Having attended a panel sponsored by TEAMS at the Annual International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2018 titled “Teaching Medieval Studies with/without Objects and Collections,” I left the conference greatly encouraged by the ways by which experiential learning can bridge the gap between the medieval past and now. “Experiential learning” is derived from the pedagogical position that experiencing something for ourselves is the only way we can truly know something, a position pioneered by the work of educational theorist David A. Kolb.¹ All of the papers in the roundtable session I attended emphasized the effectiveness and availability of student-centred, experiential education for students of the Middle Ages that is grounded in student encounters with material objects from the past. Given that so often medievalist instructors of literature meditate on how the alterity of the medieval past acts as a paradoxical hindrance and advantage in getting students interested in our medieval literature, I left the panel greatly encouraged by the variety of ways through which we can bridge the gap between then and now. The obvious object to employ in the literature class is the manuscript, and my own experience in developing an early books-focused assignment for a medieval literature course
(“Premodern Fantasy”) at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick (Canada), where I teach medieval literature affirmed that, even when your resources are limited, students can benefit from the immediacy that material encounters can give their studies of the distant past.

In the session at the ICMS, Dr. Anna Siebach-Larsen had described how libraries and special collections are, in general, underused by those in a position to make best use of them. She spoke of how she actively reached out to faculty in various areas and disciplines who had never considered the value that the collections could bring to their subject. I myself was, at the time, about to move to St. Thomas University, whose library, as far as I knew, had little in the way of medieval material in its holdings. Hearing Siebach-Larsen pushed me to reach out to my new institution, which shares the Harriet Irving Library with the University of New Brunswick — and discuss with Francesca Holyoke, head of UNB’s Archives and Special Collections, how my upcoming course on premodern fantasy might benefit from a trip to the special collections.

The activity of encountering real premodern books would, I hoped, resolve one of the key problems of authenticity that I had encountered in previous courses. As Joshua Eyler explains in How Humans Learn, “the greater the authenticity, the deeper the learning … [because] the brain registers the situation as being realistic (and therefore useful) and, thus, learns more than if the scenario had been contrived without attention to this authenticity” (153-54). In introducing students to a premodern text, I almost always begin with the manuscript or print history of that text. While the reasons for this often seem obvious to me, they are not so to the students; even when I carefully expressed why a manuscript’s mise-en-page was of interest or the significance of Caxton’s early prefaces in the brave new world of print, I don’t doubt that these manuscript detours can seem like hit-and-run pedagogy to some students. Getting students to physically
encounter manuscript and early print material early in the semester is a simple and effective way to build authenticity into these discussions.

Not wanting to reinvent the wheel in creating this activity for my students, I posted a query to #medievaltwitter with the following tweet:

The many generous responses I received to this tweet, both on Twitter and via email, are the reason for this short essay now. For the most part, colleagues from around the world offered suggestions via Twitter, but a number of educators reached out directly with their own assignments and exercise prompts. I’ve collected these assignments (with authors’ permissions) and record them in what follows for the benefit of other teachers.

These assignments offer models of experiential learning that are all broadly and easily adaptable regardless of the resources on campus. I wrote my own assignment by sampling from the variety that had been sent to me, and I encourage readers to do the same. While each assignment bears the markings of the course for which it was designed – whether that be a course on sacred texts or on art history – they all reflect, whether consciously or not, Kolb’s learning cycle that moves from concrete experience, to reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In particular, I found the structure of Emily West's assignment
useful for my approach that required a written assignment as students record their observations and hypotheses, so my assignment echoes hers the most (sometimes verbatim, see the Appendix). Others on Twitter also pointed me to the National Archives, whose assignments are geared towards younger students; I adopted some of the National Archives’ approach, which encourages students to feel less anxiety over being non-specialists with simple, jargon-free steps for “meeting a document.”

