



An Assigned Essay

One to two pages, graded, due soon. The only exercise that gives you evidence of individual learning and the student a private channel.

College and high school.

One to two pages, written out of class and graded. It is the only exercise here that produces real evidence of individual learning, and the only one that gives a student a private channel to you. Some of what a student most needs to say about a simulation is not something they will say in front of the people they said it to.

Its cost is real: it arrives after the memory has cooled, and you have to grade it. Set the deadline close.

When to use it

- **When the simulation carries a grade.** The essay is what you are actually assessing; the performance in the room is not.
- **When students argued positions they do not hold.** The essay is where they get to say what they think.
- **Not instead of an in-class exercise.** Run something the same day. The essay is the second pass, not the first.

The prompt

Ask for process as well as content. The weak version asks what happened; the strong version asks what you chose, why, and what you would do differently.

“Two pages. **First**, what your role was trying to achieve and what it was constrained by. **Second**, the single decision you made that mattered most, why you made it, and what you would do instead. **Third**, one thing that happened in the room that the course reading explains, and one thing it does not. Name the reading.

I am not looking for a narrative of the session. I was there. I am looking for your reasoning.”

A four-part prompt structure, if you want one

Petranek, Corey and Black guide written and oral debriefing through four elements. It is forty years old and it still works as a set of prompts.

Element	What you are asking for
Events	What happened, in the student's own account rather than the official one
Emotions	What it felt like to hold the position, especially one they disagreed with
Empathy	What the other side was working with, stated fairly
Explanations	Why the outcome came out as it did, in terms of rules and incentives

Grading it without creating a burden

- Grade the reasoning, not the outcome. A student on the losing side can write the best essay in the class.
- A short rubric with three lines (constraint named, decision analyzed, reading connected) grades faster than prose comments and tells the student more.
- Say in advance that you will quote anonymized passages back to the class. It raises the quality and it gives you material for the delayed debrief.

What to watch for

*Two cautions on what an essay can show. **Skills:** ask students to recognize and name what they did, not to assert that they improved; self-reported gains are unreliable, and Clark and Scherpereel's own test of skills gains was not supported. **Identity:** a sense of oneself as a future practitioner is the most ambitious thing a debrief can aim at and it is barely studied in political science. The nearest finding, Engel and colleagues on Model UN, found growth concentrated in the metacognitive realm, students analyzing their own negotiation styles. Treat it as a goal worth pursuing, not one the field knows how to measure.*