

## The Value of Writing “How-to” Books in High School World History and Geography Class

*“I LEARNED THAT I’M A GOOD WRITER AND IF WE HAVE PROJECTS LIKE THIS I WOULD DO BETTER.”*

*“EVERY TIME I WRITE IT SEEMS TO GET BETTER AND BETTER WITH VOCABULARY AND WORD CHOICE.”*

*“I LEARNED HOW A SAMURAI GOES INTO TRAINING OR INTO A FIGHT OR EVEN HOW THEY WERE RAISED. I FELT LIKE A RETIRED SAMURAI WRITING ABOUT MYSELF IN DUTY.”*

*“I LEARNED THAT IF I STUDY/RESEARCH THE RIGHT TOPIC THAT INTERESTS ME THEN I WOULD BE A BETTER HISTORY STUDENT AND PAY MORE ATTENTION IN CLASS.”*

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THIS IS A STORY about eighty-six ninth-grade World History and Geography students who authored a “how-to” book, while pretending that they were experts who lived in the past and had to explain how to do something relating to that time period. These students attended a large high school in the Midwest; the school’s population is 55% Caucasian, and 16% of students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The students were asked to write a “how-to” book about a topic relating to the time period between 300 and 1500 CE (Era 4 of the state’s high school expectations for World History and Geography). This period can offer challenges for both teachers and students. Andrew Langley, author of *Medieval Life*, believes that “In many ways medieval times seem remote and mysterious, peopled by knights and ladies, kings and bishops, monks and pilgrims.”<sup>1</sup> Over the years, Katie (the first author) has found that one difficult concept for her students to grasp is the political power of the Church during the Middle Ages. The purpose of the “how-to” book writing project was to make life during the Middle Ages accessible to teenagers and to motivate them to want to learn about the past.

**“How-to” Book Requirements**

1. A cover page with the title (including the words “how-to”), a relevant graphic, and the student’s name.
2. A table of contents with at least six “chapters” (steps or headings to highlight the major themes).
3. At least eight graphics and a minimum of four sources, including three primary sources (no more than three could be from the Internet).
4. At least 500 words of the student’s writing.
5. Explanatory captions for graphics.
6. A list of all sources.
7. An autobiographical statement about the student, with his or her photograph. (The biography did not have to be entirely true to real life.)

**Figure 1:** “How-to” book requirements (for ninth graders).

**The “How-to” Book Writing Assignment**

When assigning the “how-to” book, Katie first identified the curricular objectives. Since the project has been so successful, in addition to the guidelines, students are given examples of titles and “how-to” books that previous students had written. In these projects, they were asked to write their books as a series of instructions for an audience. Students had to compose short chapters that provided specific details that the reader could use. Students were told that their creativity would be rewarded. Katie explained the “how-to” book requirements (See Table 1). Points were rewarded for each of these requirements. Katie notes that if students had been seniors rather than ninth graders, more chapters and resources would have been required. The “how-to” book writing process was broken into parts, and due dates were spread over two weeks (See Table 2).

Katie walked students through the writing process of brainstorming topic titles and ideas. They practiced writing a first paragraph so that it would grab their readers’ interest by giving some historical background or asking their readers a question.<sup>2</sup> Students were asked to choose a title, gather information, and then organize their essays using headings as steps in a process. They were to use their instructions to explain the

**Time Table for “How-to” Book Writing Sequence**

1. Student autobiographies due first.
2. Cover page, including a graphic, due three days later.
3. Table of contents, listing their six chapters, as well as a draft of chapter one due two days later.
4. Three graphics or visuals due two days later.
5. Draft of three more chapters, along with two primary sources, due three days later.
6. Finished “how-to” book presentation to the class, due three days later.

**Figure 2:** “How-to” book assignment time table.

process to another teenager who lived between 300-1500 CE. Katie explained to the students that each heading should be followed by a paragraph or two providing examples and details. Photographs were to be added to help with the explanation and to keep the readers’ interest. Students were encouraged to put their humor and personality into their writing to keep their readers turning the page (and learning some history). Students turned in their first “chapter” as a rough draft. If time permits, peer review is helpful for the revision of developing drafts. Also, later student presentation of their entire “how-to” books to their classmates promotes pride and a learning community. After students completed their “how-to” books, they were asked to complete an anonymous survey (See Table 3).

**Examples of Students’ “How-to” Books**

Students chose a wide variety of topics for their “how-to” books (See Table 4). Students’ humor and personality were evident in their books. For example, the student who wrote “How to Be a Successful Merchant in East Africa” followed the title with a cautionary note that “your results may vary.” The student who authored “How to Decrease the Spread of the Bubonic Plague” tied a plush, toy rat to her book. Katie felt that the photographs and design layouts in the students’ “how-to” book were impressive.