I circulated my assignment prior to our visit and explained to students that I hoped they would gain a greater appreciation for how the material aspects of the work we study are so often hidden from us by modern editing. To supplement their encounter, I had students watch episodes 1 and 2 of “If Books Could Talk” from the University of Iowa, and “Making Manuscripts” from the Getty Library. Although students were encouraged to make connections between these videos and their own assignments, in retrospect I would reserve greater class time prior to our visit to discuss the videos. “If Books Could Talk” offers a fun, accessible introduction into the kinds of questions a book historian might ask when confronted with an original document ranging from script analysis, to analysis of book covers, and even demonstrating how what’s missing from a book (erasures or cut-out images, for example) can also be evidence. “Making Manuscripts” provides a beautifully filmed explanation of the process of book creation, from vellum scraping to illumination and binding. Watching these would ensure that learners were primed for examining the materials we would see in the special collections.

When we discussed the upcoming library visit, I emphasized that this was an exploratory assignment: they were to speculate about the object they studied and to give free rein to their imaginations in considering the answers to the various questions included in the assignment. This reassured them that I didn’t expect them to have the advanced knowledge of a trained book
historian and that they could offer their best approximations, but I especially wanted them to feel at ease once they reached the third and fourth sections of the assignment, “Try to Make Sense of It” and a section asking them to make historical conjecture. In those sections, I ask them to speculate about audience (“How does the document try to appeal to its intended audience? What do qualities like the size, shape, and weight of the book tell you about how people were able to, or were meant to, interact with it?”) and the object’s historical relevance (“What does your analysis add to our understanding of literature and/or writing in the period in which your object was created?”). In order to attempt an answer at these questions, and to learn from the process, students need to be comfortable with failing here. Learners are acutely aware of their position as non-specialists in a library’s special collections, so the insistence on the exploratory and tentative nature of this assignment is absolutely necessary.

When it came time for our visit to the library, my students brought with them their assignment sheets, paper and pencils and, after a twenty-minute introduction by the librarian, they spent fifty minutes choosing a textual object and taking notes on it. The librarians and I had chosen a very fine array of texts for my students to explore: books and documents representing the medieval, early modern, and modern period were laid out on several tables. The rare books were largely provided by the University of New Brunswick’s Beaverbrook and Vaughan Collections: fine facsimiles of the Luttrell Psalter, Domesday Book, and the Book of Kells; a rare incunabulum of Johannes Nider’s *Perceptorium divinae legis* among other early modern theological treatises; a facsimile of the elaborately illustrated Kelmscott Chaucer, originally printed by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press; a full original printing of Dickens’ serial *The Pickwick Papers*; and author papers from local maritime writers including drafts and letters.
This miscellany of textual objects met my students’ needs exactly. I found that the Harriet Irving Library’s Special Collections had a wealth of early modern and modern materials that could help my students experience material culture. The early modern treatises and books did an excellent job of speaking to the prevalence of religion in textual production of both the medieval and early modern period; and their layouts, languages, and formats spoke to their purpose and audience. The fascicular nature of the *Pickwick Papers* provided an excellent example of form meeting function and an altogether different way of looking at the novel. Students readily identified the economic reasons for fascicular publication holding in their hands evidence of middle class, serial reading practices. The working papers of more contemporary writers, far from being removed from medieval manuscript production, connected directly to the act of writing, drafting, and editing by hand, as well as revealing the difficulties of transcription. Additionally, the facsimiles of medieval works themselves, though providing an instance of what a medieval text would look like, also raised fascinating questions for my students regarding the status of facsimiles (and digital facsimiles) as intermediaries between us and the “real thing.” These questions all arose because students were actively reflecting on their concrete experience in the special collections.

