

Writing Assignment title: Atlas Writing Exercise

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Summary: Students create an atlas diagramming multiple features of the world and then write a paper analyzing the possible connectivity and covariance between these features.

Objectives:

1. Core concepts: Students will have a basic competence in the core concepts of each of the five disciplines, including an awareness of how these disciplines frame problems, and how the disciplines can complement one another.
2. Applying disciplinary contexts: Students will understand how to use historical background, geographical context, political systems, economic structures, and socio-cultural milieu to better understand regional and global developments.
3. Skills: Students develop core liberal arts skills: reading unfamiliar information and making sense of it; thinking critically about what they're reading; synthesizing material; coming to a conclusion about it; and articulating that conclusion verbally and in writing.
4. Representation: Students develop a recognition that all acts of representation are always partial—that they are shaped by the questions asked and the perspectives of those creating the representation. Therefore, students will be more critical consumers of such representations in the future.

Learning Outcomes:

- Students select four characteristics of the world and/or its international communities to analyze.
- Students create four original maps using data obtained from an atlas.
- Students construct a hypothesis concerning patterns and co-variances in the data they chose to analyze—how various social, cultural, physical, or economic factors might be interrelated.
- Students analyze the strength or probability of their hypothesis, appraising the support they have marshaled for their argument.

Materials Required:

- Published atlas as required text for course or on reserve. The handout below assumes students have the *Student Atlas of World Politics*, John Logan Allen, McGraw-Hill, but any other good current atlas could be substituted.
- Blank world maps for students to fill in. These are available free online for educators at:
http://geography.about.com/od/blankmaps/Blank_and_Outline_Maps.htm
- Assignment handout (see below).

Assignment Activities:

1. Go over assignment handout in class (below).

2. Suggest specific research questions that might serve as examples, helping students see ways (or reasons) to seek connections.
3. Ask students to free-write in class for a few minutes—what international phenomenon would they like to study with this exercise? What global or regional social problems could they try to unravel through mapping data? (Give them two or three minutes to think about this and write this.) Then ask, what kinds of data would you have to map to analyze the problem? Take a few minutes and share these in class, giving feedback on how to connect or complicate the data students suggest.
4. Optional: if possible, show a model of a well-done atlas from a previous class. If you can get permission from the student who authored it, scan a successful atlas and show it on the big screen—or pass a few around class if the class is small enough for this to be viable.
5. Optional: require a one-page prospectus (possibly posted on Blackboard) that outlines the student’s intended project two weeks before the project is due. Getting them started early may improve students’ final projects.
6. Optional: Consider having students reply to one another’s prospectus posts as part of their grade for the prospectus (or the atlas grade itself), giving feedback to one another about other features to examine, etc., how best to analyze the data, etc. This allows them to view many project ideas (which may improve their own) and also helps them develop evaluation skills.
7. Before the assignment due date, consider taking a day to discuss writing conventions in your field. See “comments” below.

Comments: Students often arrive in your classroom not having been taught yet how to write in the social sciences. Scheduling at least one day to talk about writing is time well spent—for you and for them. (For you this may lead to fewer hours marking errors on papers and seeing a surge in “successful” assignments. For them this is disciplinary knowledge they need your expert assistance with.) Consider making a one-page handout of the writing conventions most valued or expected in your field, or discussing common student errors on an overhead projection. Be sure to include information regarding your field’s preferred citation format.

Grading Criteria: (adapted from Shaw 1984)

Determine the following:

- a. Does the paper clearly articulate
 - i. A controversial question?
 - ii. The author’s position on this question?
- b. Is the author’s position supported by evidence, including research findings, data, and examples?
- c. Does the author articulate and respond to critics’ arguments?
- d. Does the author properly cite in the text and include a full bibliography?
- e. Does the author produce complete and coherent sentences and paragraphs?
- f. Is the paper free of many or gross mechanical errors?

[Instructor's note: "If the answer to any of these questions is "no," I give the paper some kind of C. If the answer to more than one of these questions is "no," the paper receives a low C or below.]

For papers that meet the above criteria, ask the following questions:

- g. Is the paper well and thoroughly researched? Has the student gone beyond class materials and engaged in independent investigation into this question?
- h. Is the argument creative, strong and persuasive?
- i. Is the evidence appropriate, strong and employed effectively in the argument?
- j. Is the paper well written? Does the author write in the active voice and use appropriate words and phrasing? Are paragraphs and transitions well constructed? Is the paper's tone appropriate? Does it have a strong introduction and conclusion that do more than just restate the remaining content? Does the paper use quotations sparingly and effectively? Are grammatical and mechanical errors kept to a minimum? Is the style efficient, not wordy and unclear?

ATLAS WRITING EXERCISE

This assignment combines working with data and maps with social scientific analysis. Using the data in your *Student Atlas*, you will map four characteristics of the world's variation in economy/development. You will map these features on four separate blank world maps by 1) choosing four to seven categories for each feature, 2) color coding each category, and 3) coloring the map according to the data. Be sure to include a color key as well.

Read the data tables in the back of the *Student Atlas* carefully. *Do not recreate one of the maps already presented in the atlas.* Choose your features according to an explicit hypothesis that links them. For example, you might hypothesize that population will co-vary with GDP per capita, women's health and environmental standards. Or you might hypothesize that consumption per capita of kilowatt-hours can explain health care availability, education and life expectancy. Choose interesting and unique combinations and consider them carefully. Choose only features that you understand and avoid comparing per capita or percentage data with absolute figures. After mapping each, study your maps carefully and look for patterns. What regional variations do you see in each map? What might explain them? Then look at the maps together. Where do the features co-vary? Where do they diverge? How do your maps support or fail to support your hypothesis? How do you explain the patterns? I am looking for intelligent and creative hypotheses and analysis. Leave no stone unturned or reference uncited.

Your paper should be presented according to the following outline:

1. HYPOTHESES
 - a. Presentation of your hypothesis(es)
 - b. Explanation of its logic – why do you expect the relationships you do?
2. DESCRIPTION – a very thorough, and entirely descriptive, section that reports your findings
 - a. Referring to your maps, describe the patterns or lack thereof that emerge
 - i. In individual maps – report the distribution on each map, including patterns and outliers
 - ii. Comparison of the four maps – where do the features correlate, where do they not?
3. ANALYSIS
 - a. Is your hypothesis supported?
 - b. How do you explain the patterns or lack of patterns you found?
 - c. What did you learn from this study that you did not know or expect when you started?

Your paper should be presented in the same format described above for the study abroad paper, with the following changes and additions:

- 1) Up to 7 pages of text.

- 2) Append your maps neatly to the back of the paper. *Do not roll your maps.*
- 3) Put your legends either directly on each map or on a page stapled to the back of your paper.
- 4) Each map should have
 - a. A title (the name of the feature mapped)
 - b. Your name
 - c. The page numbers where the mapped data are found in the atlas.

This assignment is the most important of the semester and accounts for 25% of your grade. I will look for careful selection of features and data categories, clear maps, well-reasoned hypotheses, clear and concise descriptions and thorough analysis.