Students internalized the directions of how to organize their “how-to” books using headings as chapters. They followed each heading with

Results of “How-to” Book Survey (Scale 1-5)		
1.	How much did you enjoy writing a “How-to” book?	3.37
2.	How much do you feel like you had ownership in your “How-to” book? In other words, to what extent did you feel like you wrote this book <u>for yourself</u> or <u>for your own pride</u> , even though it had been assigned to you?	3.26
3.	How proud are you of your “How-to” book?	3.95
4.	In comparison to other tests and projects in this class, how motivated were you to work on your “How-to” book? (circle one answer please)	
	Less	12.79%
	Same	48.83%
	More	38.37%
5.	Did working on your “How-to” book motivate you to want to know more about the topic?	3.36
6.	Did working on your “How-to” book motivate you to want to learn about the next topic to be studied in your World History and Geography class?	3.05
7.	Do you think you learned enough about your “How-to” book topic to have made the time and effort you put into your “how-to” book worthwhile?	4.02
8.	What did you learn about yourself as a writer by writing a “How-to” book?	
	I am a good writer; writing takes time, effort, motivation	34/68 (39.53%)
	[No answer]	17/86 (19.77%)
	Writing steps is hard, easy, I learned how to write steps	13/86 (15.12%)
	I learned more about topic or technology	11/86 (12.79%)
	Nothing	7/86 (8.14%)
	I prefer a different writing genre	4/86 (4.65%)
	I am not a good writer	2/86 (2.32%)
9.	What did you learn about yourself as a history student by writing a “How-to” book?	
	I learned about the topic and research	29/86 (33.72%)
	The assignment was fun and interesting	19/86 (22.09%)
	[No answer]	16/86 (18.60%)
	It takes effort to write well	15/86 (17.44%)
	Nothing	4/86 (4.65%)
	I don’t like history or I don’t like “how-to” genre writing	2/86 (2.32%)
10.	What would you suggest could be done to make the “How-to” book writing project a better experience for future World History and Geography students?	
	[No answer]	21/86 (24.42%)
	Allow more work time	14/86 (16.28%)
	Allow wider historical time range of topics	12/86 (13.95%)
	Make less work-allow group work	10/86 (11.63%)
	I enjoyed the project-thought it was fine as is	10/86 (11.63%)
	Narrow the historical time range of topics	5/85 (5.81%)
	Expand this project	4/86 (4.65%)
	I didn’t enjoy this project	3/86 (3.49%)

**Figure 3:** “How-to” book survey results.



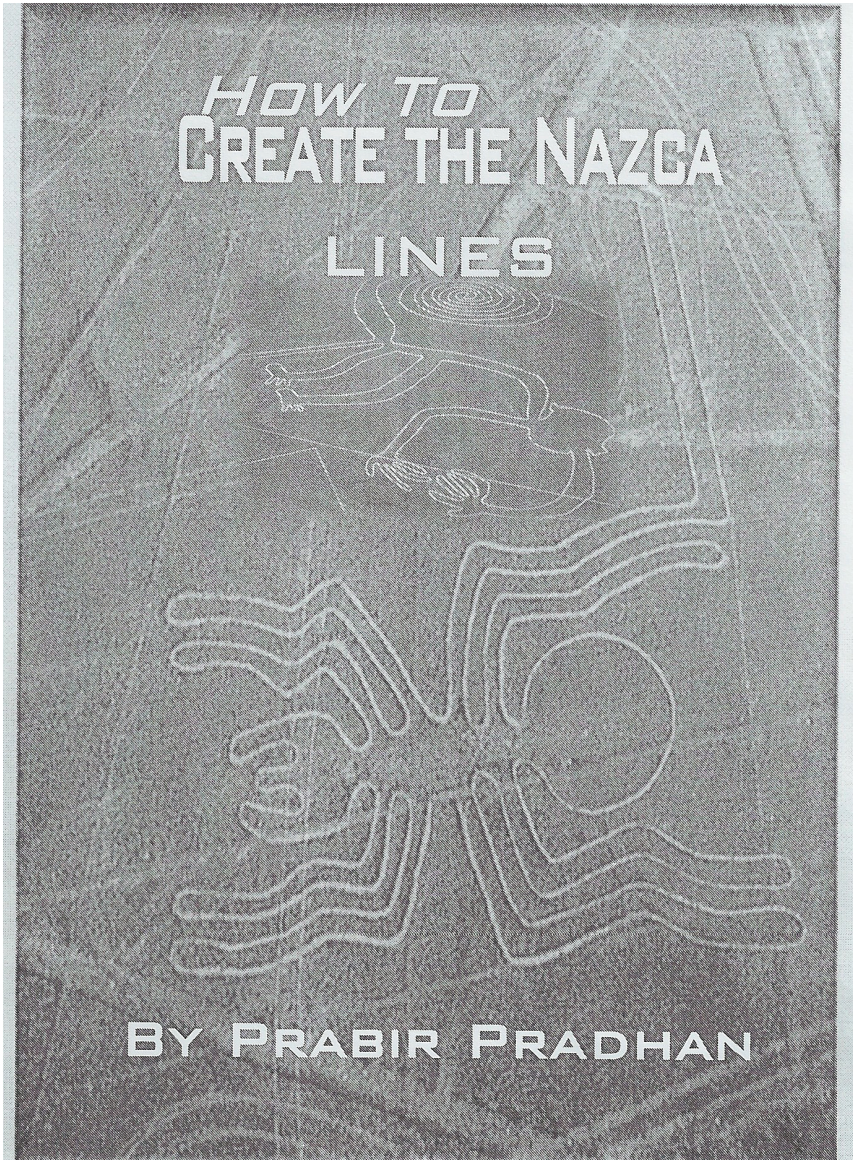
Titles of Students’ “How-to” Books	
How to Create the Nazca Lines	
How to Survive the Spanish Inquisition	
How to Be Sir William Wallace	
How to Be a Medieval Doctor	
How to Hunt and Gather Like the First Americans in the 1400s	
How to Be a Trader on the Silk Road	
How to Form a Feudalistic Government in Europe Around 800 CE	
How to Make Art and Sciences Flourish in the Muslim Empire	
How to Become a Native American Bow Hunter	
How to Be a Successful Merchant in East Africa	
How to Decrease the Spread of the Bubonic Plague	
How to Win the Battle of Crecy as the French	
How to Be a Byzantine Empress	
How to Build the Great Wall of China	

