and it has helped me grade much more fairly across the spectrum of extroverts and introverts. Instead of grading participation separately, I started grading it as part of the commonplace book/verse miscellany. A student who came to class and copied something from it, in addi-

tion to the assigned commonplaces or poems, earned a perfect score for the week. With the participation grade folded into the manuscript book assignment, I decided to increase its value to 60 percent of the course grade. By design, students could no longer pass the course without making a commonplace book by hand and using it to demonstrate consistent engagement with the readings and discussions. It was no longer enough for a student to sit through some or all of my classes and then write a good essay on only one of the texts that I had assigned. The commonplace book required much more consistent engagement with the readings and discussions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I offered students a variety of ways to take my courses, and I revised the commonplace book assignment for each option. I told students that they could take the course as a tutorial student (which required visible and audible participation, whether in person or on Zoom), or as a lecture student (by attending during class time but not necessarily speaking or using their camera), or as a correspondence student (by watching Zoom videos of class later). Tutorial students would need to copy only one commonplace from each class in which they showed up and read aloud or spoke. Lecture students would have to copy three or four commonplaces from each class that they attended without participating audibly and visibly. Correspondence students would need to correspond by copying ten commonplaces from each class that they watched on video later. One goal of this range of options was to encourage students to show up and to speak in class. Another goal, though, was to offer students concrete steps for how they could learn in the course when they could not or would not participate during class time. The labour constraints for the assignment therefore vary widely depending on a student's other work for the course. On a day when a student shows up and speaks up, copying down a single commonplace might take only a few minutes during class. But after missing a class, a student might need to be copying commonplaces for most of the time that a class video is playing in order to earn a top grade.

In response to the issues that Sarah E. Parker addresses in the coda to this book, I make it very easy for students to earn perfect grades on their commonplace books. Although English departments have developed high standards for essay writing, they have left standards low for making books by hand, and my students and I have taken advantage of these low standards. I see no problem in awarding high grades for poorly made books and sloppy handwriting, as long as a student's commonplace book demonstrates the intellectual labour of commonplacing. I find grading commonplace books to be more engaging and more efficient than engaging my students' more conventional writing assignments. As long as students have enough com-

monplaces, and those commonplaces contain the requisite elements, they have earned a good grade.

While my students have to produce a commonplace book in order to pass the course, they cannot earn a very high course grade by neglecting the other, more conventional assignments. They accrue most of the credit required to pass the course in their weekly work on their manuscript books. Their work on four other assignments, each worth another 10 percent, then determines their final letter grade for the class. I settled on this division of the course grade intentionally, but only after a long process of trial, error, partial success, and continuous revision.

Sources

Students made the first verse miscellanies and commonplace books that I assigned by copying from an assigned textbook, in addition to occasional readings that I made available in digital copies online. Some of my students were slow to acquire the textbook, though; others never did. Whenever anyone in class lacked a textbook, I projected it on screen, either from a document camera or from scans saved as a PDF. I quickly got used to projecting the reading in every class. I then tried to make a virtue out of necessity by assigning facsimiles and transcripts of original sources—better sources than I could possibly order for an entire class through a campus bookstore. As a result, our sources got much more original, the textbook became less and less important, and I eventually stopped requiring that students purchase one. Some of these sources come from EEBO. Increasingly, they come from library websites that offer high-resolution images of manuscripts and printed books. I rely heavily on *Luna*, the digital repository of the Folger Shakespeare Library.¹³ I also direct students to high-resolution images of sources on the British Library's online collection of *Digitised Manuscripts*, the *Huntington Digital Library*, the *Digital Collections* of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, *Harvard Digital Collections*, and others.¹⁴ Where available, I share modern transcripts of the artifacts that we read in facsimile as well. For instance, we read the British Library's colour images of