In order to provide the best learning experience for my students, I took a backseat in this activity. I offered guiding questions for students who seemed stuck or answered queries as they came up (or modelled how one might consult a specialist by deferring to the librarians) as I circulated among the learners, but the authenticity of the activity depended on the students having a personal encounter with their object guided by their own curiosity. The end results of my students’ textual encounters were all I could ask for: the students embraced the task, put on their own detective caps, and came up with insightful and persuasive ideas about the texts. For
example, students wrote thoughtfully on likely audiences for texts, and they discussed the material conditions required to produce their chosen text. They recognized the elitism involved in publishing certain types of books: the Kelmscott Chaucer, for instance, one student observed, would have been a prestige item with its many illustrations and spacious layout. Other students noted the necessity of knowing Latin and being able to make out a particular script or font in order to use the biblical commentaries. Still more students observed the ways in which other formats were geared towards a wider public: the fascicular *Pickwick Papers*, for instance. There were numerous comments as well on the *ordinatio* of the religious volumes, where students speculated, correctly, about the formulaic nature of such layouts that would eventually lead to the modern critical apparatus. And the various sizes of these books almost always led students to consider their practicality – something with which book-toting undergrads have personal experience!

There were, of course, missteps. In encouraging speculation, I was also encouraging a kind of failure. The parameters I set out for the assignment, however, emphasized that I would be assessing students on their “willingness” to engage with the activity, not the accuracy of their speculation. In class, I made sure to tell them that I would not penalize wrong conjecture, and that they should look to my comments on their assignments as simply a dialogue from which they can learn. In several cases, these conversations, begun in the margins of their assignments, did continue off the page, and one student in particular has taken our discussions of format further into an analysis of modern fan fiction he is writing for a local publication. The seeds for this can be seen in his closing thoughts on the Kelmscott *Canterbury Tales*:

> Were it not produced in 1896, the book would seem like a prop from a movie – something to be seen instead of read; to be slammed on a dusty table by a broken old
man; to be dramatic and self-important. This edition is lavish and extravagant, reveling in its own presence with every page turn. But this is all fine, as this is an edition clearly produced as a labor of intense love for the original. This is, in current terms, a fan work. I found many of my students’ closing thoughts a particular indication of the success of this activity. For instance, another student studying The Pickwick Papers wrote:

Looking at these volumes and hearing the librarians speak of their popularity, makes me think of a time when reading was the number one form of entertainment. They mentioned Lord Beaverbrook would constantly send letters to the library telling them what books they had to purchase. The wear and tear of these volumes brings me back to a time when books were loved and cherished instead of second place behind videogames and television. I like the idea of Beaverbrook taking these volumes out when he needed a laugh or reading them to his children.

These ideas represent just two among many observations that demonstrate my students’ connecting with the material realities of these texts not in the abstract, but in a personal way only enabled by their physical encounters in the Special Collections of the Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick. In their hands, and in their memories now, the text is alive to them authentically; subsequent introductions to the manuscript or print history of particular pieces of literature took on deeper significance. Evidence for this this deeper learning could be found in the questions students asked in class following this activity: “Who would read this? How do we know?” Numerous students remarked, in particular, on the amount of labour that would have gone into making some of these volumes; these comments, along with the more personal connections, I found especially gratifying. The countless unknown hands and minds
behind each textual artefact we encounter, obscured in our anthologies and critical editions
beneath edifices of criticism remarkable in their own right, became just a shade more visible.

My hope is that the assignments below, selflessly shared with me at the offhand
prompting of one tweet, will encourage other instructors to share in the wealth of their local
libraries and that this will foster greater connection between librarians, teaching faculty, and
students.

Sample Assignments

The following five assignments are from instructors who responded to my initial Twitter query. They were created to suit the learning outcomes of their particular courses, but, without exception, they are broadly adaptable and provide a sense of the ways in which students can be encouraged to interact with premodern material culture.

1. SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ASSIGNMENT

Andrew Klein, St. Thomas University

With so many ways to encounter text between print and digital media, we can easily forget that the literature we encounter almost always began in a different material state than what we read for class. This is especially true when dealing with texts from the premodern era. It’s important to consider that the material realities of what we read often have an effect on how we read them, and sometimes a bit of thought about a work of literature’s materiality can open up interesting avenues of critical inquiry or give us a deeper appreciation for what we read. Form serves function.