**Figure 4:** Sample student “how-to” book titles.

examples that showed their historical knowledge. For instance, the student who wrote “How to Be Sir William Wallace” used the following headings: 1) Face Tragedy at a Young Age, 2) Marry without Permission, 3) Kill over your Fish, 4) Win the Battle of Sterling Bridge, 5) Win the Battle of Falkirk, and 6) Refuse Loyalty to Long Shank.

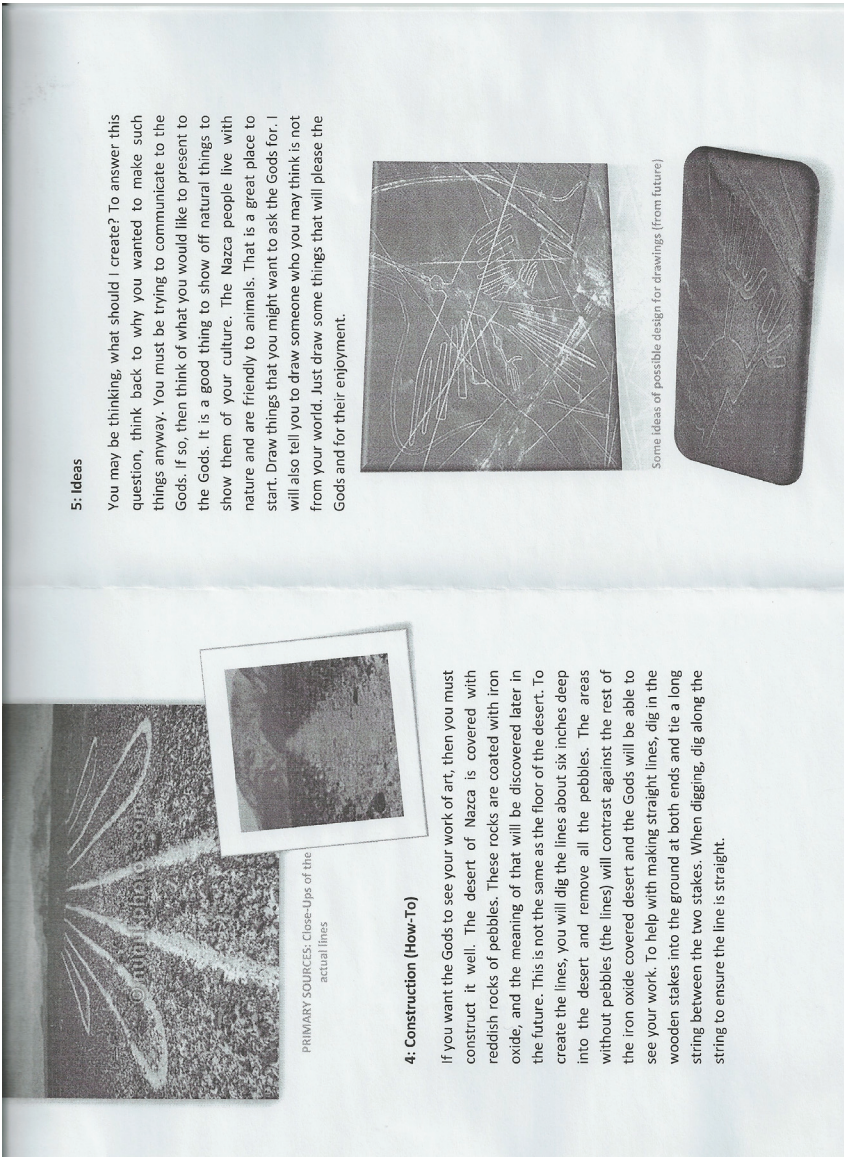
Students’ writing suggested that they took into account the power of the medieval church. For example, one student, who wrote “How to Be a Member of a Medieval Glassmakers’ Guild,” was mindful of the influence of the Church upon the success of a business. She explained to her readers, “Devote your life to God as a part of the Christian religion. Do this by setting and leading an example of a person of Christian faith, studying the bible, and helping the ill and less-fortunate.” Another student, whose “how-to” book was entitled “How to Be a Medieval Doctor,” reminded her readers of the powerful influence of the medieval church and warned her readers to “have the belief that people get diseases from their sins.”