13 Folger Shakespeare Library, *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet>.

14 British Library, *Digitised Manuscripts*, www.bl.uk/manuscripts/; Huntington Library, *Huntington Digital Library*, <https://hdl.huntington.org/>; Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, *Digital Collections*, <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digital-collections/digital-collections-beinecke-library>; Harvard Library, *Harvard Digital Collections*, <https://library.harvard.edu/digital-collections>.

the Devonshire manuscript with the help of the transcripts and information on the Wiki edition of the same source.¹⁵ We read the Folger manuscript of Lady Mary Wroth's poems with recourse to Paul Salzman's online transcript of the same.¹⁶ Some websites offer both the images and the transcripts that we need; the Pulter Project is a supreme example.¹⁷ Occasionally, I scan transcripts from printed scholarship for use in class, or provide my own transcripts. I assign virtually any early modern literature that students can easily access online, and link to all of the readings in the syllabus from the beginning of term.

While it was actually the facsimiles of original sources that were replacing the textbook, I told students that it was their hand-made books that were making it unnecessary for them to buy one. I advertised my early modern courses by telling them, "*Students do not have to buy any textbooks for this course. Instead, they have to make their textbook by hand. This involves hand-copying extracts, and several complete texts, from online readings... Thus the course introduces both texts and textual technologies from early modern England.*" This part of the course description combines a practical, financial benefit with a theoretical, educational one. It suggests that students will learn not only by reading what authors have written but also by doing some of the things that manuscript compilers have done. It also points toward the original sources featured in the course.

When I was still requiring that students buy a textbook, the course would begin with rather few copies on hand and very few students prepared. Students would huddle together to share copies. Not uncommonly, one student would quickly borrow another student's copy to read aloud. But this sharing would happen only when I asked someone to read. The rest of the time, several students just looked ahead, or down at their usually empty notebooks, without immediate access to the literature that we were ostensibly studying. When I stopped requiring that students buy a textbook, though, and started providing all the readings online instead, everyone suddenly had the readings that they needed. Students did not have to wait until they could afford

15 London, British Library, Add MS 17492, British Library, Digitised Manuscripts, www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_17492&index=0; *A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript (BL Add. MS 17492)*, https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Devonshire_Manuscript.

16 Washington, DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, Folger MS V.a.104, *Luna*; Paul Salzman, ed., *Mary Wroth's Poetry: An Electronic Edition*, <https://wroth.latrobe.edu.au/all-poems.html>.

17 *The Pulter Project*, <https://pulterproject.northwestern.edu/>.

to buy another book to start preparing for class. And we could start reading them together on the first day of class, with the words projected on screen.

My students seem to regard this as a benefit. Many of them work off-campus and have a rather full range of adult responsibilities: several struggle to afford textbooks. They seem glad that, instead of spending more at the bookstore, they can read online and make a book out of (free) found material or spend as little or as much as they wish at an art supply store. While they have not objected to digital readings *per se*, some of them have struggled to navigate the large numbers of digital sources that I assign, and especially the original spelling and manuscripts that I assign. While I try to simplify the steps required to access digital sources, I intentionally retain the relative difficulty of reading early modern printed books and manuscripts in facsimile.

Replacing the textbook also helped solve another, more common problem: students were using their computers and other devices in class, and not only for coursework. Assigning digital transcripts and facsimiles of original sources filled up some of their screens. The challenges posed by the spelling and the letterforms in some of the readings helped students to slow down and focus on what was on their screens. It also gave students a sense of satisfaction as they decoded another strange symbol or spelling. Once I started inviting them to resume working on their manuscripts in class, this assignment gave them something to do with their hands as well. You could see the difference right away, in their postures. Most of my students used to lean back in class, looking up at me and then back down at their screens, with their hands free to scroll or swipe on their devices. With this assignment, more of them lean forward in order to write in their books and to read an original source. As do most aspects of this assignment, this makes a physical difference that can also involve a conceptual one. Instead of just observing me and consuming the course, more of them are reading actively and reproducing texts by hand. They are thereby demonstrating to themselves how those texts were, and still can be, produced and manipulated. In fact, they're using modern digital technologies to distinguish them from the early modern technologies that led up to them.

