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Sarah Pearce  
Spring 2008  
James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

Assignment Sequence: The Text and the Object

*Contents: Sequence Sketch, Sequence Rationale, Assignment Sheets*

*I. Sequence Sketch*

Assignment #4 — The History of Islamic Science in al-Andalus

Assignment #6 — Don Quixote Through Archaeology

Final Portfolio — Museum Exhibition Catalogue

## *II. Assignments*

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Writing Assignment #4

4-5 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to help you refine your research skills, to design research paper topic that suits your own interests, and to practice explaining technical concepts to a lay audience.

### **A. Choose your topic.**

Choose from this list a scientific or mathematical innovation, concept or device (broadly defined) that has roots in the medieval Arabo-Islamic world or underwent major changes during the Middle Ages at the hands of Arab and/or Muslim scientists. (With instructor approval you may select a topic that is not on the list.)

### **B. Annotated Bibliography. Due 3/14.**

Bearing in mind our in-class discussion about sources and library searching, find five scholarly sources that describe the historical development and application (both medieval and modern) of your chosen object or idea. Write an annotated bibliography plus one additional page describing how you went about searching for and selecting your sources.

We will discuss in class how to prepare an annotated bibliography. If you have further questions as you get started, you may find this document on the library's web site to be useful: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>

The following collections of essays and encyclopaedias may be a helpful starting point. The first three are on reserve in Uris, and the second three are found in Room 602 in Olin. In addition to plumbing them for further bibliography, you may include one essay or article contained therein in your annotated bibliography; the other four sources should be items you find on your own:

*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*  
(*Al-Andalus and Religion, Science and Learning* volumes)

*The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma K. Jayyusi

*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*  
*Encyclopaedia Judaica*  
*Encyclopaedia Iranica*

You may also find this library tutorial to be useful review:

[http://campusgw.library.cornell.edu/newhelp/res\\_strategy/tutorial/tutorial.html](http://campusgw.library.cornell.edu/newhelp/res_strategy/tutorial/tutorial.html)

**C. Pre-Writing. Due 3/14.**

In one to two pages, describe the history of your object or concept, from the ancient world through the modern day, paying particular attention to developments that took place in Spain. You might think back to our readings from the court of Alfonso X where relevant.

**D. Presentation. 3/26.**

In class, each student will make a three-to-five minute presentation about his or her topic. In addition to informing your classmates about your topic, this is also an opportunity for you to mention any difficulties you have encountered either in research or writing and seek advice from your colleagues.

**E. Draft. Due 3/31.**

Write a paper of three to five pages in length that addresses the following prompt:

Imagine that you have to describe the history and application of your scientific concept or object to a friend who does not know that it has roots in the Islamic world. How would you describe the object or concept? How would you describe its historical concept? What concrete things could you do illustrate this? (Build a model? Show your friend a manuscript? What else?) Think carefully about the form your essay will take.

**F. Rewriting. Due much later.**

A rewritten version of this essay will form part of the final portfolio. Details will follow as we get closer to the end of the semester. You would be well advised not to lose your prewriting and your marked drafts.

**G. Suggested topics.**

1. Botany (Ibn al-Battar)
2. Cartography (Piri Res, al-Idrisī, al-Bakrī)
3. Chemistry/Alchemy
4. Chess
5. Flying Machines (Ibn Firnas)
6. Glass blowing
7. Medicine (Maimonides, Avicenna, Abulcasis, ibn Shaprut)
8. Translation (Ibn Ishāq)
9. Zero

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Writing Assignment #5  
Due in class, 4/28/08  
4-6 pages

This is an assignment in which you will consider the relationship between texts and objects, and between fiction and history.

Posted on Blackboard, you will find two sections of a museum exhibition catalogue entitled *Don Quixote Through Archaeology: Fiction and Reality in the Golden Age*. Each one of these sections contains photographs and brief descriptions of quotidian objects that relate to a corresponding section of Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. The corresponding sections are as follows:

	<i>Fiction and Reality in the Golden Age</i>	<i>DQ</i>
A-L	Commerce at the Inn	Part I, Chapters 3-4
M-Z	The Duke's Palace	Part II, Chapters 31, 33

**A. Pre-Writing. Due 4/18.**

1) Choose three of the objects in your section, and write a primary source analysis in your writing journal like the ones you have written for other assignments.