Students’ personalities came through in their instructional writing. For instance, one student, in his “how-to” book entitled “How to Build the Great Wall of China,” recommended the following to acquire laborers:

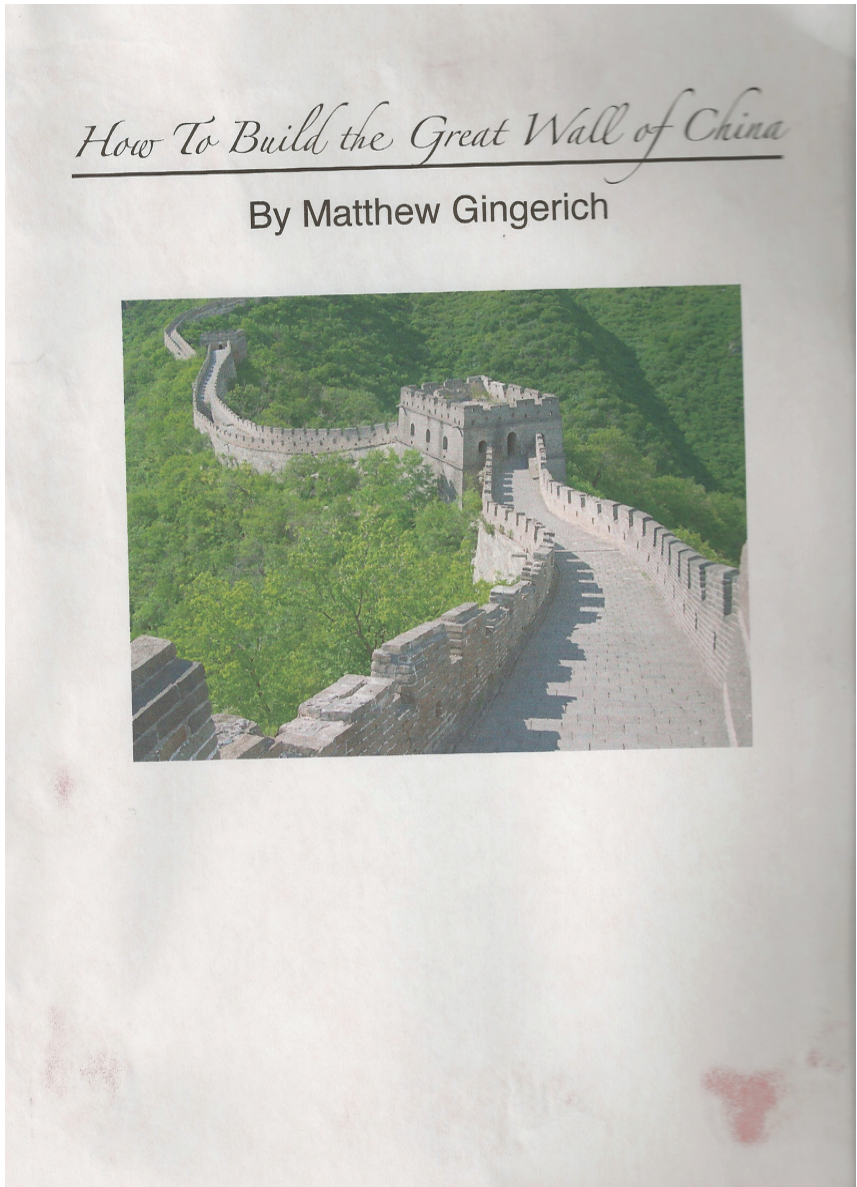


**Figure 5:** Cover for student “how-to” book, “How To Create the Nazca Lines,” by Prabir Pradhan.





**Figure 6:** Sample student writing from “how-to” book, “How To Create the Nazca Lines.”



**Figure 7:** Cover for student “how-to” book, “How To Build the Great Wall of China,” by Matthew Gingerich.



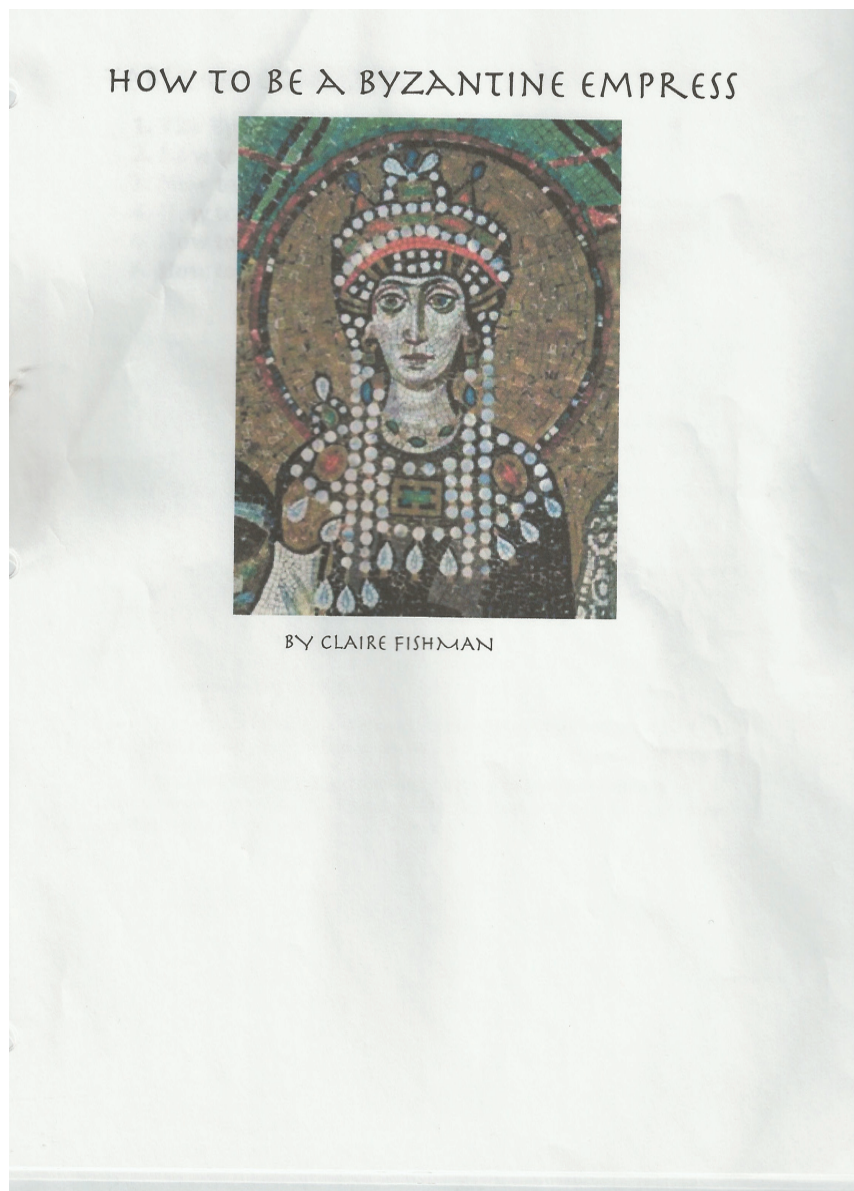
## Ch. 3- Getting Laborers

For the wall to go up, someone has to actually put the stones in place. And it won't be you, since you have important imperial duties like reading this book. So you will need to get as many workers as possible. Peasants are a good place to start. They will work for low wages, and you can always force them to build if you have to. Soldiers are also an option, thanks to the large army you developed in the previous chapter. If you have to, resort to using criminals and convicts. And try not to let the death of thousands of forced laborers trouble your conscience. Just bury them under the wall.



As this picture shows, it can get quite cold and unpleasant working on the wall.

**Figure 8:** Sample student writing from “how-to” book, “How To Build the Great Wall of China.”



**Figure 9:** Cover for student “how-to” book, “How To Be A Byzantine Empress,” by Claire Fishman.

For the wall to go up, someone has to actually put the stones in place. And it won't be you, since you have important imperial duties like reading this book. So you will need to get as many workers as possible. Peasants are a good place to start. They will work for low wages, and you can always force them to build if you have to. Soldiers are also an option, thanks to the large army you developed in the previous chapter. If you have to, resort to using criminals and convicts. And try not to let the death of thousands of forced laborers trouble your conscience. Just bury them under the wall.

