Writing in the Eighteenth Century

Heather Morrison
State University of New York at New Paltz

We do not always have to follow the newest of ideas in our teaching practices. As historians, we could learn from the past in developing our classes while paying attention to contemporary discussions of effective pedagogy. Intellectuals have always thought deeply about means of sharing knowledge and modeling knowledge practices. The focus of the enlightenment on critical reasoning and methods of popularizing knowledge aligns well with general pedagogical goals of developing writing and critical thinking. In teaching the enlightenment, we can have students delve into influential eighteenth-century theories of human reason and education by asking them to exercise the same knowledge practices those theorists advocated. Doing this would help teach both the ideas and the methods of the enlightenment, and encourage student development in writing, criticism, and even informed wit.

I teach an upper-level, writing-intensive history course on the eighteenth-century enlightenment in Europe. All students, regardless of major, are required to take a writing-intensive class like this; the class can also count towards requirements for degrees in history, education with a concentration in social studies, or general upper-level liberal arts credits for B.A. degrees. The student body in
this class is therefore mixed between students deeply interested in intellectual history and philosophy, students in education whose constrained schedules make a course that counts for two requirements appealing, or students whose majors do not offer writing-intensive courses, such as business or the sciences.

When designing “The Enlightenment,” I wanted to present content dynamically in a subject that I feel passionately about. Pedagogically, I sought methods that could help me overcome students’ intellectual insecurities when looking at early modern philosophical works or developing their own writing. As the course is a writing-intensive one for our campus, I can use writing exercises as a way to help students learn. I also wished to design a course for both the students coming into the class already engaged and excited about the subject, and those who see the course as a requirement in an area and discipline in which they perhaps have no pre-existing knowledge or interest.

Given the time constraints of a semester, the complexities of this historical movement, and the lack of general knowledge about the enlightenment among most of the student body, I do not design the class to attempt full coverage of enlightenment intellectual history. Rather, I aim to lead the students to an understanding of the enlightenment not as a set of unitary ideas, but rather as a process developing through new publishing practices and social forms. The central text for the course is James Van Horn Melton’s *Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (2001), which ensures that the students are exposed to broad considerations of the reception and dissemination of ideas. Many of the course assignments focus on exploring social or print means of generating and sharing ideas. Over a couple of course days, students seek to imitate a formal salon conversation and informal coffeehouse conversations using assigned readings to generate discussion. This allows them to experience the importance of conversation to cultivate ideas just as they read about authors who were convinced of its necessity. They write about an author’s choice of genre (such as whether the author was criticizing novels, pornography, poetry, letters, or treatises) and how that choice affects the way their ideas convey to readers. They do a research paper on social means of spreading ideas; the topic within that broad prompt is one they can choose.

The class thus seeks to focus on the enlightenment as a process through which an array of people sought to change thinking on
human society and practices. To ground these discussions of how the movement worked as a process over time and across boundaries like regions, religions, and degrees of literacy, the primary sources the students read are focused on a few core themes and build on one another throughout the semester. For example, the paper assignment I introduce here covers early enlightenment discussions of human understanding and education by John Locke and Pierre Bayle, as well as mid-eighteenth-century ideas building on and departing from that earlier work by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Later in the semester, the students read substantial sections of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). When she engages with Rousseau, then, the students can recognize and appreciate her criticisms, for they had earlier developed their own criticisms of his work on education. Through these authors, I can also illustrate to the students how, gradually, the enlightenment went from seeking to understand human thinking and improve elite education to articulating concepts of education as a more general right. The coverage of the ideas of the enlightenment is necessarily highly selective, given the diversity of enlightenment thought and the limited time in a semester. My goal in choosing readings like these is simply to give a cohesive sample across some topics and allow students to explore how criticism developed through time.