Although it started as just a side project, worth only about 10 percent of the course grade, the commonplace book/verse miscellany has come to assume a major role in my survey of early modern literature—rather like it did in the educations of many early modern students and scholars. Both in class and in the assignment instructions, I show a few of the manuscript books that compare to the ones that my students make. Also in class, I assign poems from early modern manuscript miscellanies. For instance, in

my survey of early modern literature, we read psalm translations and sonnets by Surrey and Wyatt, and other poems by Sidney and Raleigh, from Ruth Hughey's transcript of the Arundel Harington manuscript.¹⁸ As the semester progresses, we start reading manuscripts in facsimile, starting with the very legible italic hands visible in the Folger's online images of two manuscripts: Sir John Harington's copy of his epigrams, and Lady Mary Wroth's of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*.¹⁹ More challenging manuscripts follow, such as the Westmoreland manuscript of Donne's poems on *Digital Donne*, alongside the *Donne Variorum*'s transcript.²⁰ Students who want to take on greater paleographical challenges can try manuscripts in secretary hand, such as a copy of Spenser's *A Vewe of the Present State of Ireland*.²¹ They can also attend the weekly transcription sessions of an official student group devoted to transcribing manuscripts, called the Superscripts. Occasionally, they have been able to participate in one of the transcribathons that the Superscripts host.

Before they read or copy text from any of these original sources, I show students a few early modern examples of the sort of manuscript books that I ask them to produce. One of these manuscripts provides an example of an early modern index of commonplace heads.²² One shows commonplaces in both English and Latin.²³ Another shows a commonplace book giving way to a verse miscellany, distinguished by a second set of page numbers.²⁴ Typically, the last commonplace book that I show students comes from the last poet we read in the course, John Milton.²⁵ I encourage students to mimic

18 The Duke of Norfolk, Arundel Castle, MSS (Special Press), "Harrington MS. Temp. Eliz."; Ruth Hughey, ed. *The Arundel Harington Manuscript of Tudor Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1960); *Knowledge Bank*, <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/28934>.

19 Folger MS V.a.249; <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/se3b86>. Folger MS V.a.104; <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/6ci6mt>.

20 New York, New York Public Library, Berg Collection, Westmoreland MS; *Digital Donne: the Online Variorum*, <http://digitaldonne.tamu.edu/NY3-biblio.html>.

21 Folger MS V.b.114, fols. 136v–193r; *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/2de7v0>.

22 Folger MS E.a.4, fols. 1v–2r; *Luna*, <http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/485jfy>.

23 Emmanuel College, Cambridge MS I.3.2, fols. 1r, 22r; *Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online*, www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/196897; www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/196903.

24 Folger MS V.a.160, p. 1 (both instances of this page number); *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/09niv0>; <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/tt09dm>.

25 British Library, Add. MS 36354, fol. 55v; Puck Fletcher, "Happy Birthday to John

these historical examples, adopting the same methods but also exercising the same freedom used to produce them.

I admit that, in my courses, the commonplace book/verse miscellany assignment has assumed a larger role than many of my colleagues in the field would desire for their own courses. It has effectively replaced the textbook and subsumed the participation grade. It has also made early modern literature something that students do not just read but use as well: something that they do not only write about, but something that they actually write, more or less as early modern students and scribes did. It has transformed and improved the sort of writing that my students are prepared to do about early modern literature. This is partly because I can assign much more demanding reading when the first step involves simply commonplacing or copying it, and students do not have to jump straight from reading to interpretation. This also has to do with how their commonplace books and verse miscellanies prepare them for other assignments in the course. In order to explain this, I need to introduce two of these related assignments briefly.