Another student, in the “Technology of War” section of her book, “How to Be a Chivalrous Knight,” used her humor to suggest the need to “Invent the technology of leather saddles because it makes it much easier for you to stay seated on a moving horse.” A third student, who wrote “How to Become a Byzantine Empress,” offered useful advice to would-be empresses:

To win the Emperor's heart, you first must make yourself desirable. Do this by joining a profession that will make you noticeable, such as being an actress in the Hippodrome, the place where many of Constantinople's sporting events happen. Next, work very hard to become popular in your career. Once you have become a star, convince one of the influential nobles you've befriended on your way to the top to introduce you to the emperor (or, if you want a slightly easier time of it, the emperor's heir). If you're lucky, sparks will fly. Maybe, if you're like Empress Theodora, your beloved will even take the hugely romantic gesture of having a law forbidding the marriage of an actress and a patrician struck down just for you.

Students' biographies were another place where their personalities were noticeable. In some cases, students took on the role of their “how-to” book character in their biography. For example, a student who authored “How to Be a Chivalrous Knight” wrote:

Sir Pubudu [the student's character's first name] was born in the Kingdom of Columbo. He had achieved a good education in Vidura College. His parents of a noble family helped him reach his goals, to be come a knight. Right now, he is off traveling with his group of pages and squires, hoping to challenge a mighty knight to a joust.