In considering how to get students to perceive the enlightenment as a dynamic movement that went beyond the content of the ideas produced and to address how intellectuals should best act to change the world, I took some ideas for my approach from my subject field. With the course size capped at twenty students, I incorporate active learning approaches into the class. I thus designed the class with content focused on the ideas of the enlightenment, but with activities and background readings that reflect on the methods of the enlightenment movement. In referencing and adapting enlightenment-era knowledge sharing practices for contemporary teaching, students are made to think consciously about the ideals and the work behind establishing both a movement for change and an intellectual community. A central way enlightenment intellectuals sought to spread and share their ideas was through print. To ensure students fully understand the variety of genres and writing styles employed to attract interest in criticism, I assign works or excerpts of works written by philosophers in a broad array of forms. To force
engagement with these popularizing styles, writing assignments require critical reflection on genre, and even imitation—where students take a style of criticism and writing and apply it to relevant issues today.

The Critical Enlightenment Book Review Assignment

The first paper I assign in this course engages students with key enlightenment concepts, upon which later readings will build, while also teaching by immersing the students in the intellectual practices they read about. Through this writing assignment, the students learn general habits of enlightenment criticism and the specific methods of eighteenth-century book reviewers as they seek to engage critically with enlightenment theories on thought and pedagogy. I layered this paper with two components: a surface-level analytical comparison and critique of short readings on cognition and education from major eighteenth-century authors; and, beneath the surface, an application of readings about enlightenment-era practices of reviewing books in a student imitation of an eighteenth-century literary form.

The paper asked that students critically compare at least two of a set of four assigned readings by enlightenment authors René Descartes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The readings cover the development of enlightenment ideas on human reason, understanding of how the mind works, and theories of best practices for education. The cognition readings assigned for one class session included a selection from Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (1637) on the process of reasoning one’s way to truths, and a short excerpt from John Locke’s “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1690) that described how we get ideas through the senses or reflection. In these readings, the students encounter some concepts they often have at least heard of before, like Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am” phrase and Locke’s concept of the “blank slate.” This familiarity helps reinforce for them the importance of the subject matter, which is useful at this early point in the semester. Each of the readings also critically engage with thinkers who came before them, at times by directly addressing the work of a particular scholar, at others by raising criticism and doubt as part of the process of developing understanding. This allows me to introduce the intellectual history leading up to the enlightenment and the
Writing in the Eighteenth Century

precondition of criticism of accepted ideas—as Descartes enjoined, to get to truth, one must start first with doubt. The readings also introduce the students to the philosophy of how truth is established and how the mind works. Locke’s descriptions of how knowledge develops through a combination of sensory input and the processes of human understanding internal to the brain are a bit difficult for students to work through, but I link them to the radical implications of his rejection of innate knowledge and differences of ability. This significance, which students grasp easily when we talk about how this supports the idea of equality and, therefore, equity in rights, usually helps motivate them to work to understand the theory.

These short selections from Locke and Descartes articulate enlightenment optimism in knowledge building and reason. Showing the practical application of philosophy of cognition and innate vs. learned abilities, the next day’s course readings are on education. Locke, again, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau succinctly critique customary practices of education and offer arguments for optimal ways to form youth. I assign selected passages from Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1762). These selections incorporate some sharp criticisms of a range of things students have opinions about, like corporal punishment, breastfeeding practices, and spoiling vs. over-regimented childrearing practices. Rousseau also aids comparison by directly praising and critiquing Locke’s contributions to education theory. The two selections have enough common themes for students to develop direct comparison. Ideas on when and how to motivate student learning, what the age of reason is, the role of nature versus society’s cultivation of youth, and how education might be structured in practice are all raised in both readings. These readings thus provide students a range of topics and comparative material while remaining short and, for the most part, clear and accessible. This is to be the content from which they will develop critical written arguments.

