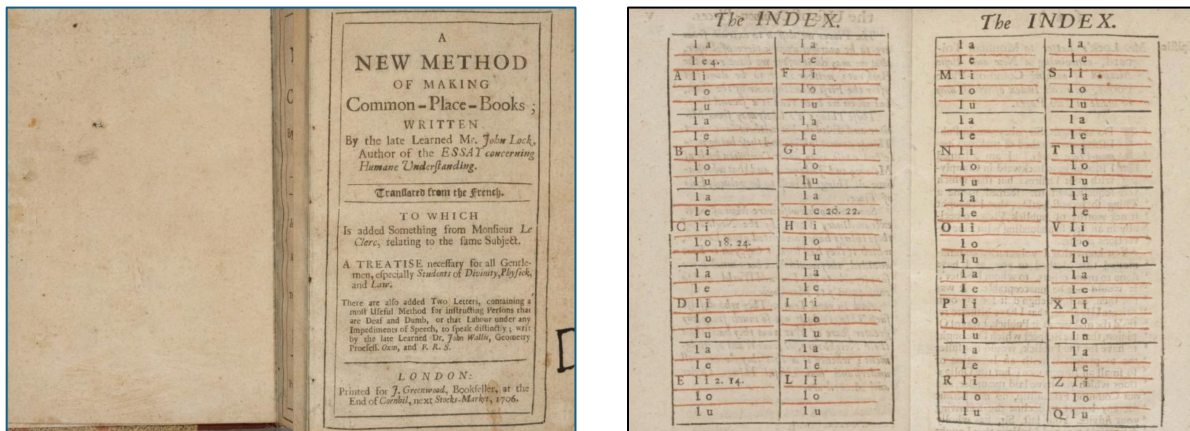


## A Commonplace Book for our Common Place in Walla Walla

### *Capital Punishment, Fall 2026*

One of the central elements of this course is your contribution to and maintenance of a personal commonplace book as we progress throughout the semester. But what is a commonplace book?



### Background

Popularized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – and revitalized by contemporary journal enthusiasts on Instagram and TikTok – a “commonplace book” was a notebook used to gather quotes, excerpts, definitions, and analyses from one’s readings. In its most ideal form, the commonplace book not only served as a personalized and ever-evolving encyclopedia that safeguarded against the failings of human memory by tracking compelling ideas over the course of a lifetime, but it also created a “wonderfully tangled mixture”<sup>1</sup> that could generate new arguments from seemingly disparate thoughts. This method of combining notetaking with recursive thinking was formalized by John Locke in his posthumously published *New Method of Organizing Common Place Books* (1706). For Locke, each new commonplace book began by, first, binding together a stack of empty, white sheets into a single volume and, second, reserving two sheets on which he could create a self-made index, such that he could trace recurring ideas as his literary explorations progressed (see above). The result, as historian Robert Darnton elaborates, was

“...a special way of taking in the printed word. Unlike modern readers, who follow the flow of a narrative from beginning to end, early modern philosophers read in fits and starts and jumped from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things,

<sup>1</sup> Sam Dolbear, “John Locke’s Method for Common-Place Books” in *The Public Domain Review* (May 8, 2019).

for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality.”<sup>2</sup>

This historical understanding of a commonplace book also informs its contemporary purpose – and its purpose for our class. Harvard University, for instance, notes that commonplace books form an “autobiography of the mind,” such that an individual can “contain a collection of significant or well-known passages that have been copied and organized in some way, often under topical or thematic headings, in order to generate future ideas for the compiler.”<sup>3</sup>

In this course, I ask that you – like Darnton interprets Locke, and as the librarians at Harvard note – keep an account of your readings, make a book of your own, and stamp our materials with your personality and, in doing so, make sense of the theory and practice of capital punishment across a variety of textual and physical landscapes. Moreover, I ask that, as you build your commonplace book, you endeavor to create connections between the ideas we encounter in class and the lived experiences we encounter in our “common place” of Walla Walla. Indeed, this course takes place in a unique setting: although the death penalty was formally abolished in Washington state in 2023, its affective legacy is still visible in the people, spaces, and systems it touched – and it still operates in states near to and far from us as well as at the federal level. Thus, rather than seeing capital punishment as something that happens “elsewhere,” our commonplace books can help us make the abstract real and, as a result, deepen our capacity to understand both our community and our world.