## Results of Survey

Students felt that what they had learned was worth the time and effort that went into writing their “how-to” book (See Table 3). They were proud of and felt ownership in their “how-to” books. More than a third of students reported that they were more motivated to work on this assignment than other tests and projects in the class. However, this project did not particularly motivate them to want to learn about the next topic in the history class. Students' enjoyment for this project varied, as did their motivation to know more about their topic.





**Figure 10:** Cover for student “how-to” book, “How To Be A Chivalrous Knight,” by Josie Granner.



When asked “What did you learn about yourself as a writer by writing a ‘how-to’ book?” many students thought that they were good writers, given motivation, time, and effort (See Table 3). A student noted, “It is sort of fun to write about a topic I want to write about.” Another student thought, “I learned that I can write a lot more than I thought.” Some students focused on writing steps. For instance, one explained, “If you haven’t written one before as a writer, you just start to write paragraphs instead of a ‘how-to’ but it’s a nice change once you get the hang of it.” Students thought that it was important to “know a ton on your topic” before writing. A few students said that they did not like the “how-to” genre. One explained, “I wanted to write an essay when I was doing my ‘how-to’ book.”

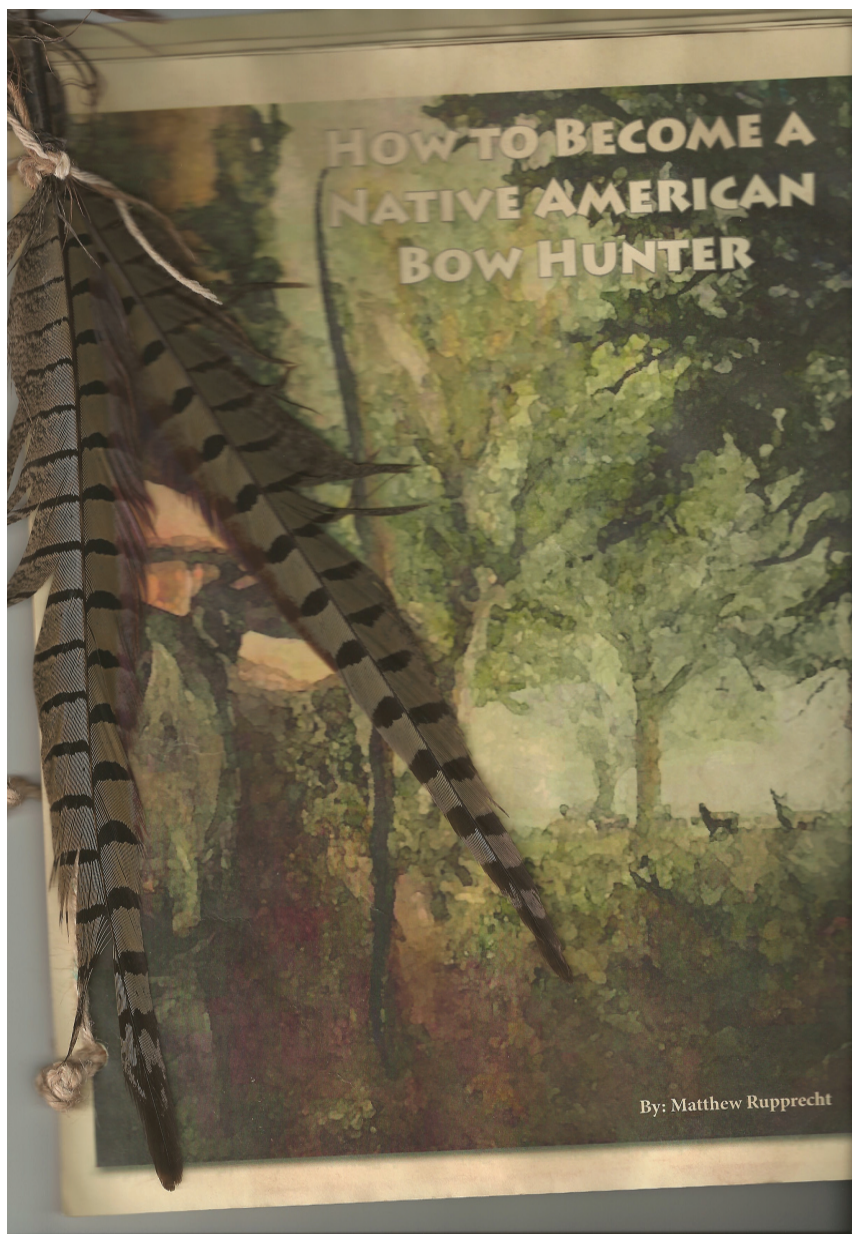
When asked “What did you learn about yourself as a history student by writing a ‘how-to’ book?” many students felt that they had learned about their topic (See Table 3). For example, a student learned that “there is a lot of stuff to learn that isn’t in the history textbook.” Students also wrote about their enjoyment and interest in the topic: “I love barbaric, old times and finding out how things used to work and old beliefs of things like the moon, sun, and stars.” Some students wrote about their effort to write their “how-to” book: “If I actually set my mind to something, I can accomplish it.” Another student concluded, “I can always try harder and read more.”