I complicate what would otherwise be a typical analytical essay by requiring students to learn about and then imitate the style of eighteenth-century book reviews. During the eighteenth century, a steadily increasing stream of books from the proliferating printing presses confronted readers. Literary production during that century far outpaced that of the millennia before. With such scale of print emerging from the presses, no one could hope to have a universal
grasp of emerging ideas. To cope with the large selection of books and accompanying impossibility of reading all the emerging knowledge while still fulfilling desires for a well-rounded understanding of various knowledge areas, readers in the eighteenth century devised new methods. One such attempt to harness the scale of publication was the creation of subscription libraries. Whereas one consumer could not identify and buy all the important works appearing in print, an association pooling its money might hope to. Another attempt was the creation of periodicals that sought to review new publications. Such journals arranged books chronologically and by subject matter, providing readers an overview of what was happening in the broader world of ideas. Weekly review journals described books’ content and value in one accessible, periodical publication, while also placing those books in the broader context of knowledge development in that field of thought. Reviews also established taste in form, style, and even opinion. As a result, they became an important new layer between authors and readers. Reviewers acted as arbiters, but also humanized authors and directly evoked a community of consumers of print. Some of the most prominent intellectuals of the enlightenment busied themselves with reviewing other writers’ works.

With knowledge of the context of book review journals, then, students should be better primed for looking for such conversations in print between intellectuals writing during the enlightenment. In the week after this paper is due, the students read some of Voltaire’s writings that directly engaged with printed books and their authors in a critical yet conversational way. One semester I taught the class, the students raised that trait of his writings without needing a prompt from me. They then discussed his acerbic style and whether that can be seen as encouraging knowledge development or tearing it down. When they get to Wollstonecraft and her damning discussion of Rousseau, they see enlightenment authors as engaging in a conversation in print. By being exposed to the proliferation in print and the widespread practice of criticism in the context of reviews and linking this to the enlightenment discussions of criticism as a value itself, the students connect practices they can easily identify to philosophical intents.

Departing from the readings on the philosophy of human understanding and education, I next assign material to expose students to the practices of eighteenth-century book reviews. I introduce them to three prominent intellectuals in Berlin who created
several review journals over a few decades. Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and Friedrich Nicolai were prolific reviewers exposing German-speaking audiences to many of the new ideas and debates of the mid-eighteenth century. Friedrich Nicolai also wrote explicitly about the methods, style, and purpose of a review and review journals. An article by a historian on Nicolai’s methods allows me to teach eighteenth-century views on the role of criticism and the reviewer in that era of rapid expansion of and access to ideas. James van der Laan’s essay, “Nicolai’s Concept of the Review Journal,” in an edited collection called The Eighteenth-Century German Book Review is ideal for my teaching purposes because it very clearly lays out six stylistic requirements for a successful eighteenth-century book review while explaining why each element is important. The methods Nicolai promoted were: clarity about the book’s content; impartiality; frankness in assessing strengths or weaknesses; satire as a means to critique; the assumption that criticism reflects a valid truth; and a conversational tone.

Through this list, the students get a clear set of instructions on how to model their own book review, as well as historical context on the practices of eighteenth-century journalists. In the article’s discussion of the need for candid criticism, they learn Nicolai favored having anonymous reviewers so they would feel more free to speak their mind regardless of the status of the author they critiqued or the potential backlash against their judgments. The in-class discussion of anonymity, then, helps students cast aside contemporary assumptions about the meaning of authorship, intellectual property, and accountability to consider the evolving practices of eighteenth-century authors. In class, I review the range of options for anonymity and the ways in which people could both be an anonymous reviewer and still get recognition for their work. My descriptions of the use of anagrams, inverted initials, and pen names that evoke ideals leads to a free-association of how students in the class might come up with their own authorial alias, which I write on the board as the students generate them. Similarly, van der Laan’s raising of satire as one of Nicolai’s ideal approaches to criticism allows us to explore an eighteenth-century form through consideration of its use today. As a result of the students’ familiarity with The Colbert Report or Saturday Night Live’s ridicule of contemporary political figures, I can get the students to generate a definition of satire and explore
its methods, applications, and effectiveness. We connect that to a quote from Nicolai in the article that states, “Satire is without doubt the most powerful and perhaps the only means, of improving bad authors—and we do indeed wish we could improve them!”

We discuss the eighteenth-century ideal traits of a reviewer as neither engaging in ad hominem attacks nor allowing personal relationships or prior knowledge of an author to bias their reading of a text. This material also encourages student reflection on effective arguments in their own and others’ work. While the review article provides them hints for improving their approach to criticism, its discussion of the need for clarity, conciseness, and accessible writing style also allows me to connect to goals the students should have for their own written work, as well as the importance of thinking of the needs of one’s readers. The reading thus provides a basis for a broader discussion of effective communication in print.

