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## How to use *Habits* when you're really not supposed to

Sometimes we pick texts because the learning objectives line up with our institution's core, or because the number of chapters fits nicely into our fifteen-week semester, or because we're teaching a composition course and so we pick the most-used composition text. Other times, we get creative.

I am not a composition instructor; I usually teach media and communication. But, as you'll see in the section on how I used the readings and practice sessions, I find *Habits of the Creative Mind* inspirational. These are essays about thinking and writing that make me want to run to my desk to capture an idea. There's no better way to pick a text than to follow this feeling. Happily, since *Habits* so completely embraces the implications of the digital landscape for teaching and learning, it was a more-than-worthy companion to basic media-production assignments and supplemental readings from media studies (open up to the *Habits* essays "Down the Rabbit Hole," "On Self-Curation," and "Making Space and Time" to see what I mean).

What's more, using *Habits* has caused me to consider how important it is that our textbooks reflect not just our discipline or content but also our personal teaching philosophies. My motto (written plainly in all of my syllabi) is that students are responsible for their own learning. To support them in this, we must give them strategies for finding their own curiosity, creativity, and motivation to play. In short, we must reward risk.

I've incorporated this into my own teaching by following Peter Elbow's method, using low-stakes assignments and pass/fail grading (see "Teaching Writing, Teaching Media," available online from the Media Education Foundation). It turns out the philosophy behind the practice sessions in *Habits* perfectly supports this approach to inquiry and composition—including multimedia composition. Each brief reading includes practice sessions with gentle directives to "reflect, research, and explore." These also frequently employ the same directive for quantifying work that I already use with my communication students: set time goals, not word counts. By suggesting that students

take “thirty minutes to search online,” we recognize that the act of reading (and certainly of researching) in a digital environment is more rhizomatic than linear. Further, focusing our attention on how we use our time is a way of valuing all the time writers spend not writing. After all, reading, researching, and reflecting are parts of the writing process, too. It turns out that sometimes the text that fits the best is the one that doesn’t seem to fit at all.

## Here’s how I used *Habits* to teach toward a digital portfolio

As I entered my third year as an assistant professor, I was handed what I considered to be a challenging assignment: I was to teach the honors freshman seminar. I had never taught a room full of freshmen before. I was armed with a partially prescribed syllabus focused on college-readiness, and since I was teaching the honors section, I had an additional mandate that every student should create a digital portfolio by the end of the semester. I had used digital portfolios in my courses before (this being the reason I was tapped for the “challenging assignment”), but I was accustomed to teaching communication majors, students who have a predisposition for thinking about and with media technology. This time around, I would be teaching freshmen with diverse academic interests and professional goals: education, nursing, music, physical therapy, and business. I was in unfamiliar territory—and I had about one unit’s worth of space to call my own. Enter *Habits*.

Fortunately, I had already done some research into best practices in digital portfolio-making, including the guidelines developed by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the MLA Commons project *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities* (see Kathleen Blake Yancey’s entry on e-portfolios), and some excellent student-facing materials created by Auburn University. From there, it wasn’t too much of a magic trick: I opened *Habits* and started reading. I began marking the essays and practice sessions that connected to the best practices laid out by these digital resources. What I found was that I could teach most of what my students needed to create digital portfolios based on a selection of nine readings and practice sessions in *Habits*.

Below, I walk through these readings and practice sessions and go into more detail about how each one functioned in my course. This description surely represents just one way of using *Habits* to teach toward

a digital portfolio. What I hope other instructors will take away from this is that *Habits* is rich with insight into how we read, write, and think in the digital age. When paired with your own creativity, this text is capable of inspiring courses as unique as the instructors who teach them.

## **Habits readings, practice sessions, and additional assignments: A six-week sequence**

### **“On Finding Your Feet”**

If you’re teaching students who “have it all figured out,” as I discovered my freshman honors students had, this essay is a must-read. It introduces what I consider to be the heart of the book, the incantation-like reading from *Alice in Wonderland*, which begins “Curiouser and curiouser!” The opening of this essay is a read-aloud if ever there was one.