When asked what they suggest could be done to make the “how-to” book writing project a better experience for future World History and Geography classes, students recommended more “how-to” book examples: “Pass around more examples so students can get a better look at what they’re supposed to do.” Some students wished for more time to work: “We had time for the first chapter, autobiography, and table of contents, but suddenly it was due on Friday and I felt really rushed!” Some students wished for a wider span of time periods for topic choice: “Broaden the time span a little more to get a little more variety.”

### **The Greater Significance of the Project**

*1. Writing a “how-to” book enhances students’ construction of knowledge, encourages them to be researchers, develops a learning community, and promotes the mastery of curricular objectives.*

Although Katie wished that some students had researched their topics in more depth, students thought that they had learned about their topics and felt that the amount they had learned was worth their time and efforts. Students advised other students to know “a ton on your topic” before writing. They cautioned that all the information necessary was not to be found in their textbook and that they should expand their search. Students



**Figure 11:** Cover for student how-to” book, “How To Become A Native American Bow Hunter,” by Matthew Rupprecht.

brought medieval characters to life and grappled with the political power of the medieval church and its far-reaching influence into many aspects of life at the time. One student felt like he had become a retired Samurai by the end of his “how-to” book. Through writing, students were encouraged to know the past. They were asked to work like researchers. “How-to” book writing transformed passive receivers of facts into active learners. One reward of writing is the enhancement of one’s own education.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have found that writing promotes refinement of conceptual thinking, as students connect their prior knowledge and life experiences with new information.<sup>4</sup> “How-to” book writing promoted this self-education and intellectual growth by encouraging students to manipulate ideas and to go public with their writing.

*2. “How-to” book writing requires that standard history language go through the conduit of a student’s thinking.*

Writing instructions in a history class required students to put on their “thinking caps.” As one student explained, “If you haven’t written one before as a writer, you just start to write paragraphs instead of a ‘how-to’ but it’s a nice change once you get the hang of it.” Although Katie does not see herself as a creative writing teacher, she believes that a benefit of writing in the “how-to” genre was that it forced students to write in a voice that they usually did not take on. This writing was valuable because it required students to practice their language skills by taking the information and rather than doing the expected, having to restructure it into instructions. It took students’ thinking, effort, and rewriting of drafts to get into the “how-to” voice. During this thoughtful percolation, the transformation of information gave students a chance to put their own signature on their work while promoting their development as students of history.

In a global society, students need to think, apply, and make knowledge their own.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of writing-to-learn activities is to encourage students to analyze and synthesize information, then communicate their thinking in a reasoned and well-structured manner. The “how-to” genre of writing can be more challenging for students because they need to understand the content, think about it at a higher level of thought, and then explain it.<sup>6</sup> Sociolinguist James Paul Gee has researched the differences between academic language and the vernacular language of students. He has observed the barrier to success that academic language can pose.<sup>7</sup> In order to empower themselves to achieve in school, students need to understand and use the vocabulary of the discipline. Students’ “how-to” book writing provided evidence that they had mingled the academic discourse of school with their vernacular language, and made it their own.

Although there isn't a known cure for the Black Death, there are some treatments that you can use to get rid of some symptoms.

One treatment that you can perform on your patient is to lance the buboes. When you lance them you're letting the disease ~~to~~ 'come out'. You should put a mixture of tree resin, roots of white lilies and dried human excrement (also known as human feces) where you have cut the buboes.

If your patient is complaining about his/her headache, you can dull it down by giving them rose, lavender, sage and bay.

And, of course, like everything, you can use the use the method of bloodletting to 'cure' it! The blood that comes out from the cut will be thick and black, giving off a horrible stench.

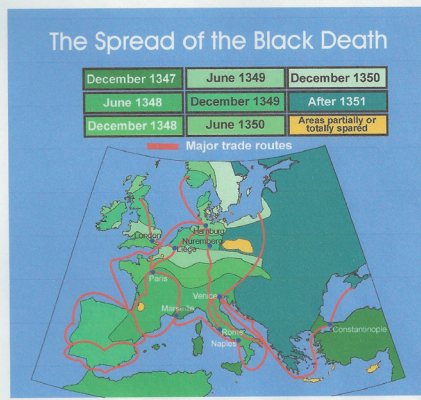
-To make sure that the Black Death is engraved in your mind, read the account of Gabriele de' Mussi:

*"We reach our homes; our kindred and our neighbors come from all*

*parts to visit us. Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn*

*A map of the spreading of the bubonic plague.*

p.8



**Figure 12:** Sample student writing from “how-to” book, “How to Decrease the Spread of the Bubonic Plague,” by Isabel Zheng.



The High School Content Expectations in Social Studies require students to communicate clearly and coherently in writing, while acknowledging audience and purpose.<sup>8</sup> Students must know how to find and organize information from a variety of sources; analyze, interpret, and support interpretations with evidence; evaluate critically; and present the information in writing. They are required to use multiple perspectives and resources to identify and analyze issues appropriate to the social studies discipline being studied. “How-to” book writing gave students practice so that they could attain these goals.