Van der Laan’s short article provides a clear assessment of eighteenth-century book review methods; I also provide the students with short examples of actual eighteenth-century reviews so they can see them in practice and judge how the review article and Nicolai’s stated ideals of a reviewer look when applied to a real piece of criticism. Of course, these do not completely match Nicolai’s ideals, as was the case with a Mendelssohn review that the students point out is a bit too biting and personal. Nevertheless, they can see the adopted tone of the authoritative reviewer and have some examples of style they can imitate more directly. The assignment requires students to reflect on these readings and the corresponding class discussion in developing the style of their own review. They have some freedom to determine which aspects of the eighteenth-century book review formula established in “Nicolai’s Concept of the Review Journal” they wish to borrow from, a freedom that the actual samples of reviews from the 1700s reinforced because of their selective employment of some of those Nicolai-endorsed practices. Whatever stylistic choices the students make, they must explain and justify them in connection with these assigned readings and accompanying class discussion. I therefore require that students add annotated footnotes throughout their review, noting when they employed one of the aspects of the review discussed above or imitate something they noticed in Mendelssohn’s or Lessing’s practices. In the footnotes, they employ Chicago-style citations to refer to the
source material that informed their writing choices. The result is a three-page paper containing comparative analysis of the ideas of some eighteenth-century theories, while students develop a creative imitation of styles used by writers in that same century.

Results

I have assessed the results of this assignment over three separate semesters of teaching this course in the last five years. The papers themselves provide most of my information on the outcomes, but I also surveyed students to get reactions and feedback on the assignment. Through this assignment, I have been able to teach students enlightenment ideas and methods integratively. The students learn this material actively, as they work through the imitation of methods. Not unimportantly, the assignment also provides me some benefits as an instructor. I find that grading it is less of a burden than a direct analytical essay because I am interested in seeing the students’ creative application of stylistic elements. The students have developed pen names that made me laugh out loud, pushed boundaries in expressing their attacks on ideas they did not like, and altogether made many of these papers a refreshing joy to read. As the first paper assignment, it provides me useful insight into the personalities and interests of these students. I also can limit my attention to grammatical issues in this first paper for the class rather than also addressing problems of style in a student’s writing. To encourage their imagination and sense of enjoyment in the writing of this paper, I tell them they can copy Locke’s long-winded sentences, develop a mock eighteenth-century writing style of another sort, or rely on their own styles, which takes away some of their self-consciousness and fears in writing. The assignment thus accommodates the range of writing abilities among the students who tend to sign up for this course. By setting aside formal paper style as a concern in the first paper, this approach also incorporates an incremental or stepped approach to developing students’ abilities in written communication. A final benefit of the assignment is the way it sets up future course readings. Because a later section of the course assigns substantial sections of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, having students write on the authors she critically engages with ensures some familiarity and investment in her contributions. As
mentioned above, it also trains them to accept criticism as a central step in the process of enlightenment. Finally, since so much of the class seeks to understand enlightenment as a project involving not just intellectuals, but also a reading public, writing the paper seems to get students to think more systematically about an author’s cultivation of and concern over their relationship to their public.

After three semesters of offering this assignment and reflecting on its results in the form of the papers written and students’ perspectives, I have made some changes, while seeking to keep anything that seemed to result in real learning results and student engagement. The initial design of the assignment involved a peer review session, which did much to perfect the explanatory annotated footnotes and to get students consciously thinking about the tone and style of their writing. It was less successful at forcing students to engage more deeply in their analysis of the works on education, as the students seem to have it ingrained in them to not critique each other’s ideas. Students were also unsure of how to “correct” writing when the students were being allowed to write creatively, so comments varied from students trying to force their peers into a more formal, typical paper-writing style to students being unwilling to make any comments on writing, fearing everything is a potential stylistic choice. Peer review sessions also create some anxiety among students, for they are unfortunately unused to having their peers help proofread their writing. While a writing-intensive class at my institution is required to incorporate this experience at some point in the semester, I decided that in the first month and with this particular assignment, it was not ideal. By abandoning this component, the students came to enjoy the assignment and the creativity it allowed much more. Yet it also meant that the papers varied in their degree of success in explaining and supporting their stylistic choices through annotated footnotes.

