

**INTRODUCING PERIODICALS TO
UNDERGRADUATES:
SERIAL READING BLOGS &
WIKI MAGAZINES**

Jennifer Phegley

Department of English

University of Missouri-Kansas City

TEACHING AN ASYNCHRONOUS BRITISH LITERATURE SURVEY

- I've been teaching the Brit Lit Survey (Romantics to Moderns) online for a decade. In order to do so successfully, I adapted my assignments to create an engaging environment that places student writing (rather than instructor knowledge) front and center by using discussion boards, blogs, and wikis.
- I emphasize student collaboration rather than solitary work and shift away from private grading toward public feedback. Students share their work weekly and I respond to it in a class announcement, quoting from their writing and building on their ideas to create a shared knowledge base and sense of community.
- I provide the readings and structure, while students generate the course content. I facilitate and respond while the students interact.

WHY BLOG?

Blogging encourages students to:

- Experiment with new ideas and give and receive constructive feedback
- Practice building a focused argument supported by evidence in 500 words or less
- Frame their analysis using 19th-century contexts or connections to contemporary culture in order to engage their peers and establish the significance of their claims
- Develop an engaging voice and use titles and section headers to make their ideas clear and readily apparent.
- Incorporate relevant visual images (illustrations from the period, photographs of an author, book covers, etc.) using [Wikimedia Commons](#)

THE SERIAL READING BLOG

- In our Serial Reading Blog, students explore their reactions to Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, which we read in serial parts throughout the semester. Each student writes a blog every other week (for a total of 5 blogs over 9 weeks). They also reply to 2 peers' blogs per week (for a minimum of 18 responses).
- The first blog comes after reading the opening parts of *The Woman in White*. It asks students to analyze the novel in relation to [Shawn Crawford's "No Time to Be Idle: The Serial Novel and Popular Imagination"](#) and Wilkie Collins' "How I Write my Books." These essays succinctly introduce students to the publication context of the Victorian serial and get our discussion of the form rolling as we wait for the plot to thicken!
- I use the following prompt: **What gave rise to the serial novel in the nineteenth century? What are its pleasures and frustrations for both readers and writers? What elements of the serial novel can you identify in the first few installments? How does Collins' account of writing the novel coincide with or differ from Crawford's discussion of serialization? What are the parallels between Victorian serial reading and our current media consumption practices?**
- After kicking off the blog (everyone writes the first week), students go into rotation writing three **Open Topic blogs** and one **Periodical Context blog**, with an extra week for a **Make-Up Day** when they can submit one missed blog or two missed comments.

OPEN TOPIC BLOGS

For Open Topic blogs, I suggest the following approaches:

- Raise questions about the themes, characters, or plot points of the novel. Discuss the reason you've chosen those questions and/or why they seem important.
- Provide a close reading of a specific passage that you find interesting and explain why you were drawn to it or why you think it is significant, paying particular attention to the language Collins uses.
- Examine the beginning and ending of a serial part of the novel. How does Collins lure readers in and keep them coming back for more?
- Analyze Collins' use of multiple narrators to tell his story. What impact do these points of view have on your interpretation of the novel?
- Explore the ways in which the book illustrations from the 1861 edition (reproduced by Broadview Press) or from the [Harper's Weekly illustrations](#) published alongside the American serialization of the novel interact with the text. How might these images have influenced audience perceptions of the characters or themes. How might they amplify, contradict, or complicate your own interpretations?
- Make connections with other texts we've read in the course and/or build on the ideas presented by your peers in their blog entries.

PERIODICAL CONTEXT BLOGS

- For the Periodical Context blog, students read Deborah Wynne’s chapter on the serialization of *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round* from *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine*. Wynne argues that Dickens makes editorial decisions that enhance the sensationalism of the novel by highlighting issues related to “the proliferation of secrets and shocks” as well as “crime, detection, health, safety” and other topics that build suspense and mystery (39).
- Next, I ask students to [Visit the Dickens Journal Online page](#) to view issues of *All the Year Round* that coincide with their assigned serial parts of the novel.
- After browsing these issues of the magazine, students choose one article, story, or poem published alongside the novel and consider the following questions: **In what ways might your selection have influenced readers’ views of the themes and/or characters in the novel? Why might Dickens have included it in that particular issue? How does your chosen item resonate with the corresponding portion of Collins’ novel?**
- This assignment allows students to explore a magazine without becoming completely overwhelmed by the amount of content they encounter and to focus on something that interests them or that ties into the framework Wynne sets forth.

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE WIKI MAGAZINE

- Building on what they learned all semester, students work in teams to collaboratively produce a wiki magazine, choosing a theme from the course as the subject matter and authors or characters from our readings as the magazine editors and contributors. They create a visually interesting layout and work to tie the various magazine components they generate into a coherent whole over an intensive 3-week period with multiple deadlines that they set.
- We start with a collaboration contract that delineates their team goals and individual responsibilities, including a timeline for completion and methods of communicating. This supports a more positive collaborative experience because they start with a clear plan.
- They also have the opportunity to assess themselves and their teammates at the end of the process. I base their grades not only on the final product but also on their teamwork and accountability to the contract. Each student receives an individual grade, so they are not penalized for a possible slacker in the group.