Related Assignments

These two assignments proceed logically from the manuscript books that my students make. They therefore help show the value of the commonplace book as a means to an end, and not just as an end in itself. After submitting the first facsimile of their commonplace books, the students in my early modern survey write, or rather compile, a dialogue made up of quotations from the works of Sir Thomas More and William Tyndale. Students may present this dialogue in any way they wish: some turn it into a screenplay or stage play, for instance. One student presented More and Tyndale in a political debate. Another invented an early modern social media app to make sense of the relative popularity of their views. But I insist that students can, and do, earn good grades on the assignment merely by selecting and arranging quotations, without any imaginative or narrative framing. In order to press this point, I even allow them to (digitally) copy and paste More's and Tyndale's words from the digital transcript of original sources that I assign.²⁶ The goal is to identify passages from both writers that relate to one another, and to demonstrate their relationship: to find where More and Tyndale

Milton!" *Untold lives blog*, <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2015/12/happy-birthday-to-john-milton.html>.

26 Matthew DeCoursey, ed., "The Thomas More / William Tyndale Polemic." EMLS Text Series 3, 2010; <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/moretyndale.pdf>.

were writing about, or to, one another, and to make it easy to see the substance of their disagreements. By the time that students start constructing their dialogues, they have already quoted several passages by More and Tyndale in their commonplace books. They have also given each passage a commonplace heading, identifying its topic. Ideally, they have even given the same heading to passages by each author. If they have, they can start by transferring to their dialogues the same passages that they have already placed together, as common, in their commonplace books. Neither of the individual steps required for this assignment is terribly difficult. In the first, when they're making their commonplace books, students merely fold and stitch paper, quote a few passages a week, and identify their topics. In the next, they type up and arrange some of the same passages. Taken one after the other, though, and repeated, these two steps can help students progress to a much better understanding of the reading than they would be able to accomplish otherwise.

At the end of term, I ask for a similar but wider-ranging assignment: an essay that introduces the major theme(s) of their commonplace book, with a paragraph explicating each commonplace that they select for the essay. Early versions of this assignment suffered from my failed attempts to communicate to students how many commonplaces they should explicate. I kept failing until I asked students to do two new, and closely related, things. First, I asked them to write a short paragraph about one of their commonplaces whenever they submitted a PDF of their hand-made book. Second, I asked them to include in their final essays one paragraph for every week of class. In previous semesters, I would routinely receive essays consisting of no more than six or eight quotations, some of them from the same readings, even from otherwise thoughtful and engaged students. Now students' essays include at least 14 or 15 body paragraphs, some of them revised from earlier submissions, that collectively demonstrate that a student has engaged and understood readings from throughout the term.

In a course without a commonplace book assignment, an essay that engages every week of term might not make much sense and could be daunting. In a course with a commonplace book assignment, however, students can get started on the assignment quite easily, as long as they have already indexed their commonplaces, or arranged them alphabetically (like Wase did). They can simply look in their manuscript books to see which themes they have already identified most frequently in the readings for the term. An index of their commonplace headings can show them, at a glance, which subjects they tended to find in the literature that I assigned. One former student, whose index I show to new students in the assignment instructions,

found in it that she had commonplaced several passages on “Women” and “Colonialism.” That prepared her to select commonplaces on these subjects for the final assignment. An alphabetically arranged commonplace book, on the other hand, allows students just to flip to the pages that have the most writing. Their next steps are to type up related quotations and expand their headings into sentences that explain the quotes’ common subject matter.

I offer these two additional assignments (the dialogue and the essay) simply to show how a commonplace book can lead directly into other writing assignments. Rather than just reading literature and writing essays about it, these assignments together give students several intermediate steps to take in between reading and writing, at least as these activities typically appear in an English classroom. Students who find the reading difficult or alienating have something easy to do first: just copy it down, or quote it and name the subject of the extract. Students who would not otherwise know how to begin writing a dialogue between sixteenth-century scholars, or identifying a major theme in early modern literature, can open up their hand-made books to see what themes they have already recognized. Their own academic writing can thus begin just by presenting and explaining what they have already noticed and recorded in their hand-made books.

