

Challenge Statements: One Sentence Writing Assignments

Primary and Secondary Source Analysis

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DESIGNED FOR: “Modern Germany”

Course Type: Upper-division history course

Course Enrollment/Size: 30 students

Student Composition: mostly history and education majors

ASSIGNMENT BACKGROUND, GOALS, AND DESIGN:

“Challenge statements” are not original to me. I first saw them on a syllabus by Rudy Koshar, Professor of German History at the University of Wisconsin, and adapted them to my courses. They are short, 50-word, single-sentence statements on course texts. On my course syllabus, I include short prompts on the readings that ask students to summarize the main thesis or idea. They must answer the question in one sentence of 50 words or less. Challenge statements are due on the day that we discuss that particular reading. Students bring their typed sentences to class as a basis for class discussions on that day. They usually write a minimum of one challenge statement per week. I grade them on a simple scale: 1 (good), ½ (sufficient but flawed), or 0 (insufficient). Students have an opportunity to write 15 challenge statements overall, and I drop the grade for three of them. For more on the grading scale and rubric, see below.

Challenge statements foster a central skill: analyzing and summarizing the arguments of primary and secondary sources. They encourage students to read actively, looking for the main thesis. They also provide a solid basis for class discussion. I ask students: how did you articulate the author’s thesis? Is there a different way to frame it? Challenge statements also allow a focus on writing at the sentence level. In my courses, we often talk about how to write good challenge statements the first five minutes in class. I show them one or two outstanding examples from the last batch, and we discuss writing pitfalls at the sentence level: the dreaded comma splice, the run-on, the passive voice construction, the fragment, the misplaced semi-colon. Challenge statements are also easy to grade and return to students quickly.

I’ve found that challenge statements are excellent tools for encouraging students to do the reading, to learn to summarize arguments, and to become better writers.

THE ACTUAL ASSIGNMENT:

Challenge Statements, 15%: Over the course of the semester, you will write a series of extremely short, single sentence “challenge statements” on our course readings. These 50-word statements are designed to a) encourage you to do the reading and b) improve your skills of summary and analysis. Challenge statements are due on the day we discuss that particular reading. They must be typed and handed in during class. They cannot be turned in late unless you have a medical excuse. Challenge statements will be graded with either a 1 (good), a ½ (sufficient but flawed) or a 0 (insufficient). You will have the opportunity to write 15 challenge statements overall. The grade for three of them will be dropped. Readings for challenge statements are marked with an asterisk (*) in the weekly modules on the syllabus. See the handout “How to Write a Challenge Statement” below and at Brightspace for tips and suggestions.

The very name of these assignments—*challenge* statements—indicates that they are meant to be difficult. The core challenge is summarizing complex ideas in one clear and concise sentence, without “fluff” or digression. The skill involved here is boiling things down their essence. The more you work at challenge statements, the better yours will be.

Grading Rubric:

A full-credit challenge statement (1 point) has the following:

- correct answer to the question
- a complete and well-written sentence
- correct grammar
- correct punctuation

A partial credit challenge statement (1/2 point) has the following:

- a partially correct answer to the question
- some incorrect grammar or awkward syntax
- a comma splice or incorrect use of semi-colon (see below)
- punctuation mistakes

A no credit challenge statement (0 points) has the following:

- incorrect answer
- more than one sentence (separated by a period)
- more than 50 words
- garbled grammar or syntax
- sentence fragment

The final grade for “challenge statements” will be determined according to the following point system:

12 points: A	6 points: C
11 points: A-	5 points: C-
10 points: B+	4 points: D+
9 points: B	3 points: D
8 points: B-	2 points: D-
7 points: C+	0-1 points: F

The challenge statements for the semester are:

1) Jan. 26: The “German Question.” In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain how the “German question” changed from the early nineteenth century to the twentieth century. (Alter, “The German Question and Europe”)

2) Jan. 30: “Blood and Iron”: Bismarck and the Unification of Germany. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain why Bismarck was often portrayed as a blacksmith in monuments and woodcuts. (MacGregor, “Bismarck the Blacksmith”)

3) Feb. 2: The Dynamics of the Second Empire. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain Richard Evans’ position on the legacy of Bismarck. (Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 2-21)

4) Feb. 6: Politics and Society under Wilhelm II. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain what was “new” about politics in the 1890’s. (Blackbourn, “The Old Politics and the New”)

5) Feb. 13: German Colonialism. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain why the German colonial state was often weak in the extent and depth of its control. (Conrad, “The Colonial State”)

6) Feb. 20: World War I. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain the wartime concept of the *Burgfrieden*. (Jeffrey Verhey, “War and Revolution.”)