COLLABORATION CONTRACT: SCOPE AND DESIGN

- What is the focus of your magazine? For example, is it about art, literature, food, fashion, gardening, movies, or home décor?
- What is the audience for your magazine? Are you trying to reach 19th, 20th, or 21st-century readers? What binds your readers together?
- Which authors or characters do you plan to use as editors or contributors and why? How might the contributions reflect authors' writing styles and/or interests? What would these authors or characters have to say about your magazine's subject matter?
- What features would suit your magazine? Would an interview, an advice column, or an advertising section be appealing to your audience? What readings from the course might you draw on to create such sections?
- How might you use your understanding of the literary periods of Romanticism, Victorianism, and Modernism to highlight different approaches to your magazine's contents? Will you focus on representing one period or cover all of them? Explain your choices.

COLLABORATION CONTRACT: ACCOUNTABILITY

- How are you going to communicate with each other during the project? Will you use Canvas messenger, email, text, phone, etc.?
- How are you going to divide responsibilities for the project so that each team member has an equal role? Who is going to be responsible for each element of the project (editing, designing the layout, writing articles, choosing images)?
- Describe the elements of your magazine and tell me who will be working on which part.
- How will members share their work with the group? Will you use the Canvas wiki page or some other method such as Google Docs?
- What will your deadlines be for drafts, revisions, and final proof-reading?
- What will you do if somebody does not do his or her part or misses a deadline?

BLOGGING RESOURCES

How Blogging Makes you a Better Writer

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/seven-reasons-why-blogging-can-make-you-better-academic-writer>

Tips for a Good Blog Entry

<http://ncteinbox.blogspot.com/2008/10/tips-on-good-blog-entry.html>

Effective Academic Blogging

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/blogging.html>

My Reflections on Teaching Blogging (in a more advanced class on Braddon)

<https://maryelizabethbraddon.com/blogging-braddon-in-the-online-classroom/>

Blogs Published by my Students (from more advanced courses)

<https://maryelizabethbraddon.com/rough-justice-from-victorian-police-narrative-to-1920s-hard-boiled-detective-fiction/>

<http://rs4vp.org/pushing-the-bounds-of-obscenity-in-the-times-and-ella-hepworth-dixons-the-story-of-a-modern-woman/>

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK ABOUT BLOGGING?

- I enjoyed the class blog. I think it was a unique way of generating new ideas in a less formal setting and I enjoyed writing them.
- I think the blogs helped to open up more discussion about our readings, and through them we were able to do research and discover new things. I found the blogs one of the most interesting parts of the class.
- When it comes to generating new knowledge, I feel like the blogs did a great job. Reading through what the other people had to say each week truly helped me understand the novel.
- I often feel a lot of anxiety around the writing process because the stakes are so high. I found it refreshing to have shorter, more informal writing assignments to help me sort through my ideas and impressions.
- Everyone was so supportive and I thoroughly enjoyed reading their comments.

ADVICE ON FACILITATING COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

- Collaborative writing can take many forms. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede describe *dialogic* and *hierarchical* collaboration: in dialogic collaboration, the group works together on all aspects of the project, whereas in hierarchical collaboration, the group divides the task into component parts and assigns certain components to each group member. Lunsford and Ede point out that these are not mutually exclusive categories; many collaborative writing projects involve both dialogic and hierarchical collaboration (*Singular Texts* 133-134).
- Successful collaboration, say Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, allows not only for "group cohesion" but also for "creative conflict" and the protection of "minority views" (*Singular Texts* 123). From such conflict can emerge "a joint inquiry into thorny problems, opening up live options that let us construct a language of possibility and a more complicated ground for action" (50-52). It is important for students to anticipate in advance that dissent and conflict will arise and to be ready to respond to it productively rather than wasting time trying to suppress, reform, or eject dissenters.
- See "Collaborative Pedagogy." By Rebecca Moore Howard. *Composition Pedagogies: A Bibliographic Guide*. Ed. Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

REFINING THE PERIODICAL CONTEXT ASSIGNMENT

In my first attempt at assigning Periodical Context blog to beginning English majors, I found that even with the limits I provided, some students were overwhelmed with information. The next time I teach the course, I may add the following suggestions:

- Use a quotation from Wynne to frame your blog entry and set up your argument.
- Be clear about the issue in which your chosen article, poem, or story was published.
- Be sure to connect that selection to something specific in the serial part it appears alongside.
- Analyze how the serial part of the novel and your selected piece might have influenced a reader's understanding of one or both of those features of the magazine.
- Conclude by explaining what we can learn about the novel as a serial; about the focus, tenor, or purpose of *All the Year Round*; or about the collaborative partnership of Dickens and Collins.