2) Read the section of *Don Quixote* that corresponds to your section of *Fiction and Reality*. Discuss some of the following issues in your writing journal:

*How does Cervantes portray household objects and decorations in the chapters you have read? Does it contribute to the realism of the text or hinder it? How? What do you learn about daily life in Golden Age Spain from the portrayal of objects in the text? How does it differ from what you can learn about daily life in Golden Age Spain from the objects that archaeologists have found from that time period? How do the portrayals coincide or differ? To what extent is it acceptable to reconstruct or fill in the blanks imaginatively?*

**B. First Draft. Due 4/23.**

Write a 4-6 page paper that addresses **both** of the following topics:

- 1) Describe daily life in Castilla-La Mancha the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of the archaeological record and the descriptions in *Don Quixote*.
- 2) Which type of evidence creates the more accurate portrayal of daily life? Should text be privileged over object, or object over text? How do you decide?

Think carefully about the structure of your paper. How will you incorporate your description of daily life into your discussion of the theoretical issues? Under no circumstances should your paper be a laundry-list of answers to the main and secondary questions.

Bring two copies to class. You will exchange drafts with a peer for an in-class peer critique, and will turn in one draft to me. Drafts with my comments will be available to be picked up in the NES office (409 White Hall) on 4/25.

**D. Second Draft. Due 4/28.**

**C. Re-Writing. Due much later.**

Simply be advised that this essay will form the basis of your final portfolio, which will be due during exam week. Details and due dates to follow.

**E. Note**

Depending on how you frame your essay, you might find it helpful to consult some additional bibliographic references that relate specifically to Spanish culture. The following are some suggestions:

Brown, Jonathan. *Kings and Connoisseurs: Collecting Art in Seventeenth-Century Europe*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.

Enggass, Robert and Jonathan Brown. *Italian and Spanish Art, 1600-1750: Sources and Documents*. Evanston, Northwest UP, 1992. (Sibley N6916 .E36 1992)

Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 1992. (Olin DS3.A2 H23)

Johnson, Carroll B. *Cervantes and the Material World*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. (Olin PQ6353.J625x 2000)

Marken, Mitchell. *Pottery from Spanish Shipwrecks, 1500-1800*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994. (Olin DP44.M27x 1994.)

Williams, John. *A Spanish Apocalypse: The Morgan Beatus Manuscript*. New York: G. Braziller, 1991. (Olin ND3361.R52 B436x 1991 ++)

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Final Portfolio Project

*This assignment is the culmination of the semester's activities. Use it to synthesize the many ways of retelling history that we discussed, and to demonstrate your mastery of the writing skills we learned and reviewed this semester: thorough revision, writing in a voice, writing for an audience, primary source analysis.*

**\*Poof!\*** You are now the curator of medieval art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. You have just decided to mount an exhibition of medieval Iberian art in order to expose the general public to the cultural history of medieval and early modern Spain. This is a big undertaking, so you sit down and make yourself a checklist of tasks you will need to complete to pull off a successful blockbuster exhibit. The beginning of your checklist looks like this:

**Get approval from the powers that be.**

Write a memo to the director of the museum briefly describing the exhibit you hope to curate. Define the time period, geographical region, and cultural scope that your exhibit will encompass, describe how and why literature will be integrated into the exhibit, and explain why this exhibit will be compelling to the public.

*(Approximately 2 pages. Due by email by 5pm the night before your final conference, either 5/4 or 5/5.)*

**Select objects to put on display.**

The specific purpose of your exhibit is now clear in your mind and approved by the director. Choose five objects and write museum labels that will be read by visitors to your exhibit. Annotate your labels with explanations of why displaying those particular objects will serve the stated purpose. Think about what aspects of life you want to emphasize in your exhibit. Make a note of where these objects are located, to facilitate requesting loans from other collections; this note should include the physical location of the object as well as the bibliographic reference where you learned about its existence.

