Overview:
Good writing, research, and literary interpretation all begin with good critical reading. The point of this assignment is to help you integrate your reading with your writing through a form of journaling called “common-placing.”

Assembling one’s reading into a commonplace book is a practice that dates back to the thirteenth century in Europe, though it became very popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Everyday readers and great authors alike used their commonplace books to keep notes on their reading for use at a later time.

Here is how a book from Shakespeare’s time instructs readers to keep their books:

…students may note down everything worth storing to memory from what they hear or read in their texts, apportioning their excerpted material into clearly defined categories. In this way students will have a storehouse from which to draw an abundant supply of excellent material, [quotations], similitudes, narrations, and so forth, for any matter on which they are required to speak or write. (1564)

Assignment:
For our reading of Beowulf, you will be responsible for keeping a commonplace book. You will write in your journal for each reading assignment we have with this text using the procedure outlined below. I may ask you to share one of your passages and interpretations with the class on a given day, so please bring your updated commonplace book with you to each of our class meetings.

**STEP 1: Choose a Format**

You may create either a pen-and-paper commonplace book, or a digital one, or even a hybrid (pen-and-paper with typed text pasted in...digital with scanned handwritten materials). This choice is entirely up to you, but think about how you like to read, take notes, and the format that would best suit your personality and work habits. Your commonplace book should be organized, nicely put together, and most importantly, usable.

**STEP 2: Find Passages**

As the long passage quoted above says, there are two key steps to this practice: the first is “not[ing] down everything worth storing.”

As you do your assigned reading, underline or make note of important words and phrases in your reading. What is “important”? Those passages that connect to key themes and ideas we discuss in class, those that fall under the topics and categories listed below, or those that you see being part of a pattern—either in this text alone or in other texts from our class. Write notes to yourself in the margins of your book (or use post-it notes) to remind yourself why you underlined that particular passage so that you can easily gather it up in step three.

**STEP 3: Organize into Topics and Headings**

The second step from above calls for creating “clearly defined categories” in which to organize your passages.
Looking back over the words, phrases, and long quotations that you selected in your reading, make up categories that make them fit together. For example, in *Beowulf* you might find frequent references to “God,” “Lord,” and other words that resonate with Christian traditions. You could then create a topic called: “Christian Traditions and Cultures” and place all the quotations you have identified that fit within that category.

Be creative in thinking about these categories, and try to come up with your own ways of organizing the text and your reading. Topics can also be questions: How are women represented in *Beowulf*? What are the characters’ attitudes toward wealth? How is the natural world represented? I encourage you to start with my suggestions, and as you read and become more familiar with the story and material, begin to explore with your own.

**How many categories should you have?** That depends on you, but you should have at least five categories by the end of your reading.

**STEP 4: Elaborate and Expand**

After you have put **three to five** of your quotations into these categories for each reading assignment, write a brief reflection on each of them. First, **SUMMARIZE** the quotation or phrase as you understand it. Next **COMMENT ON** and **INTERPRET** the passage, making some remark about why it is interesting to you, why it confuses you, what you think it means, and/or why you think it is an important passage in this reading. You can also write down questions, reflections, and other thoughts that are related to this particular passage. **PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE**—how does the author’s choice of words convey the meaning of the passage? What is curious or interesting about the use of language?

Consider this writing as exploratory. You should take chances with ideas that are not fully formed and half-baked. This might seem odd to you, if you are used to turning in work that is only fully formulated, but the point of this kind of journaling is to help you explore and develop new ideas, many of which begin as half-baked reflections!

**Please note:** This is not a research project, and at this point I don’t want you to use any outside sources for your reading journal. The idea behind this assignment is for you to use and develop your own critical reading skills.

**STEP 5: Final Reflection**

After you have finished compiling your commonplace book for the entire text, read over what you have written. Review each of your topics and reflect on what these categories now reveal to you about *Beowulf*. What major themes and ideas do you see emerging over the course of the book? If you were to write a paper on *Beowulf*, what topic would you be interested in pursuing? Also, provide a general reflection on the assignment itself. What do you think you noticed in your reading by doing this Commonplace Book that you might not have otherwise? What value do you see in this kind of reading and writing?

Your final reflection statement should be about a page, double-spaced, and attached to your commonplace book when you submit it.

The ultimate goal of this project is to help you connect your reading with your writing. By keeping this journal, you will find it much easier to develop ideas and write your assignments later on in the semester.
English Literature I  
Rubric for Assignment #1: Reading Journal/Commonplace Book

**Date due:**  
Please print out this sheet and attach it to your assignment.

**Commonplacer’s Name:**________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Incomplete or Missing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Format and Presentation</strong></td>
<td>-Thoughtfully prepared, the journal was created with attention to being used for easily collecting and annotating passages. The pages are large enough to hold passages and commentary. -Headings are clearly marked and passages are compiled in such a way that they could be used later for other assignments. -The journal is generally neat in appearance.</td>
<td>-Some thought went into the format of the journal, but it lacks clarity in organization, doesn’t allow for enough space for quotations, or seems to have other flaws that might make it difficult to use as a resource for later assignments.</td>
<td>-Journal appears hastily thrown together without clear thought or organization. -It appears that the journal would be difficult to use as a commonplace book, lacks clear headings, and/or lacks clear organization.</td>
<td>Author failed to complete this aspect of the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>-Three to five entries for each day of assigned reading (12-20 total). -Summaries are complete and commentary is thoughtful, reflecting reader’s engagement with the text. -Particular attention is paid to the language and effects of language in the passages. -Writing is exploratory and probing, opening various questions and ideas for further reading, writing, and interpretation. -Final Reflection indicates deep engagement with the text and project.</td>
<td>-Fewer than required number of passages and/or those passages included do not have commentary that reflects complete engagement with the reading material. -Writing goes into some depth, but does not frequently explore other ideas or open new questions for further inquiry and reading. -Writing rarely attends to the language of the passages. -Final Reflection is complete, but could be more probing and engaged with the text and project.</td>
<td>-Fewer or far fewer than the required number of passages. -- Very limited summaries and commentaries lack any kind of depth or reflection on the reading assignments. -Little or no attention is paid to the language of the passages. -Final Reflection is hastily compiled and doesn’t reflect very deep engagement with the project and text.</td>
<td>Author failed to complete this aspect of the assignment.</td>
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