If you want to be explicit about how this book connects to your learning goals for the course (prescribed or not), you can refer to the full list of habits on page 4, which I present as a list of community values (curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibly, flexibility, and metacognition.) Incidentally, if you are also teaching a freshman seminar focused on college-readiness, this content will do double duty.

### **“On Confronting the Unknown”**

Here’s where the philosophy of the book is considered in further detail, and we encounter the provocation that we can train ourselves to “be attuned to the wonder of the world.” Writing, then, may be considered “a technology for thinking new thoughts.” I connect this to the task of being attuned to (and documenting) our learning through a portfolio project, as well as an introductory conversation about what we think of when we use the term *technology*.

If we’re doing it right, we can use our portfolio as a tool that allows us to tell the story of our intellectual journey while engaging in active self-reflection.

The book’s use of prompts is also explained in this essay. It’s like an anticipatory gesture to the terrified student who asks with raised hand: *So what do you want us to write?* Here, a prompt is figured as an invitation to improvisation. Stated this way, we can easily parry our wide-eyed student’s question with something like: *Does a jazz musician ever ask what to play? You’ll have to make it up, of course!*

### **“On Getting Your Act Together”**

This is the essay that most explicitly leads students to a digital portfolio project. The practice sessions ask students to first google themselves and consider the results, and then to imagine the content and structure of their own website.

This is also where my students had some of the most interesting conversations around the social pressure for visibility in the digital age. *Why do we all need to have our own websites? What if all we want is to be left alone?!* Indeed, when asked to google themselves many students defined success as *invisibility*. By being mostly unfindable they had protected their identities from the kind of regret conjured up by the *Habits* term *digital tattoo*. If you are so inclined, you might respond to these concerns with supplemental readings on the power of self-representation, digital or otherwise (go old school with Goffman or keep it current with someone like danah boyd or Michael Wesch).

The prompts here showed the desired effect most clearly when my students submitted writing that included sentiments of surprise, such as, *It's strange to see that most of the content about me on the Internet wasn't created by me!*

Even though many students went into these practice sessions kicking and screaming, several surprised themselves (and me) with creatively sketched-out drafts of their home pages, complete with drawings and logos. One student even took the next step to begin building his home page in WordPress well before the assignment sequence called for it. A fairly common response to the portfolio project at the end of the semester referenced this practice session directly: *I didn't want to do it, but it was actually fun!*

This is also where I introduce the idea of *digital artifacts* and methods for collection.

### **“On Thinking New Thoughts” and “Persisting”**

These essays paired perfectly with our emphasis on first-year topics like procrastination and time management. What's a writing student to do in this digital media environment so keyed toward distraction and constant connectivity? The answer: find your inner *Walden* and practice solitude. (Chalk that up as another opportunity to dip into a useful primary text for freshmen). The practice sessions here include invitations to unplug and observe the results. Alternately, they also include a helpful list of digital resources aimed at getting readers to

rethink the possibilities for doing real intellectual work while in front of a screen.

Teaching from a media studies perspective, I use these essays as an excuse to introduce media ecology theory (via McLuhan and Postman). This opens up a discussion on how and why to compose for the web, including what it means to think and compose using hyperlinked content. This is a must for encouraging students to build a website that is not merely available online, but rather interconnected to the wider web.

### **“On Joining the Conversation”**

If you are like me and long for opportunities to read aloud to your students, assign this essay and indulge in a recitation of Kenneth Burke’s parlor scene, which when acted with relish, actually makes it possible for freshmen to understand the illusive, college-speak term *discourse*.

I also found this essay helpful for getting through a complementary reading on media technology the students did not particularly enjoy or agree with. Here we have the habit perhaps most succinctly stated as: *listen first, speak second*. Even more shocking to students learning how to make an argument in their Comp 101 course, *Habits* suggests that we may want to let go of the idea of winning the argument and instead consider our humble contribution as just one more voice in the parlor.