*(You should include the concrete demonstration of a scientific concept that you wrote as part of assignment #4, and you may include one of the objects that you analyzed as part of assignment #6. You should select the remaining objects from the museum catalogues we reviewed in class: Fiction and Reality, Convivencia and Caliphs and Kings. You have photocopies of the first, and the second two are on reserve in Olin. You may also select objects that were mentioned or pictured incidentally in the readings over the course of the semester, such as those in The Buried Mirror and in some of the essays from Crisis and Creativity, or any object in the holdings of the Kroch RBML or the Johnson Museum. You will find a sample label and annotation on the Blackboard site for the course.)*

**Write an introduction to the catalogue.**

Describe daily life in the time and place that is the focus of your exhibition. Draw distinctions and comparisons between the history that is told by the objects you have selected and fictional accounts with which your reader may be familiar.

*(Approximately 5 pages. You have already done most of the work for this section of the assignment by completing assignment #5. However, you will need to subject that assignment to a major revision, one that includes more than just corrections on the sentence level, but instead takes into account the new audience for this assignment, and any changes you might have made to the temporal scope of the project. How do you want to grab and keep the attention of the museum-going public? Will the current structure of your essay make sense and appeal to a non-specialist, or is there a different way you could organize it to appeal to your audience? Is your exhibit limited to the time of Don Quixote, or have you decided to include earlier or later art and literature? If so, which other literary texts do you wish to include in your commentary? How do the objects from different time periods relate to each other? Reading a few of the introductions to the aforementioned catalogues, as well as reviewing your class notes from our discussion of museum catalogues and our visit to the Johnson Museum, will give you a sense of the tone and scope of this type of writing.)*

**Send the catalogue to the printer.**

*(This step is the final assembly of your portfolio. Compile the final drafts of your introduction and labels. You are encouraged to include illustrations or otherwise elaborate upon the writing (floor plans, a museum logo, etc.) to make the final product look more like an exhibition catalogue, although this is not required. Along with your museum catalogue, turn in the earlier drafts of the relevant work and a two-page response paper reflecting upon your revision and editing process. **Due in my mailbox (White Hall 409) on 5/14.***

### *III. Sequence Rationale/Reflections*

After spending the first half of the semester examining and using documentary sources for history writing, students are asked in this sequence of essays to think about the material record as another point of entry for answering historical questions that arise while reading *Don Quixote*.

Very close to the beginning of the semester, when I learned that the vast majority of the students who pre-enrolled in my FWS were freshmen in the College of Engineering, I swapped Assignment #5 and the related readings into my syllabus in the place of a slightly different writing assignment and set of readings that I had originally planned to include. I hoped that by adding a content unit on Islamic science in al-Andalus, my students would benefit from being encouraged to apply their specialized knowledge and interests in a way that they might not have thought about before. I designed the assignment to require them to explain a scientific concept to an audience of non-specialists, since this is presumably something they will have to do in their future careers. And as a first entrée into thinking about material culture, students also had to think about what kinds of objects were involved in the scientific concepts under discussion, and how they would make use of those objects to better illustrate and explain those concepts. This assignment was preceded by a library skills session in which students learned how to find and analyze useful sources. Following this activity, the students produced an annotated bibliography including five sources.

One of the preliminary questions that we discussed in class is: What, exactly, constitutes Islamic science? Is it science practiced by Muslims? Science practiced in accordance with Islamic law? Science practiced by anyone in a Muslim country? The purpose of asking this question in a writing-intensive class was to remind and encourage students to be precise in their

use of terminology, both religio-cultural and scientific. Even though (or perhaps especially because) my students had already been careful all semester to distinguish between Arabs and Muslims, the discussion that ensued about the role of religion in science and the relationship between the working language and the scientific process was quite fruitful. To prepare for this discussion, I asked students to read two short essays (4 pages each) on the terminology that is used in scholarship to describe medieval and early modern Hispano-Arabs and Hispano-Muslims. For the last twenty minutes of class that day, I gave students a list of fictional and historical figures we had read about and discussed up to that point and asked them each to choose one and decide which of the terms, if any, they would use to describe their figure, and to defend their choice based on evidence from the readings.

Two classes prior to the due date of the paper, we devoted the entire session to student presentations. I presented this as an opportunity for students to practice explaining their topic to an audience of their peers who were unfamiliar with the topic (in other words, as a way to test out the “explain this to a friend” part of the assignment), and also as a chance to brainstorm solutions to any research difficulties they had encountered. One change that I would make for next time is to make much clearer guidelines for how to give a presentation, something I had assumed to be self-explanatory but that I quickly learned is not. Several students recounted every single fact that they had found about their topic thus far, and even though the class only comprised eight students, we actually ran out of time. I did not want to cut them off, though, because they were clearly motivated by enthusiasm and because several of the presentations engendered good discussion both about the topics and the research methods. I ended up having to give the last two students the option of either speed-presenting or waiting until the next class meeting.