As students and faculty at a university, we’re fortunate to have access to collections at our library that can make this materiality readily apparent for us. **Your job in this assignment is simply to follow a process of trying to make sense of what you encounter when meeting a strange book for the first time.** Your assignment will be assessed by its willingness to engage with the topics and questions below by directly studying your object through describing its material qualities. Your process of encounter will be structured around the four simple steps advised by the U.S. National Archives. 1) **Meet the object,** 2) **Observe its parts,** 3) **Try to make sense of it,** and 4) **Use it as historical evidence.** Each step is guided by a topic and series of questions.
Your assignment should be about five fully-developed paragraphs long, comprising steps 1, 2, 3a, 3b, and 4.

**Step 1: Meet the document (Material description)**
Write a paragraph describing your initial impressions of the object. Questions to consider:

- Is there a date provided for it? (can you find one in the catalogue or display?)
- How large is the object? Heavy? Light? How does it feel to hold it?
- Is the object made up of only text, or does it include illustrations or other non-textual content? If so, what kind? What is the balance between text and non-textual content?
- Does the object show any signs of use? If so, what are they?
- If applicable, note anything else interesting to you about your initial impressions of the object’s material qualities not covered by these questions.

**Step 2: Observe Its Parts (Material description continued)**
Write a paragraph describing the parts of your object. Questions to consider:

- Outside of the main text, what else can you see?
- What is the paper the book is printed on like? Sturdy? Flimsy? Somewhere in between?
- What do the binding and paper feel like in your hands?
- How are the pages set up? How large is the print? How much empty space is left on the page? Is the text easy or difficult to read, or somewhere in between? Why?
- What kind of material is the object made out of? Does it have a binding? Is it the original binding or has it been changed at some point?
- Are there any extra-textual marks such as prickings, rulings, or catch-words?

**Step 3. Try to Make Sense of It**

**a. Audience**
Write a paragraph speculating about what the material qualities you noted above tell us about the object’s audience, addressing the following questions:

- How does the document try to appeal to its intended audience, and what do those choices tell us about how the author and/or publisher saw that audience?
- If the book does not seem to try to appeal to an audience, what does that tell you about how the author saw their product and/or audience?
- What do qualities like the size, shape, and weight of the book tell you about how people were able to, or were meant to, interact with it?
- If the object shows signs of use, how do these add to or modify our understanding of how the object was or could be interacted with, and of the object’s audience?
• If the object does not show signs of use, how does that add to or modify our understanding of how the object was or could be interacted with, and of the object’s audience?

**b. Content and/or Literary Qualities**

Read (or transcribe – see below for this alternative) a selection from the document if you can. Write a short paragraph reflecting on how the object’s content adds to or changes your understanding of the object and its audience.

• Does the document say what its audience is, or address that audience directly in some way? How and why?
• What does the form of the writing—that is, the way that the writing is organized and put together—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?
• What does the level of writing – its difficulty in diction, style, and/or script—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?
• What does the content of the writing—its main topics and concerns—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?
• Alternatively, copy out a line or two of text (transcribe). It doesn’t matter if you know or read the language, or whether you’re right or wrong – just pay close attention to the letterforms and record what you see. Try to answer any of the above questions from your short transcript.

**Step 4. What historical conjectures might you make based on the evidence in your observations?**

Reflecting on the three previous sections, what does your analysis add to our understanding of literature and/or writing in the period in which your object was created?

2. **Sacred Books Exercise**

Shamma Boyarin and Justine Semmens, University of Victoria

You have explored the importance of Material Culture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this exercise you will look at the way books (Bibles, Qur’an and More) function as material objects. You will visit UVic’s Special Collections (located on the bottom floor of McPherson Library), and spend time with one of the books, or fragments of books, listed on the following pages (either a TaNaKh, Bible, Qur’an, or prayer book). Some of them are old, some new, some fancy, and some relatively plain—but they all can tell you something about the way Scripture functions both as text and object.

You will need to produce a one-page reflection (typed, double spaced) documenting your impressions of the item.