Conclusion

The commonplace book/verse miscellany assignment has two concurrent purposes—one retrospective, the other prospective. Looking back, it helps students understand—not only intellectually but also experientially—how early modern literature was made and preserved. It lets them try their hands at reading not only what, but also how, our historical subjects read, by reproducing texts more or less as they did. Our students can thus study early modern writing not only in the usual, broad sense of an author’s writing or *oeuvre*, but also in the narrow sense of a scribe’s or a student’s writing or transcription, unoriginal and unique as that may be. The process of making a manuscript book, while reading original texts and documents in transcripts and facsimiles, conveys a great deal which one simply cannot learn as well from reading modern editions and essays: about orthography, the development of the language, authorship, other literary agents, book history, and much more. Looking forward, the commonplace book leads directly to their other assignments in the course. Together, these assignments offer students several valuable steps toward not only essay writing but potentially other sorts of writing as well—steps such as collecting quotations, organizing them by topic, and ordering them in a sequence.

In between the assignment's retrospective and prospective functions, though, is its present purpose. In other words, in between the long history of making books and the future writing that a student will go on to do sits the student in class, deciding how (and sometimes whether) to do the work that the class requires. And in virtually every day of class, the manuscript book assignment is there to tell the student: you can do this. You've got this. You may not yet understand the entire work of literature that we're reading, much less be able to write a work of literary criticism about it. But you can quote it. You can decide what your quotation is about and identify the topic in a heading. You may find a poem confusing at first, but you can copy it down. And you will be at least one step closer to understanding it once you have copied it—even as you copy it. This is the main message of the commonplace book assignment. Its main purpose is to offer practical steps forward, steps that benefit the most uncertain and the most enthusiastic students at once.

Appendix

ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

So, you're going to college. You'll leave it behind one day. When you do, do you expect to take anything tangible with you that you will continue to use, maybe something that you make here? Artists will take their portfolios. The good engineers will take the robots they make. In the period of literary history that we're studying in this course, college students made books full of quotes and notes from their reading, organized under subject headings that identify their topics. Imagine filling a multi-subject notebook, divided by tabs, or a Trapper Keeper with the best passages you've ever read, organized according to subject, so that you could easily find and quote them again.²⁷ They also copied their favourite poems and song lyrics, producing the early modern equivalent of mixed tapes and iPods.²⁸ Many of them kept adding to their manuscript books, and making new ones like them, after leaving college.

This course requires you to make the same sort of book. In addition to reading what early modern English people wrote, it requires you to read, and use what you read, rather like they did. Students should start making their books right away, even if only by folding a small stack of standard copier paper.²⁹ Students who would prefer to make a finer book might start with more ambitious instructions and a trip to an art supply store.³⁰ In any case, students will earn their grades based on the contents, not the appearance, of their books. Awards typically go to the students who make both the finest and the most economical books in the class. Regardless of what materials they decide to use, students should **bring those materials to every class, and copy something in every class meeting** that they attend, clearly dating anything they copy or write in the classroom.

When we're reading prose or a very long narrative poem, students copy at least one passage from every class period that they attend. They give each

27 Erin McCarthy, "The History of the Trapper Keeper," *Mental Floss*, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/52726/history-trapper-keeper>.

28 Thurston Moore, *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture* (New York: Universe, 2004); "Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mix_Tape:_The_Art_of_Cassette_Culture.

29 jtgualtieri, "How to Make a Book," *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/c-vNiyexqeU>.

30 Yuchen Chang and Myungah Hyon, *Book Book* [English Version] (Beijing: Dreamer Fty, 2017). De Dominicis, Raffaele, "Bookbinding hand sewn: Lesson 1 step 1," *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/fCVq6Stj9o4>. London Centre for Book Arts, *Making Books: A Guide to Creating Handcrafted Books* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural, 2017).

passage a heading or title, describing its topic or subject matter, along with a short citation. These extracts with headings are called *topoi* or “commonplaces.” So the students’ individual books of quotes, labeled by topic, are called “commonplace books.” Students should alphabetize their headings in one of two ways. They can designate a different page for each letter in the alphabet, like a blank address book, and copy each commonplace under the first letter of its heading. Or they can write an index for their book near the end of term.

