

David Voelker
University of Wisconsin–Green Bay
Wisconsin Teaching Fellows Project, 2006–07

“For and Against: Assessing Student Understanding in Large Introductory Courses”

As I reworked my introductory history courses to prioritize understanding over coverage, I developed and tested an assessment tool called “For and Against.” I doubt that any single, simple assessment can allow an instructor to evaluate every facet of historical thinking, but I believe that For and Against can play a useful role. During two semesters, I have graded over twelve-hundred For and Against responses and have also collected survey data about my exams. For and Against provides a means of assessing students’ ability to apply knowledge to the authentic task of evaluating a historical claim according to the standards of our discipline, and, crucially, the responses can be graded quickly.

For and Against asks students to respond critically to a set of historical claims, such as “The U.S. Constitution created a democratic government”; or, “The antebellum Republican Party posed a serious threat to the institution of slavery.” I ask students to write two brief paragraphs that provide the best evidence *for* the statement and the best evidence *against* the statement, with three or four pieces of evidence for each side. Students have about two-thirds of a sheet of paper to write their answers, and they respond to either two out of three or three out of five statements.

The For and Against assessment requires students to compose compressed historical arguments on the spot, drawing on their knowledge of the period at hand. To do so, they must call up information and convert it into evidence for or against the statement. In the process, they must explain how the evidence supports their point—simply listing facts seldom works. Frequently, students must also consider multiple points of view as they write their responses. In doing so, they are showing awareness that there can be no single objective account of the past.

When surveyed, my students overwhelmingly agreed that the For and Against format required them to “think carefully before answering.” Many students were also able to explain how For and Against required higher-level understanding than typical multiple-choice questions.

I do not mean to promote For and Against as the sole assessment tool for any course, but I have found that it provides a relatively quick way to assess the understanding of large numbers of students. I am currently working on an article that fully explains this assessment and provides evidence of its efficacy for assessing understanding.