One difficulty that my students had with this assignment that I had not anticipated was in how to cite sources within the context of a letter to a friend, which was the form that many of them chose for their descriptive essays. As a result of this, I spent more time in class reviewing proper citation procedures and gave the students plenty of time to ask questions; I also required several students to rewrite their essays with the citations fixed. I was initially surprised that this happened in the context of an assignment whose first step was to produce an annotated bibliography, but I do also understand from where the confusion stemmed and how to nip it in the bud for next time. Overall, though, this was quite a successful assignment in part because so many of the students were genuinely excited to investigate the topics that they had chosen on the basis of their own standing interest in them. And in fact, it fits into this sequence better than the original assignment that it replaced, so all in all, it was a felicitous coincidence.

I designed this sequence to include non-sequential assignments so that some of the new material and ways about thinking about sources would have time to sink in and continue to percolate in the backs of my students' minds as they worked on something that did not directly or explicitly require them to use these skills. I am still reflecting on whether this was as effective as I had hoped, and I am not sure that I will intercalate the two major assignment sequences the next time I teach this course, though. But this time around, Assignment #6, and not #5, is the second one in this sequence. The seeds of this assignment were planted quite some time ago, actually, when I visited a small museum while on a research trip to Toledo in 2005, which was the year in which Spain celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote*. The exhibit, called "Don Quixote Through Archaeology: Fiction and Reality in the Golden Age," was organized around various episodes of the novel and included corresponding objects that had been excavated at several sites in Madrid and greater Castilla-La Mancha. At the time, I bought the

catalogue and brought it back to the U.S. thinking that it might be useful one day in teaching. The purpose of this assignment was for students to try to write a historical account using the skills they had developed while using documentary sources, but with a completely different class of evidence. Because this was a course on historiography, the other purpose was for them to consider the extent to which a novel can be employed in history writing.

After introducing the assignment to the class, the first step was for us to visit the Johnson Museum, where we had a tour led by Dr. Andrew Weislogel. It was a bit of a challenge for us to come up with a relevant museum session since the museum's collection's strengths are not in areas that were relevant to the topic of my course. However, because of the nature of the assignment, we decided that a general tour and discussion of how the museum's curators constitute an exhibition would be useful. Again, I modified this based on the high enrollment of engineers in the course, asking Dr. Weislogel if he might change the focus slightly to the scientific aspects of conservation, which he agreed to do. The visit was quite a success. The students were very interested in the explanation of the ways in which laboratory science, particularly dendrochronology, has been brought to bear on some of the objects in the collection as the museum tries to refine its understanding of their provenance.

The assignment itself was met with mixed success. In both the pre-writing object analysis activity and in the writing itself, some students limited themselves to repeating only the information that they were given in the catalogue, while others really ran with the imaginative aspects of the assignment. Ultimately, I chose my class' nominee for the Rice prize from this batch of essays.

Finally, the end-of-term portfolio is not simply a portfolio of cleaned-up essays, but rather a fairly major revision and rethinking of assignments #4 and #6. I designed the portfolio

to require students to revisit their work in a thoughtful way and to revise it more than superficially. I builds directly on Assignment #6, explicitly incorporates assignment #4, and also speaks to many of the techniques and considerations we studied over the course of the term in other assignments and activities, particularly attention to voice and attention to intended audience.

I dedicated most of the last class of the semester to a portfolio workshop. I asked students to come to class having thought about which text would form the narrative backbone of their proposed exhibitions. Then in class, they did a round robin-style brainstorming with different discussion partners in which they explained their ideas to each other and helped each other begin to select objects for inclusion in their projects. In the final conferences, I reviewed the students' memos with them, checked in on their progress on the other aspects of the assignment, but then left most of the time for them to ask questions about difficulties they were having or creative modifications they wanted to make to their portfolios. Based on the conferences, I expect a mixed response similar to the one to Assignment #6, with some portfolios containing fairly basic and minimal revisions and others really rising to the creative and technical challenges of the assignment. I'm quite looking forward to receiving and reading them next week.