## Guidelines

What does this look like in action? At the outset of the semester, you will receive a notebook and a pouch of writing instruments (pens, pencils, highlighters, sticky notes, small scissors, glue sticks, and a stress-relieving desk pet). Please be sure to bring your materials to class every Tuesday and Thursday as we will often use your commonplace book to motivate our discussions (or reflect on our conversations). It is important to read the directions below carefully, as this project counts for 35% of your overall grade.



<sup>2</sup> Robert Darnton, “Extraordinary Commonplaces” in *The New York Review of Books* (December 21, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Y. Martin, “Harvard Views of Readers, Readership, and Reading History” at Harvard University Library (March 14, 2016).

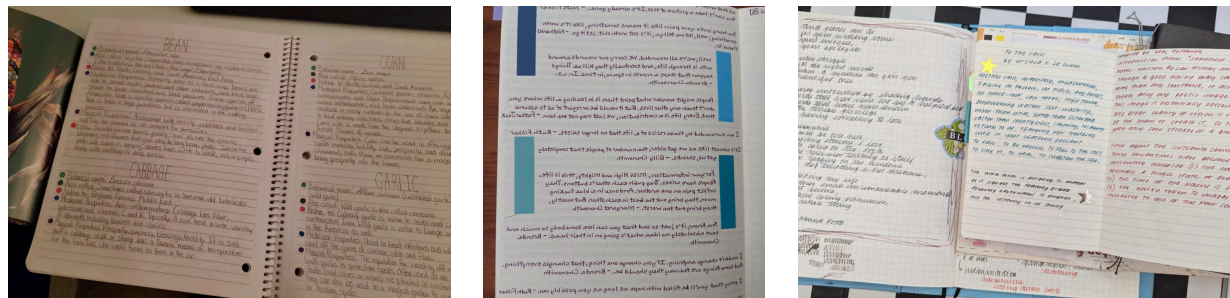
### *General Approaches to Commonplacing*

In general, the content and arrangement of your commonplace book is up to you as the author. On our Canvas site, and in the electronic version of this handout, I will link to some commonplace books used by historical and contemporary figures – you are welcome to use these as inspiration. I have also included some pictures throughout this handout. But, as you get started, here are some suggestions that you may wish to consider:

- Consider designating two sections in your book for a **table of contents** (at the front) and a **glossary** (at the back). Consider also **numbering the pages** in your book, so that – whenever you encounter a new subject or idea – you can write the title in bold at the top of the page and copy that title for your table of contents. As you encounter new terms of art, or as we discuss them in class, you can add those terms to your glossary – and revise or expand them as the semester progresses and your knowledge develops.
- That said, instead of a glossary, you may wish to make boxes or circles or use a highlighter with **key terms** throughout your book, and then make an index with the words and page numbers.
- For information or ideas that do not yet fit into a current section and do not yet warrant a new section, you can write them on a **sticky note** and place them on the inside back cover – when the time comes, you can move each note to its new section.
- To draw your future attention back to an idea, you can **use highlighting or color-coding** – or, when you re-read a previous entry, you can use a highlighter to make connections across ideas, themes, or questions. You could also develop a system of symbols – stars, circles, etc. – that correspond to a particular key. This part of the process helps you see **connections and discover themes** in your thinking.
- If something feels too abstract, you can create **visual maps, tables, infographics, doodles**, and more. It may also be useful to create timelines or sketch spaces. You may also wish to create **text boxes, sidebars, headings or subheadings, bulleted lists, mind maps, and more**.
- When a desired passage from a source is too long, you are also welcome to **print, copy, or cut out the passage from our course readers, our handouts, or even the slides** used in class. You can then tape or glue the passage into your book, and then write notes in the margins or highlight.
- If the text feels opaque, or as if there is something that does make sense or something that feels as though it hasn't been addressed, then you might want to consider **recording the questions you are asking yourself or the thoughts that you are exploring** as you engage with the course material.
- You are absolutely welcome to **supplement your commonplace supplies** with writing materials that you would prefer to use – there is no right or wrong way to approach this task.
- You may wish to take inspiration from Virginia Woolf and keep **a list of texts** that you have read – or texts that you would like to read – in the back of your notebook.