Note: most of the items are not in English—we are not necessarily expecting you to read the text, but rather focus on other aspects—materials, size, decorations, images, the look and layout of pages, etc.
Some questions to consider:

1. What would you guess was the intended use of the book (for the home or for a communal place of worship? For simple reading or more advanced study)? How is this reflected in its construction?
2. Are there any “paratextual” elements -- words or symbols that go beyond the main text? Can you speculate on their function?
3. Where and when was the item made (you may need to consult the catalogue description to answer this)?
4. Are there any decorative elements? If so describe them and discuss their nature (are they pictures that accompany the text? Interesting use of color? Something else?)
5. What does the text look like on the page (usually texts of scripture look different from the way text is arranged on the page of a novel for example).

It is hard to anticipate general questions that will cover every aspect of every book you might see—please do not see these questions as limiting, and feel free to add any observations you find interesting! You will have to do this assignment at Special Collections—do not leave it to the last moment as there are a limited amount of students that can fit in there at one time. Also, only one student can work on a book at a time—so if there is a specific book you wish to work with, you may have to be patient if someone else is looking at it.

3. ROAMING THE COLLECTION

Erik Kwakkel, University of British Columbia

Dr. Kwakkel included the following note for instructors:

When introducing any group of students to medieval manuscripts for the first time, I put about twenty medieval manuscripts and single leaves on the table, numbering each item for reference. Then I let the students loose on the material with questions by which they are invited to observe the materials and provide answers to the questions. They roam freely through the room.

Below you will find three batches of questions, covering three important aspects of medieval book production: materials, scripts and scribes, and page design. Students think they are merely looking at items, while the task to observe and report on why they think what they think actually makes them work very hard. Sneakily.

N.B. In the sample questions, #1 is a fragment written in bold letters, but you can really take any sample that stands out or is different from the others paleographically. #2 is a leaf that combines text and commentary, both in different sizes of scripts. #3 is a fragment with musical notation.

The Exercise
Round 1: Materials
1. There are two printed items among the artefacts on the tables.
   a. Which are they?
   b. Observe and report: how do you know these are printed books?
   c. Explain for each of the two items why they are present in this line-up of handwritten materials.

2. There are three different kinds of materials on the tables – stuff the items are made of.
   a. Which are they? Name one representative for each.
   b. Observe and report: how can you tell the difference?
   c. Argue why the scribes opted for one material over the other. What may the rationale(s) have been?

3. Did all items on the tables once belong to a book – a “codex”?
   a. Which did not and why do you think so?
   b. How do you know the others did? The query is particularly relevant for very small fragments.

Round 2: Scripts and Scribes
1. The samples on the tables contain a variety of medieval scripts.
   a. Can you identify three different families (no need to name them)?
   b. Observe and report: choose one letter and try to describe how it varies in the three different script families.
   c. Which of the scripts seen on the tables do you find most attractive? Why?

2. Take a good look at item #1.
   a. How would you describe the letters on this artifact? Use any language that comes to mind to come to a verdict.
   b. How is this script different from the other scripts on the table?
   c. What would have been the purpose of this manuscript, you think? Why do you think so?

3. Some leaves contain black/brown ink only; others show writing in different colors as well.
   a. What other colors of writing do you observe?
   b. What is the purpose of using different colors in these instances?

4. Apart from being presented in different scripts, the writing on the specimens also differs in other respects.
   a. Name two other ways in which the writing of the exhibited pages differs.
   b. Why is this the case? How do you explain your observations?

Round 3: Page design
1. Take a good look at item #2.
   a. Why is this leaf so “full”? This is a rather opaque question, but on purpose: just say what comes to mind.
b. Observe and report: the text on this leaf varies in size and shape. Describe how precisely, while keeping an eye on the location on the page where a certain style of writing is found.

c. What is the function of this variation?

2. Take a good look at item #3.
   a. What kind of “elements” does this layout or page design consist of? Just to give you a hint, the page contains text – that is one down. But what other elements are there?
   b. Keeping in mind your answers to 2a, how was the manuscript to which this leaf belonged used?

3. Some leaves show a plain “simple” design, while others are much more complex.
   a. Identify two items of which the text does not just consist of columns with text, but also has other elements which add to the complexity of the page.
   b. Observe and report: try to deduce what makes a complex layout complex.
   c. What purpose did this kind of layout serve?

