Aluka exercises: Learning though describing historical documents

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Executive Summary

We developed a document analysis exercise for three History research methodologies courses. These courses attract students from diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds across the arts, social sciences, and humanities. Materials from Aluka’s Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa content area is used to help mediate the development of the essential skills in describing and analysing primary source documents. Being able to interpret primary sources is both challenging and critically important in many research areas, but it is rare that students are able to work with such sources in intensive courses. The exercise requires students to search for an Aluka document on their topic of interest, draft a description of this document in the course wiki, respond to another student's draft in the wiki and in a series of seminars discuss these documents. To contextualise these documents, students collaboratively use a wiki and mapping tool to organise their documents and responses. The map is a visually rich way to promote collaborative learning, linking students' interests to other readings and contextual essays. This structure of searching, drafting and discussing prior to submitting the final essay has been very stimulating for our students and raised the level of discussion. This has also enabled us to development a flexible template usable across other courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aluka collection:</th>
<th>Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution:</td>
<td>University of Cape Town, South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course convener:</td>
<td>Christopher Saunders, Historical Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Courses:</td>
<td>HST3025F, HST4041Z, HST5030Z</td>
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<td>Assessment:</td>
<td>20% (HST3025F) &amp; 50% (HST4041Z, HST5030Z) of course</td>
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Introduction

We developed an exercise in three of Christopher Saunders' History courses in 2007, where students write an essay describing a document from the Aluka Digital Library. The exercise introduces students to the approaches historians use to describe primary documents, a type of critical analysis. The first course is a large undergraduate course with 75 students (HST3025F), the second a smaller postgraduate course with 15 students (HST4014Z), and lastly an intensive masters course with five students (HST5030Z). Although slightly different variants of the exercise were used in these courses, they were essentially very similar. The students come from diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds, across the arts, social sciences, and humanities. They are also a diverse group by social background, computer literacy, and knowledge of the historical context. We had to cater for students who had never used digital libraries before, building towards the primary purpose of developing essential skills of describing and analysing a primary source document. The critical analysis of documents is an important skill for any scholar, especially in the social sciences.

Aluka, building on work in related projects such as DISA (Peters & Pickover 2001), represents an ambitious project to make available primary source material relating to African continent. Its mission is “to accelerate the adoption of productive and efficient uses of information technology for the benefit of the worldwide scholarly community” (www.ithaka.org). Access to universities first became available in 2007, with three content areas, namely plants, cultural heritage and freedom struggles. Unlike many conventional digital archives, there is a great richness in the types of source documents in the collections (Isaacman et al. 2005). These include rock art images, scanned herbarium specimens, interview sound files, video clips from events, 3D models of buildings, among others. The collections are also growing, with new material being added. These represent exciting opportunities for researchers who can now access material previously distributed across many archives.

For students being exposed to new content areas and research methods for the first time, there are a number of pedagogical challenges. These students do not always have the knowledge and skills to find or interpret Aluka content. There are introductory essays that promise to contextualise the content, but these are not sufficiently foregrounded for such students to use effectively. Since Aluka is intended to support diverse user needs, it would be unrealistic to have the Aluka interface guide these novice students. We saw the need then to develop more effective ways of assisting students to overcome their initial difficulties and find appropriate contextual information themselves.

Students must find and describe a primary source document in Aluka's Struggles for Freedom collection, considering who the author was, the intended audience, context, bias, and other aspects. The courses make extensive use of Vula, the Sakai-based online learning environment at UCT, to facilitate the sharing of information and essays drafts among the class. In the wiki we can read and comment on these while students update them. We have required students to comment on someone else's description to identify anything they might have overlooked. This ensures that the discussions in seminars are productive and everyone has access to what is being covered. Christopher Saunders has extensive knowledge of the Struggles for Freedom material in the Aluka digital library and of related sources. It is his facilitation of the seminars and peer feedback after students have prepared their drafts that is the most valued in assisting them with writing an improved final essay.

What we found is still required is better linking of the contextual information to the documents students select. We investigated using mapping and timeline tools to spatially and temporally organize the selected Aluka documents and contextual
documents. This can be done by asking students to mark on a map one or more places in their document, and adding on a timeline the time period their document covers. In this way we hope to see richer context and interpretations emerge and to make it easier for additional sources to be identified that other students might use.

Below we describe the learning design our experiences using Aluka in university courses. Finally we look at how others might be using Aluka.

Learning design

Below is a screen grab of the wiki in from one of our classes. The wiki is created in the course management system called Vula, and evolves as students contribute and choose their documents.