Speaking of when to speak, here’s where I have students begin to build their website. Hopefully by now, they have something to say.

### **“On Going Down the Rabbit Hole” and “On Creative Reading”**

Once students have googled themselves, I follow the text’s suggestion and invite them to google someone else. Here you can see how easy it is to tailor the practice sessions to your own liking. The practice sessions for this essay ask students to begin a journey down the rabbit hole by typing “Ellen Dissanayake” into their search engine. Instead, I connected this practice session to content in the following essay “On Creative Reading” and had them google “Diane Arbus.” I then follow the practice session’s prompts for researching, reflecting, and researching again. As an introduction to the power of the image and what it means to make private life public, you can’t do better than spending time with Arbus’s photographs.

The example of student writing included in this section, which actually comes in the form of an email rather than a formal essay, is the perfect artifact to convince students that for this low-stakes assignment: *Really, you don't have to write a five-paragraph essay.*

Again, I continued to connect this practice to the previous section's exploration of "thinking like the web." The inevitable journey to discover the story behind any one of Arbus's photographs makes for an easy opportunity to discuss what it's like to compose during an era when, as Michael Wesch puts it, "there's something in the air, it's all of human knowledge."

### **"On Asking Questions" and "On Writing to a Question"**

I have used these essays and prompts in upper-level media courses with good results. Using it for freshmen proved a great deal more difficult, but I would do it again in a heartbeat. The technique of writing to a question inverts the typical formula of beginning any writing or research endeavor with our thesis. For instructors, upperclassmen, or even for freshmen English majors, this may be a breath of fresh air. In my experience—for let's say, a freshman nursing major—this is utterly confusing. But if you started by reading "On Confronting the Unknown," at least they can't say you didn't warn them!

I paired this exercise with an invitation to apply it to any of the readings we'd done thus far in the unit, including essays from *Habits*, our supplemental readings in media ecology, or any reading they encountered during their exploration of Arbus. For those who took the necessary leap, this prompt led to wonderful moments for me as a reader, moments when, as I noted in a comment on one student's assignment: *I made an audible "huh" here—as in, "I never thought about that before."*

In another course, the "Writing to a Question" assignment would likely be given at the brainstorming phase of a longer, perhaps more formal essay assignment. In the context of my course, we didn't have the space to use it that way. Instead, this was the culmination of our exploration into a set of texts including *Habits*, all designed to question our technological moment. In this way, the questions students responded in writing to perfectly set them up to begin assembling their digital portfolios.

Further, reflective writing is always included in best practices for student portfolios; I have students include a hyperlinked letter of

reflection as an introduction to the artifacts included in their websites. The best of these will demonstrate genuine “movement of thought” as Peter Elbow suggests in his version of an assignment for paper-based portfolios, or, put another way, a letter that “does some figuring out.” “Writing to a Question” helps introduce room for a writer’s voice that begins from a place of not-knowing and embarks from there on the journey toward discovery.

At this point, students should have enough of their portfolio built that they can engage in peer review. The final portfolio and letter of reflection is due the following week.

### Syllabus Snapshot (6 weeks)

	<b>Weekly Readings/Topics</b>	<b>Work Due</b>
1	“On Finding Your Feet” “On Confronting the Unknown” Final portfolio assignment introduced	Explore online resources on portfolio-making In-class free writing on intro readings
2	“On Getting Your Act Together” Supplemental readings on self-representation	Practice Session One Brainstormed list of potential artifacts
3	“On Thinking New Thoughts” and “Persisting” Supplemental readings on solitude and media ecology theory	On Solitude: Practice Sessions One, Two, and Three Choose a platform for your website
4	“On Joining the Conversation”	Begin building your website
5	“On Going Down the Rabbit Hole” “On Creative Reading”	Down the Rabbit Hole: Practice Session One Continue building your site
6	“On Asking Questions” “On Writing to a Question”	Writing to a Question: Practice Session Two Peer Review of Portfolio
	Final Week	Final Portfolio and Letter of Reflection Due