4. Various items on the table contain some sort of decoration.
   a. Identify three items with decoration.
   b. Describe each type of decoration.
   c. What is the function of the decoration in each of these cases?

**Extra task**

**Compose a query based on the items on the table.** Your query needs to invite your fellow students to interact with the materials, apply the knowledge they gained from the readings, and include material observations.

4. **MANUSCRIPT ENCOUNTERS**
   Anna Siebach-Larsen, University of Rochester

The following exercise is designed to help you explore, engage with, and interpret one of these manuscripts as a living object with its own ongoing history. Your job today is simply to try to make sense of what you see.

1. Begin by asking yourself a very simple question: what kind of object is this? A book/codex? A fragment? Something else? What is its format?

2. Start your exploration by looking very closely your object and paying close attention to its particular material features and characteristics. Outside of the main text, what else can you see? List five things you notice. Be specific! [NB: There are no right or wrong answers here!]
3. What substrate or writing surface is your object made out of? How can you tell? If your object is made from animal skin, can you determine the flesh side from the hair side? What kind of ink or pigments are present?

4. Are there any extra-textual marks such as prickings, rulings, or catch-words?

5. Is your object decorated at all? If so, in what way(s)?

6. Take a look at the text itself. What language is it in? Is there any ornamentation? Erasures or redactions?


9. Is your object in its original condition? By this I mean, has your object been detached from a larger object? Reused or recycled in some way? Is there damage?

10. What is the format of the text? Multiple columns? Single column? What size is the script and what does it look like (cursive, Gothic, etc.)? How might this text be read (out loud, in one sitting, in public, in private, etc.).

11. Look at your description. What does it tell you about the purpose and use of this manuscript? What is its quality or luxury level? Does it seem to have been heavily used? What can you guess about who made it and for whom they made it? What can you surmise about how it was used across centuries?

Finally, choose a few lines from the text and try to make a transcription. It doesn’t matter if you know or read the language, or whether you’re right or wrong – just pay close attention to the letterforms and record what you see.

5. IMAGES AND MANUSCRIPTS

Sara Öberg Strådal, University of Edinburgh

A note from Dr. Strådal for instructors:

This assignment was part of an art history course called “Art, Illness, and Death in the Middle Ages.” I didn’t assume my students had any background knowledge in medieval medical theory or manuscripts, and I wanted to encourage them to think about images as practical tools or even
agents in the healing process. Students are divided into four groups (or however many groups align with your choice of manuscripts).

The Exercise
Your group has been assigned one digitized manuscript to research and discuss in class. Below are the links to each digital manuscript and their catalogue entry that all contain bibliographies and tips for further reading.

You should, in your group, familiarize yourself with the manuscript and pick one page/image/opening to discuss in class. You should introduce the codex, the text, and that particular image. Your group’s presentation/discussion/report should be no more than 10 minutes.

Although you may not be able to answer all, you can begin by considering the following questions:
• What was the function of this image? Did it aid in healing practices? If so, how? If not, did it serve a different purpose?
• Does the image correspond to contemporary ideas about the body or health? If so, how?
• How does it fit in with the rest of the manuscript? Conceptually? Codicologically?
• Who is the author of the text(s)? Is it known? Who is the scribe? Who is the artist?
• Who would have seen it? Who would have handled the manuscript?

6. PRIMARY SOURCE ASSIGNMENT

Emily M. West, McMaster University, https://www.emilymwest.com/

We are lucky to have access to an excellent collection of early children’s literature at the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections in the basement of Mills library. This assignment asks you to interact with an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century children’s book in order to think about how its material qualities contribute to its meaning, and to how we understand both childhood and children’s literature during this period. For the assignment, you will choose one book in the collection from a list I will provide on the first day of class. After you complete the assignment as described below, you will post it to the appropriate forum in our discussion page on Avenue to Learn. In the way, we will collectively build a class archive of some of the material forms and meanings of early children’s literature.

The assignment is a report with four sections.