When the assigned reading features short poems, students flip their books over and copy a complete poem in every class that they attend. By doing this, they turn the back ends of their commonplace books into “verse miscellanies” or poetry anthologies. One cover of the book begins the verse miscellany. The other cover leads to the commonplace book, in reverse. Bound together, the two constitute a *tête-bêche* volume: a book with two front covers and no back cover.

Whenever the syllabus requires students to submit a facsimile of their manuscript books, they take very clear scans of any pages with new writing. While students may use their own equipment, I recommend the scanners and the BookEye machine in the library. Students each combine their new images for the week into a single PDF.

It might help to consider some examples, some made by the sort of people we’re studying, and some made by your fellow students. Let’s start with a recent one. Here are two commonplaces that one student selected from the writings of Tyndale and More, as edited by Matthew DeCoursey.³¹

God’s Law~~~

And because the love of God and of his neighbor, which is the spirit and the life of all laws and wherefore all laws are made, is not written in his heart, therefore in all inferior laws and in all worldly ordinances is his beetle blind”
Tyndale (119)

God’s Voice~~~

And therefore, though our saviour say, that such as are his do hear his voice and not the voice of strangers: seemeth to mean therein to give us warning to do so, that is to wit, that we should hear and obey him, and not other against him.

31 Matthew DeCoursey, ed., “The Thomas More / William Tyndale Polemic: A Selection.” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Text Series 3 (2010), <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/moretyndale.pdf>.

The student who copied these commonplaces gave them the headings “God’s Law” and “God’s Voice.” Both could fit on a page reserved for commonplaces that begin with the letter *G*. In addition to some impressive calligraphy elsewhere, this student also made an embroidered cover for her book and won the Esther Inglis award, named for one of the most ambitious calligraphers of early modern Scotland and England. You can see the covers of some of Inglis’s manuscript books, made roughly 400 years ago, online.³²

Another student, who made another finely bound book, copied commonplaces in the order in which she read them. When the syllabus reached More, she used his name as a major heading, with individual headings for each quote from his writings beneath, like so:

The Fault of Common Translations
or The Faulty Apple

For undoubtedly as ye spake of our mother Eve, inordinate appetite of knowledge is a means to drive any man out of a paradise. More, ed. DeCoursey 79–80

This method of filling up a book as you go requires you to make an index of individual headings at the end of term. Another student started her index with the following commonplace heads:

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Page numbers</u>
Babel	22
Blasphemies	17, 36
Colonization	24, 27, 28–29, 30, 31, 32

Each individual heading appears in the index, in alphabetical order, with corresponding page numbers. This makes it easy to see, at a glance, which headings recur and, therefore, which topics interested the student in the readings. The index shows at least six passages on “Colonialism” and (later down the list) at least five on “Women.” One of the passages turns out to involve both topics. So this commonplace book ended up preparing a student to do a final project on one or both of these subjects. It preserves valuable passages for the student to present in more formal writing. And it directs her right to where she can find more like them in the assigned readings.

32 Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.94; *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/8ux03e>. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Ty 49; *Harvard Digital Collections*, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.Hough:17615365?n=5>.

That modern index works more or less like the early modern one that begins Washington, DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS E.a.4.³³ If you use the web address in the footnote and look closely, you can see that its original compiler did not get very far on this commonplace book. The index includes lots of entries for which there are no page numbers. And the commonplace on “Constantia” or Constancy, on the facing page, consists of just two lines. The rest of the page remained blank until someone else filled it in with recipes. The same thing happened throughout the volume.

It happened to others as well. Another commonplace book at the Folger began with notes or quotes organized under Latin heads.³⁴ But, after filling eight pages with writing about the five senses, the compiler left the rest of the book blank. The blank pages eventually got filled with English poems.³⁵ Our commonplace books turn into poetry collections as well.