7) Feb. 27: Early Weimar. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain one of the central weaknesses of the Weimar Republic in the initial years after its foundation. (Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 88-117)

8) March 9: The Nazi Seizure of Power. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain why President Hindenburg, encouraged by Franz von Papen, appointed Hitler Chancellor of Germany in January of 1933. (Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 232-308)

9) March 13: The Nazi Consolidation of Power. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, analyze how the Nazis used the Reichstag fire to further consolidate their power. (Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 310-374.)

10) April 3: The Holocaust. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain the debate between the “intentionalists” and the “functionalists” in Holocaust scholarship. (Fulbrook, “Mass Extermination and the Holocaust”)

11) April 6: Ordinary Men. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain Christopher Browning’s argument about why the men in Reserve Police Battalion killed. (Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*)

12) April 8: Occupation. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain how the process of “denazification” differed in the eastern and western zones of occupation. (Fulbrook, “The Creation of the Two Germanies.”)

13) April 17: Popular Culture in Postwar East and West Germany. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain Uta Poiger’s main argument in “Rock ‘n’ Roll, Female Sexuality, and the Cold War Battle over German identities.”

14) April 24: 1989 and Reunification. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain why the GDR collapsed in 1989/90. (Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*)

15) May 3: Red Love. In a single-sentence statement of 50 words or less, explain how one character in Leo Maxim’s memoir reacted to the repressive measures of state control in the GDR.

Tips and Suggestions

1. Give your sentence an actor. Who or what is the “doer” in your sentence? If you can’t figure it out, you may not have a clear subject or a strong sentence. One basic but versatile sentence form is “DOER, DOING, DONE TO.” “Simon bought the car.” “The government raised taxes.” Each item that you add to this basic structure gives more information about where, when, and so on. “Simon bought the car on Friday at the Honda dealership.” You can adapt this form to academic writing, too. For example, if a challenge statement asks you to identify the main argument in a chapter by Mary Louis Roberts, you can write, “Roberts argues that . . .” Roberts is the doer. What’s she doing? Arguing. For more on basic sentence forms, see the optional reading by Stanley Fish, “Why You Won’t Find the Answer in Strunk and White,” and “It’s Not the Thought that Counts,” from *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One* (Harper, 2011), pp. 13-33 at Brightspace.

2. Avoid the verb “to be.” It’s boring and often vague. Use active, simple verbs instead: “break, stop, spoil, mend, kill.” Avoid sentences that begin with, “There were,” or “This was,” or “There is.” These formulations don’t have a clear actor or action.

3. Use the active voice. Avoid the passive voice. The passive voice occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of the sentence. Here is a ridiculous example: “The road was crossed by the chicken.” Passive voice often leads to vagueness and conceals agency, especially when the actor is missing. For example, “Mistakes were made.” “Egypt was invaded.” Use the

active voice, and you'll be a better writer. "The President made mistakes." "France invaded Egypt." Here is a [useful site from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina](#) about how to identify and avoid the passive voice. Read it carefully, and your writing will improve.

4. Be concrete. Put specific people, places, and things into your sentences. Avoid vague words that don't say much, such as "issues, elements, perspectives, events, components, aspects, varieties, factors."

5. Use your own words. Do not quote from the text we read in your challenge statements. The idea of these assignments is for you to articulate the main idea in your own words.

6. Omit needless words. If a word doesn't add meaning to the sentence, take it out. You can always remove adverbs, as well as convoluted formulations like, "due the fact that" (use "because" instead), "with regards to," "in terms of." Once you've written a sentence, go back and take out as many words as you can.

7. Avoid the comma splice. A comma splice occurs when a writer uses only a comma to join two or more main clauses: "My hamster loved to play, I bought him an exercise wheel." That comma in the middle is a problem, because each of those clauses can stand on its own as a sentence. In such a case, you should separate those two clauses with a conjunction + comma, a semi-colon, or a period. "My hamster loved to play, so I bought him an exercise wheel." (You don't want to separate two clauses with a period on challenge statements, though, because you're only supposed to write one sentence!) Here is a [super useful site from UNC on how to use commas and avoid the "dreaded comma splice."](#) Read it, and I promise your writing will improve.

8. Don't use more than 50 words. Count the words in your sentence. Over 50? Cut some out.