Students now view this assignment positively. Though they may initially feel confusion before the in-class discussion of the readings on review styles, after that discussion, they find the imitative style requirement to be fun. One student noted that they thought analyzing the theoretical content was aided by the assignment, commenting, “I thought it made things a little easier actually writing in Book Review style. I could use humor which I like doing in my writing; made things a little easier for me.” Similarly, another student commented about the paper’s construction, “It was fairly easy and interesting.
Perhaps the interesting part made it seem easier.” This sentiment is frequently repeated in the anonymous student surveys.

The topics the students write on also accommodate the diverse student interests and ability levels that are always reflected in the class. The range of topics presented in the readings they analyze allows me to cover three central enlightenment topics in class discussions: the intellectual history of enlightenment philosophical methods; the understanding of cognition as it developed through those methods; and the practical application of those ideas on a social problem—the education of youth. Students, while being exposed to all of these topics through the readings and class discussions, could choose what they wrote about based on their interests and abilities. Those students taking the class because of their interests in intellectual history or philosophy typically write about the theories of cognition or explanations of method. Students in education programs have universally chosen to write about the education theories. Those without a background in the history of ideas or pedagogy also tend to write about education, because they can apply their discussion of these ideas to personal experience of the education system and parents’ practices of rearing children. A student who reacted against the readings’ depictions of ideal education involving one tutor overseeing an individual child’s intellectual and moral development adopted the pen name “Eli Tist.” Another, most interested in thinking through the development of knowledge on human reason, titled her review with a clever amalgam of Descartes’ and Locke’s phrasing: “I think, therefore I understand.” This student, I found out later, tended to be intimidated when expressing herself in writing about philosophy formally. Yet, in informal writing like with this critique, she worked through harder ideas than the students who chose to write on education. She even brought in some interesting metaphors she found useful in her efforts, writing, “it’s like coins and bills are the objects of a financial system. Ideas are the objects, or the “physical” proof that thinking exists.” One male student who had been struggling personally with decisions about whether or not to go into teaching as a career focused on gender issues and the assumptions revealed in the depictions of fathers and male tutors. By allowing the students to develop their own interests through writing, I came to know more about them, their interests, and their unique abilities.
The freedom students had to pick such topics was appreciated. One student noted in the survey that “It was nice being able to pick what we deemed as important and give our opinion on the matter.” In addition to the comments like the ones above noting that the assignment made the analytical paper seem easier to the students, I received other student comments noting that the assignment made them work harder to understand the ideas. Of the style requirements, one wrote, “I think it made me go back and make sure I understood the points [of the readings on human understanding]. If there was a point I wanted to make fun of, I needed to make sure I understood what the person was saying.”

Though the benefits of the assignment ensure I will continue to use it, there are some problems with it as well. The paper is complex because of the two levels of the regular content and the explanatory footnotes. Students have mixed opinions on the footnote requirements. Complaints include that it is difficult to do, that it is unnecessary since I should recognize the style they are imitating because we talked so much about the methods in class, or that it allowed them only to comment on particular, small style choices rather than simply state the overall approach they took to the whole review. Yet others thought the requirement was fine, and some found it helpful. One student wrote, “I liked the footnotes, the footnotes allowed me to give a reason why I put what I wanted in the paper. It was an easier way to connect the readings than writing a standard essay.” Beyond the experience of footnoting and justifying stylistic choices, this component of the paper can also be problematic because it requires a thorough setup of the paper and extensive class discussion of the accompanying readings, especially for the book reviews. The varying degrees of student success in the annotated footnotes is another problem, as is the range of student willingness or ability to develop deep analysis and packed coverage of the philosophers’ ideas. For example, one student had seven footnotes saying only “critical analysis” or “sarcasm.” In contrast, this is just one of multiple detailed footnotes in another student’s paper:

This paragraph, along with the four after it, are in place “first and foremost… [to] give the reader a clear indication of what the book[s] under consideration [are] all about.” (Nicolai, 101) These five paragraphs give the reader of the review a proper summary of the differences between Locke and Rousseau’s arguments, and most
importantly, where their arguments directly disagree. In the second sentence of this paragraph, I attempt to utilize a bit of sarcasm to show the borderline absurdity of Locke’s first points on physicality in his treatise on education. (Nicolai, 106, 107)

So, whereas one student quotes from, analyzes, and applies specific material from the reading on eighteenth-century book reviews, the other seemed to only retain a couple key words on the methods from that discussion.

Nevertheless, the footnotes have their benefits. For one, it helps me understand the intentions behind a student’s writing. I probably would have overlooked a student’s wordplay without a footnote saying, “Dad joke: word play of Descartes and discard.” At other times, the footnotes help me see that a student is understanding the desires of an eighteenth-century author trying to connect with their public. One thus noted, “I am using a conversational tone, to make the readers feel like we have gone through a journey together.” Because of such benefits, I will seek to resolve the wide range of practice in the explanatory footnotes by going over models and describing the requirement more clearly for future classes.

I also would like to improve some of the teaching materials, especially locating more samples of actual eighteenth-century book reviews for students to consult. It is hard to imagine a better overview of review methods than the van der Laan article, but its use of German quotes alienates the students. I have resolved this to some extent by providing an addendum with translations to those quotes and by explaining how the author always follows the quotes with an explanation of their content. This serves the double purpose of reinforcing a message to students on how they, too, need to follow evidence and quotes in their writing with direct analysis that explains how that evidence supports the argument they are making.

**Conclusion**

In constructing any class, finding the most effective means of conveying knowledge and enthusiasm for learning is one of my central preoccupations. But enlightenment intellectuals also self-consciously wrestled with that same challenge. I hope that connecting my idealism as a teacher with eighteenth-century intellectuals’ optimism in their ability to effect change will produce
a productive learning environment. The varied methods considered by enlightenment authors to reach broad audiences and develop knowledge continues to have immediate applications. I felt that this very issue provided the answer to the problem of engaging students in philosophical ideas. If I convey the social application—both then and in our own society—of intellectual endeavors, I hope students would then become less reluctant to devote energy to difficult texts and topics. In this book review assignment, I believe I have found a successful application of enlightenment practices to a modern learning environment. This paper encourages both student learning in the content of enlightenment ideas and the methods of critical, accessible writing. Students engage in metacognition by using the critical reasoning capacities of their brains in the context of a contemporary education system, all made transparent through their engagement with eighteenth-century theories of cognition and education. Through their eighteenth-century book review paper, the students also engage in what might be termed “metacriticism” by participating in enlightenment styles of writing criticism in a critical thinking writing assignment in the contemporary classroom.
Notes


4. Students are also exposed to the concepts of the public sphere in this class through James Van Horn Melton’s survey, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001).


Discover Asia

The Dream of East Asia
The Rise of China, Nationalism, Popular Memory, and Regional Dynamics in Northeast Asia
John Lie

NEW! 2018 Book Release
available now at: bit.ly/AASPubs

Presenting a framework for understanding contemporary Northeast Asia, focusing on the countries that comprise our conventional understanding of what we call East Asia

Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia
A Literary History
Edited by Mark Halsey, John Leong, and Rachel Hahn

Surveys the historical and cultural significance of modern short fiction in Southeast Asian nations

Chinese Literature: An Introduction
From Oracle Bones to the Internet
Bonfigli

An introduction to Chinese Literature that traces its origins in the seventh century and explores a literary legacy

Japanese Literature
From the oral to the internet
Masao Maruyama

ORDER NOW
bit.ly/AASPubs
Up to 20% discount for AAS Members

Zen Past and Present
Eric Cunningham

A concise but comprehensive survey of the history of Zen Buddhism

Teaching Japanese Popular Culture

A theoretical engagement with pedagogy of Japanese popular culture

Innovative, unique teaching resource journal published three times a year

Association for Asian Studies
PUBLICATIONS