As you build your commonplace book, remember that the task is not to simply record what you find interesting, but to ask yourself *why*, *how*, and *whether* the texts, spaces, people, and ideas you encounter

add to your understanding of the theory and practice of capital punishment. The point of a commonplace book is thus to not capture *everything*, but to collect the things that linger in your mind and feel meaningful to the study that we have undertaken – and can help you understand the world around us.



### *Specific Requirements of the Commonplace Notebook for our Class*

As mentioned above, the purpose of the commonplace book is to develop and strengthen your understanding of capital punishment across the semester and across different textual and physical landscapes. It can also help you develop the habits of mind that can sustain you while writing a thesis, pursuing independent studies, upper division courses, and more. But, for this class in particular, your commonplace notebook will be assessed on the following:

## 1. **Textual Analysis, Key Terms, and Informal Reflection (40%)**

### *Textual Analysis and Key Terms*

Our class draws from interdisciplinary texts in order to construct a more holistic understanding of the use of the death penalty, which can be both exciting and daunting. In order to help foster the practice of the seeing how these texts “speak” to one another and build towards a larger whole, you should endeavor to use your commonplace as an active companion to your reading process.

This means that, as you work through the texts, you should identify passages and quotes that you feel capture the argument advanced by the author, highlight a tension or provoke a curiosity, make a connection to other course materials, and more. I also ask that, as you identify these passages, you should endeavor to interpret what they mean in light of our overall course of study. Why do your chosen quotes or passages feel provocative? What do they reveal about our texts or our object of study? If your quote is too long to copy by hand, you’re also welcome to cut-and-paste from your reader and/or copy down an excerpt. In all instances, you should provide a page number and endeavor to explain what is important about your quote in clear, accessible language. There is no absolute number of quotes you can choose, but a good benchmark is 2-3 quotes or passages per text we read.

As you read, you should also endeavor to identify – and offer definitions for – key terms in the study of capital punishment. Are there specific words (philosophical words, legal terms, academic

phrases, and more) that consistently pop-up as you read? Given the texts under consideration, how might you offer a working definition of those words, terms, or phrases? Do they shift over the course of the semester and over the course of the texts we read? Can you bring forward a word that you previously encountered to help illuminate a new text under consideration? Not all texts will have new key terms.

At the end of each reading (or listening!), I would also encourage you to write down a 5-sentence critical summary what the argument of that text was – and whether you see connections to other parts of our course. Push yourself past “this is what the text was about” and consider “this text made X argument, which connects to Y and Z author from a different day, and reveals A and B.” You may also wish to create discrete pages that track specific themes (for instance: mental health, race and class, interpretations of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment, lethal injection, etc.) over the course of the class and, at the end of your reading, log where a reading or quote might fall in the grander scheme of this course’s themes – this could be useful for when you write your papers.

You should turn in your commonplace book to me at the conclusion of every class period during which you are on call (please see the dates outlined in the syllabus). You will receive your commonplace book back by the next day, with notes and comments from me – in preparing to be on call, you are also welcome to record questions or themes that have popped up (for that day or for others) that you can use to motivate our discussion in class.

### *Informal Reflections*

This course also includes regular encounters with films and field trips. Over the course of the semester, we will watch three films (“Quilters,” “The Execution Protocol,” and “Warden, I’m Ready”). At the conclusion of these films, I would ask that you record your informal reflection on how these films connect, enhance, or complicate the themes we have encountered in class.