*3. “How-to” book writing offers students compelling reasons to write, and it advanced student-driven learning.*

One of the top challenges reported by high school teachers was motivating their students to achieve literacy in their subject area.<sup>9</sup> Teenagers need to be motivated in order for learning to take place.<sup>10</sup> In the past, educators have found that, in general, book-making promoted motivation, ownership, and creativity.<sup>11</sup> When the “how-to” books were first assigned, Katie recalled that there was very little complaining in comparison to when a test was announced. More than a third of students reported that they were more motivated to work on this assignment than other tests and projects in the class. Ultimately, students affirmed their abilities as authors of “how-to” books: “I learned that I’m a good writer and if we have projects like this I would do better.” and “I can always try harder and read more.”

Although there was a large box of “how-to” books to grade, Katie noted that they were more enjoyable to read than research reports because of the creativity, humor, and visuals. Overall, student grades were a little better than usual. At the end of this project, we agree with Lunsford’s call on educators to “create a new scene for writing, one that challenges divisions between disciplines, genres, and media.”<sup>12</sup>

*4. “How-to” book writing strengthens relevance and association to personal interest.*

Choice of writing added to the appeal of this writing assignment. Students noted its importance and the relationship between their interest and achievement: “It is sort of fun to write about a topic I want to write about.” and “I learnt that if I study/research the right topic that interests me then I would be a better history student and pay more attention in class.”

Choice promotes engagement and, even within a narrow range, strengthens sense of autonomy.<sup>13</sup> Students must be willing to make a connection to make meaning,<sup>14</sup> and offering students choice of topic promotes persistence and a wish to share knowledge they have learned.<sup>15</sup> Students need to believe that writing about their topic is worthwhile.<sup>16</sup>

Students who wrote “how-to” books thought that what they had learned about their topic was worth their effort. When students are given a choice and develop ownership, they are willing to put more work and effort into their studies, which in turn results in more ownership.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, when teenagers write what is important to them, they come to understand why they might wish to use and master writing strategies and skills.<sup>18</sup> Educators have found that school writing can matter to students through the power of inquiry.<sup>19</sup> Students were given this opportunity during the “how-to” book writing assignment.

5. *“How-to” book writing adds another tool to a history teacher’s toolbox.*

“How-to” book writing was not everyone’s genre, as noted by one student, “I wanted to write an essay when I was doing my ‘how-to’ book.” Moreover, this project did not particularly motivate students to want to learn about the next topic in the history class. In order to appeal to all students, for all the topics in a history curriculum, a history teacher needs to offer a wide variety of writing assignments and activities. In this way, students may become engaged and make the connection between their prior knowledge and new learning.<sup>20</sup>

6. *“How-to” book writing provides experiences for students to enhance their writing skills, efficacy, pride, and ownership.*

When teachers try something different, they may notice students who they have never really noticed before. Katie thought that it was surprising that a number of students who were typically quiet and reserved became more apparent. They risked something that was “out-of-the-box” and, as a result, their personalities shined through their work. According to a writing teacher, Jane Anne Staw, “hope often lies in taking a different route, or at least an unexpected turn ... Interrupting our habitual series of behaviors and responses toward writing gives us a chance to open ourselves to new reactions and attitudes.”<sup>21</sup> When led through writing by a manageable step-by-step approach, students who were not successful or were unmotivated by other instructional methods had a new avenue in which to participate and flourish.

Katie believes that the concept of writing a book to suggest that students could be authors was a valuable lesson for thirteen-year olds. Also, students were given reason to practice their technology skills. “How-to” book writing enhanced student efficacy. Of importance, writing can promote social issues of justice by opening a door of opportunity that is closed to those who do not write well. Writing offers empowerment and affords dignity.<sup>22</sup> Teachers can give students power in their world by teaching

them through positive experiences to write well.<sup>23</sup> Researchers have found that students need to see themselves as writers to prompt them to continue to work on their writing skills.<sup>24</sup> “How-to” book writing helped students to use their interest for a topic, to develop their identities as researchers and writers. Writing a “how-to” book offered students a sense of accomplishment. One student wrote, “Every time I write it seems to get better and better with vocabulary and word choice.” Students thought that they were good writers, given motivation, time, and effort. A student thought, “I learned that I can write a lot more than I thought.” Students were proud of and felt ownership in their “how-to” books: “If I actually set my mind to something, I can accomplish it.” Writers remind us that, despite the work that writing requires, “writing offers rewards that few other activities can offer.”<sup>25</sup>

7. *“How-to” book writing leaves a legacy of student writing for a history teacher to share with future students.*

When asked what they suggest could be done to make the “how-to” book writing project a better experience for future World History and Geography classes, students recommended to have more “how-to” book examples to show: “Pass around more examples so students can get a better look at what they’re suppose to do.” Katie is looking forward to offering her future students a *PowerPoint* presentation of additional examples in her now-expanded collection of “how-to” books.

We invite you to ask your students to become booksmiths, and include this writing activity as one of many to promote learning, motivation, ownership, and efficacy in your history classroom.

## Notes

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