Our manuscript books certainly differ from those made by our historical subjects. They feature several of the same key ingredients: quotes, notes, headings, and poems. But, while we’re commonplacing English texts, they tended to commonplace Latin ones. Some of them did some commonplacing in English, though. The main compiler of a book now held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge worked mostly with Latin heads, such as “Oeconomica”: economics.³⁶ But in the preceding pages, someone added some English headings. One reads “Inexcusableness.”

Under this head, the compiler wrote, “The people of Rome did iudge it a crime most wicked, strange / & intollerable, worthy also of seuer [severe] punishment, when Tar- / quinius rauished [ravished] Lucrece of her chastitye.”³⁷ What was this commonplacere’s leading example of “Inexcusableness”? Tarquin’s ravishment, or sexual assault (to put it mildly), of Lucrece. This English commonplacere was recording that the ancient Romans regarded at least this sexual assault as inexcusable, wicked, strange, and worthy of punishment. On the next leaf, this compiler added a second English heading, “Princes subiection”: “Euery [every] man confesseth this to bee true. That by how much / the more benefitt hee hath reseued [received]

33 Folger MS E.a.4, fols. 1v–2r; *Luna*, <http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/485jfy>.

34 Folger MS V.a.160, p. 1; *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/09niv0>.

35 Folger MS V.a.160, p. 1 (second pagination); *Luna*, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/s/tt09dm>.

36 Cambridge, Emmanuel College, MS I.3.2, fol. 22r; *Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online*, www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/196903.

37 Cambridge MS I.3.2, fol. 1r; *Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online*, www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/196897.

fro[m] another by soe much / hee is the more bound to him.” Everybody agrees: the more benefit you receive from someone else, the more bound you are to that person—“but kinges & princes haue resea / ued [received] more at gods handes then others, seing that they / are made the Leiftenantes [lieutenants] of the world.”³⁸ Everybody knows it: the more you get, the more bound you are to the one who gave it to you. But kings and princes have received more than anyone. It stands to reason then that they should be more bound, and more subject, to the one who gave them what they have.

One of our greatest innovations to the commonplace book genre is to add citations. Not many early modern compilers kept track of where they found their quotes. But some did. One of the last authors we read in our course is John Milton. He made a commonplace book as well. On the leaf shown on the British Library’s website, he identified one topic as “De Divortio”: of divorce, which Milton provocatively supported. Immediately under the Latin heading, Milton added not only Latin passages on the subject but also very helpful citations. Milton’s first citation directed him, and anyone else who might use his commonplace book, back to “Hist. Concil. Trident.”³⁹ Perhaps this citation refers to a 1619 edition of *Historia del Concilio Tridentino* by Pietro Sarpi.⁴⁰ Milton’s first citation refers to “67.p.” And p. 67 of this book addresses “le dispense matrimoniali” and “le sentenze di diuortio.” The next citation includes the reference “l.8” for *libro* or book number 8, where Sarpi does indeed again discuss divorce. The next part of the citation identifies “p. 729 &c. et 737 &c.” These pages too concern the “contratto matrimonio” and the “decreti del matrimonio.”

Our own commonplace books ought to do the same thing that Milton’s does: direct us right back to where the compiler found a passage or topic. This could help your instructor recognize the value of your work. It’s even more likely to help you find the passages that you need for the course’s later writing assignments.

38 Cambridge MS I.3.2, fol. 2r; *Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online*, www.dspspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/196919.

39 British Library, Add. MS 36354, fol. 55v; Puck Fletcher, “Happy Birthday to John Milton!” *Untold lives blog*, <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2015/12/happy-birthday-to-john-milton.html>.

40 Pietro Sarpi, *Historia del Concilio Tridentino* (London, 1619; Austrian National Library 254804-C); available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=TOxKAAAACAAJ>.