This approach also extends to our field trip to the Washington State Penitentiary and our talk with former superintendents of that institution. On the field trip, you can expect to receive a more detailed list of guiding reflective questions, and you can expect to have some time to write in that space (to capture your thoughts and feelings). You are welcome to use these informal reflections in the completion of your formal reflection (see below) and in your final paper.

## **2. Formal Self-Reflection (20%)**

At certain points throughout the semester, I will also ask you to reflect on the knowledge you have brought to the course and the knowledge you have gained as a result of it. There will be specific guidelines that accompany each moment of formal self-reflection, but – in general – this element of your commonplace book asks you to consider, first, the knowledge that you are bringing to class and, second, the knowledge you have gained from class. These formal reflections bookend our semester. The first one (“Encounters with Capital Punishment”) is due on Friday, September 11, by 5 pm and the second one (“The Lives of Capital Punishment”) is due on Friday, December

4, at 5 pm. Specific guidance is below and, on the day that your reflection is due, I ask that you drop off your commonplace book in my office by 5 pm. You will receive it again by Monday. As ever, you are welcome to use your formal reflections to motivate your approach to your final paper and your storytelling exercise.

*Encounters with Capital Punishment.* Write a brief (2-3 journal pages at minimum) reflection on encounters you may have had with capital punishment in the legal system, in the media, or in conversations you have had with friends and family. Ask yourself: on your understanding, what purpose does capital punishment serve? What assumptions do you have about the practice of the death penalty? Do you support the practice, or do you hope for its abolition (it is okay to not know)? How have you encountered capital punishment in the news or in conversations? What do you think the future of capital punishment will be? This will be graded credit/no credit.

*The Lives of Capital Punishment.* Over the course of the semester, we will be encountering a number of “lived” experiences of carceral and capital punishment – through films, through podcasts, through commonplace extensions (see below), through tours of the Washington State Penitentiary, and more. At the end of the semester, I will ask you to revisit these experiences in light of your original *Encounters* paper. In doing so, I will ask you to write a brief (2-3 journal pages at minimum) reflection on whether – and how – these firsthand experiences and firsthand narratives add nuance or depth to your original understanding of the purposes of retributive punishment. How did – if at all – these experiences extend, challenge, or complicate our text-based readings? What connections might you draw between our experiences and the texts assigned for our course? Was there a particular moment or anecdote that had an impact on you? Did our experiences over the course of the semester complement or challenge your initial understanding of capital punishment, as reflected upon at the start of the semester? Is there anything else you want to tell me as the semester draws to a close? This will be graded credit/no credit.

### 3. **“Common Place” Extensions (40%)**

In the syllabus, you will note that there are at least ten days throughout the semester that are marked with “commonplace extension #X.” On days that contain a commonplace extension, you are welcome to go a little bit easier and lighter on your textual analysis and key terms reflections.

On commonplace extension days, you will be asked to engage with a short interview, a short article, a podcast, or a website that emerges directly from our common place in Walla Walla and Washington state. In many instances, the commonplace “artefact” is a snippet of an interview with someone like a capital defense attorney, a former superintendent of the Washington State Penitentiary, the former chief medical doctor for the Department of Corrections, the current Washington State Attorney General, and more.

When commonplace days occur, I ask that you spend time analyzing these artefacts through the lenses offered to you by our class and bring these analyses to class – we will be using them to

motivate and complicate our discussions in class. You are welcome to write as much as you would like on these days, and I would encourage you to write at least 5-8 sentences assessing the commonplace artefact.

#### **4. Revisits and Responses (5%)**

When I collect your journals, I will often leave sticky notes or comments in the margins. As the semester progresses, I would encourage you to respond to some of these sticky notes or comments – they are designed to help you progress in your thinking and in your development of a final paper.

This may feel overwhelming, but do not worry! Every commonplace book is different, and every person will find different things that they are interested in. My main purpose in this assignment is to encourage your thinking across the semester and to engage in conversation with you about the things that capture your interest – and to prompt reflection on our lived experiences and encounters in Walla Walla. If you feel confused or uncertain about any element of this assignment, please do not hesitate to reach out!