Goals for a Seminar/Discussion Section

Get students:
• to engage with the material
• to read empirical papers with a careful and critical eye and to integrate new findings into their larger knowledge base
• to offer their own thinking either verbally or in writing
• to aid students in writing and talking using science theory and data to support their ideas/hypotheses

Move students from passive listeners/absorbers to active participants in the process of science

Definition of a blog

• “A blog, is a type of website where entries are made such as in a journal or diary.
• Blogs provide commentary or news and information on a particular subject; some function as more personal on-line diaries.
• A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic.”
• Blogs are meant to be read by others

Wikipedia entry 8/19/06
Why get students to blog?

1. Get students to write to communicate to a real audience (their peers)—writing to get an “A” from the instructor is not real-life writing.
2. To blog they must read the assignment, think about it, so it gives the students something to say in class.
3. You can “hear” the voices of the students who don’t speak up in discussion classes.
4. You can use their blog material to encourage classroom discussion and to correct misunderstandings or errors of thinking.

How to blog

• How to write a better blog:  
  http://alistapart.com/articles/writebetter/
• (a few important headlines from this website are listed below)
• Follow the rules:
  • Rules are not restrictions. Grammar, spelling, punctuation, rhythm, focus, syntax, and structure help writing make sense. Learn the rules. Break ‘em later.
• Offer something new—don’t summarize readings
• Amuse/engage your readers
• Link/Cite sources, information

What to tell the students to get them to blog

1. The purpose of blogging in this seminar is to give you a chance to muse and grapple with new ideas gleaned from the articles we read. Your blog is your reaction to these papers.

2. Jump into the material (assigned reading or textbook chapter) where something is puzzling or amazing or irritating. Don’t write that you’ve “figured it all out” or that you think “this is a nice piece of research” or that the work is “interesting” or “awesome” or “annoying”. Tell us how you figured it out; why you think the work is nifty or poorly designed or surprising. If you ask a question, be sure that you try to answer it!

3. Be real. Be engaging. Don’t say something just because you think we want to hear it. Speak in a real voice about real things.

4. Write about what you love, what you find most interesting. A blog is the place for strong opinions. The more engaged you are with your subject, the more interesting your writing will be.

5. Your audience is your classmates, although I will be a reader too. Your tone should be conversational.

6. Establish your credibility. To the best of your ability, be truthful. Be respectful to your audience.

7. Link to sources or cite your sources (papers you have read, material from the book, work from other classes, papers you have looked up to get some information, websites you have consulted). Allow your readers access to your primary material, empowering them to make informed judgments.

8. Feel free to provide weblinks, photos, or videos—be creative. Be sure to do some research on the issue of interest and bring something new to your blog.
How to set up a class blog

- Blogs can be set up within the “Assignments” or the “Discussion Board” sections of Blackboard.
- The syllabus should list blog topics, blog rules, and blog groups.
- Blogs must be completed in sufficient time prior to class so that you can read and use the material in class so set due times.
- Find ways to avoid making blogging boring! (give students free passes; give weeks off; use a provocative question or issue)
A cautionary note about grading

- Make the blogs count for a substantial part of the grade (20-50% of the course grade).
- Do not correct blogs, or edit blogs.
- Write students emails about how to write a better blog or complimenting them on things they are doing correctly.
- Tell students that they start off with A’s and they will lose credit if they don’t write, or if they don’t get engaged, or if they don’t improve.
- Base grades more on later blogging efforts than initial blogging efforts.

Neuroscience blogs examples

- **Encephalon 21: A neuroscience blog carnival**
  - *Post by ouroboros under Alzheimer’s, Carnival*, *Neurodegeneration, Stem cells*
  - Welcome to the first installment of Encephalon, a blog carnival devoted to neuroscience. The carnival is organized by the inimitable Neurophilosopher, and today hosted here at Ouroboros.
  - Neuroscience is of major interest to biologists of aging, mainly because so many diseases of aging are diseases of the brain. Hence, we’ve paid a great deal of attention to recent findings on neurodegeneration (especially Alzheimer's disease). Today, however, we’re (sort of) not going to focus on these matters in particular, but on the basics of the brain and mind. Hardwired biogerontologists should nonetheless read on: We can't truly appreciate the scope and symptoms of neurodegenerative diseases without understanding how the brain works throughout the lifespan (and the other sorts of things that go wrong). Without further ado, then...Encephalon 21.

Why students like to blog (student quotes)

- It seems more like writing to a friend than doing a class assignment.
- I can submit it at 2am.
- I am more likely to keep up with my reading.
- I have more to contribute to class because I have organized my thoughts.
- I think about material from previous classes and other courses and want to integrate this information.
- I like it when Prof. Williams uses some of my writing in class or asks me to tell the class more about my blog entry.
- When I read my classmates’ blogs, I realized that I needed to do more to improve my own blogs.
- I found that writing the final paper for the class was easy because I was used to writing about the course material.