The first three sections are guided by a main topic and a series of questions you should answer in paragraph form. (Note: not all questions will apply to every book. Use your own judgement.) Each section should be about one double-spaced page long each (about 250 words). You will be graded on your ability to respond to the main topic and questions with answers directly linked to
your chosen book through descriptions of its material qualities and/or through quotations from the book, as appropriate. It is not required, but if you wish, you can include a few relevant photographs of the book (consult the archivists regarding the rules and procedures around photographing archival materials).

The final section, which should also be a paragraph of about 250 words, asks you to bring these ideas together and connect them to a larger context. You will be graded on your ability to draw links between your specific analysis of your chosen book and other texts, topics, or themes we have covered in class.

More than one person will be investigating each book, but you should work on your assignments separately rather than together. I’m interested in your own perspective on and conclusions about the book.

SECTION 1: MATERIAL DESCRIPTION

Write a paragraph describing your book, addressing the following questions:

- What does the book look like?
- What kind of material is the binding made out of? Is it original or has someone changed it at some point?
- What is the paper the book is printed on like? Sturdy? Flimsy? Somewhere in between?
- What do you the binding and the paper feel like in your hands?
- How large is the book? Is it heavy? Light? How does it feel to hold it?
- How are the pages set up? How large is the print? How much empty space is left on the page? Is the text easy or difficult to read, or somewhere in between? Why?
- Is the book made up only of text, or does it include illustrations or other non-textual content? If so, what kind? What is the balance between text and non-textual content?
- Does the book show any signs of use? If so, what are they?
- If applicable, note anything else interesting to you about the book’s material qualities not covered by these questions.

SECTION 2: AUDIENCE

Write a paragraph reflecting on what the material qualities you noted above tell us about the book’s audience, addressing the following questions:

- How does the book try to appeal to its intended audience, and what do those choices tell us about how the author and/or publisher saw that audience?
- Alternatively, if the book does not seem to try to appeal to an audience, what does that tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw that audience?
- What do qualities like the size, shape, and weight of the book tell you about how people were able to, or were meant to, interact with it?
- If the book shows signs of use, how do these add to or modify our understanding of how the book was or could be interacted with, and of the book’s audience?
- Alternatively, if the book does not show signs of use, how does that add to or modify our understanding of how the book was or could be interacted with, and of the book’s audience?
SECTION 3: CONTEXT AND LITERARY QUALITIES

Read a selection from the book: the introduction, if the book has one, and a short portion of the text that gives you a flavour of what is it doing with words. Write a paragraph reflecting on how the book’s content adds to or changes your understanding of the book and its audience, addressing the following questions:

- Does the book say what its audience is, or address that audience directly in some way? How and why?
- What does the form of the writing—that is, the way that the writing is organized and put together—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?
- What does the level of the writing—that is, its difficulty or lack thereof—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?
- What does the content of the writing—that is, its main topics and concerns—tell you about how the author and/or publisher saw their audience?

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting back on the three previous sections, what does your analysis of this book add to our understanding of childhood and/or children’s literature in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries? Link your conclusions to at least one text, topic, or theme discussed in the class.

Notes

3 These stages of learning are outlined in Kolb’s *Experiential Learning*. They can be summarized as follows: concrete experience, in which new experience or situation is encountered; reflective observation, in which the student intentionally reflects on their encounter how their observations meet or don’t meet expectation; abstract conceptualization, in which the student generates new ideas and hypotheses, or modifies their initial abstract concept; and active experimentation, in which the learner takes these ideas and tries them out in the world. The process is cumulative, with new experiences building from prior cycles.
4 The steps outlined by the National Archives: 1) Meet the document, 2) Observe its parts, 3) Try to make sense of it, 4) Use it as historical evidence. The National Archives website includes useful worksheets, as well.
5 For the importance of failure in the learning process, see Eyler, *How Humans Learn*, pp. 171-217.
6 With permission from Evan Mersereau.
7 With permission from Alyson Richard.
8 With great thanks to Shamma Boyarin, Erik Kwakkel, Justine Semmens, Anna Siebach-Larsen, Sara Öberg Strådal, Emily M. West for their kind permission to share these assignments.