### THE USE OF DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Click on your name and editing your wiki page to include a description of a document and the response to someone else's document. In responding to a document please select someone no one else has responded to yet. This is part of the main assignment. (If you experience problems reaching this Vula site - it might be related to 'issues with Internet Explorer v6' - might try another browser. If you have problems accessing Aluka documents, several have been copied here.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Butlin</td>
<td>How You Have Touched The Women, 1950-1960</td>
<td>Tsholelefo Mpshe#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Cummings</td>
<td>Cuba-Angola declaration, 1982</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Dowden</td>
<td>Letter from M. Thatcher [British Prime Minister] to Mr. President, 1985</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patricio Kiotto</td>
<td>African Women Under Apartheid, 1975</td>
<td>Jane Muhia#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Lobban</td>
<td>Press Release from R. Magabbe, November 30, 1977</td>
<td>Ryan Cummings#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindiee Mzibuko</td>
<td>ACA Congratulations Tony Bennett on Refusing to Perform In South Africa, 1983</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuben Message</td>
<td>Nelson Mandela Is Free But He Cannot Vote, 1991</td>
<td>Colette Schachter, Mary Butlin, Ryan Lobban#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny Morrell</td>
<td>Psychiatry and the Psychosocial Pathology of Apartheid, 1948 - 1982</td>
<td>Carolien Rapoeter#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsholelefo Mpshe</td>
<td>Memoirs of an Arabian Princess, 1877</td>
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In the Vula course site we placed links to readings selected by Christopher Saunders. There were also instructions and additional information. An extract from the outline for HST5030Z.

### The Aluka exercise:

1. Select a document relevant to your research from the Aluka digital library. Put up the URL on the wiki, with a short description of the document and about one page of critical analysis of the provenance, nature and significance of the document.

2. Look at what others have done and post a critical response to another person’s analysis of their document.

3. After we have discussed these responses in class, you will have an opportunity to revise your analysis before handing it in. This counts 50% of the overall mark for the course.

The Aluka digital library is at: [http://www.aluka.org/](http://www.aluka.org/). Select the ‘Struggles for Freedom’ content. Use the Advanced Search or Browse to find documents in the library. When working from home you will need to access Aluka via the UCT library proxy and your UCT login.

Pages in this wiki can be edited by clicking on Edit icon above. Click on your name above to edit your own page and respond to the questions. Then click the Save button of the editing page to save your work. Clicking on the Home icon to the top have each page returns to this page.

Several additional resources can be found under Resources (also accessed by clicking Resources on the left). If you have any queries please us, send an email or post a question in the Forums.
The basic steps in the learning design for all the courses were:

1. **Student introductions**: We began with students introducing themselves and their areas of interest, both online in a wiki and in the seminars. We encouraged students to link their interests with material in Aluka by mentioning the type of documents they might find. In the smaller postgraduate courses we additionally asked students to post a brief description of their undergraduate studies and thesis topics online in the wiki. Students’ introductions were especially useful later in the courses as invited lecturers and librarians could read these to gauge the interests of the class and adapt their presentations.

2. **Searching Aluka and outlining the task**: We gave brief introductions on Aluka, how to access it and what they could expect to find. Information was additionally posted in the Vula course management system. After encouraging students to try searching Aluka, we ran a lab session on effective Aluka searching and how digital archives are created. In the shorter postgraduate courses there was less explanation, but more support for individual students.

3. **Describing primary source documents (first draft)**: We gave and discussed guidelines on how to write a description of their document. The underlying purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of how to use documentary sources by considering provenance, meaning, context, and significance. Questions that needed to be answered included who wrote it, why, in what circumstances, with what intention, what is the meaning of the document, why does it say what it says, what does it not say, what is its significance, etc. Students typically prepare their descriptions using a word processor and copied a version into the course wiki. A deadline was shortly before they needed to respond to another student’s description.

4. **Responding to another student’s description**: Having written their own description, students were paired with someone else and had to read their document and draft description, offering comments and areas where it could be improved. The deadline was a day to few hours before the seminar discussion.

5. **Seminar discussion**: Prior to the seminar, all students had access to each other’s documents, draft descriptions, and responses. Each student gave a brief overview of their document description* the respondent would be invited to make comments and Christopher Saunders asked questions and involved the group in discussions. The students would make notes on what they needed to do to improve on their draft description.

6. **Submit the final essay (revised draft)**: Students incorporated the suggestions and made any needed additional investigations in preparing their final essay. The final essay was handed in a week or so after the seminars.

The Aluka digital library gave students easy access to a substantial collection of documents. However, finding primary source documents has several subtle differences to searching for journal articles or websites.

A visual representation of the stages developed in LAMS is shown in the figure below.
In addition we demonstrated how to use Aluka in a lab. Below we describe some of the student experiences.

**Experiences using Aluka**

Feedback from students was generally very positive. Most students consider themselves experienced web searchers, unfortunately many overrate their own abilities. Students were able to find interesting documents, but often struggled at the start to get a sense of what kinds of documents they might find. For us the challenge was to guide students in translating their interests into appropriate queries.

**Contextualising Aluka content**

The Struggles for Freedom collection consists exclusively of primary source documents, except for the contextual essays. This distinction between primary and secondary sources is very significant to historians, yet from user’s perspective Aluka makes little distinction between these two types of sources. The practical reasoning behind this is that it is far simpler to manage all documents in the same way, without special cases. However, in a teaching context we would prefer this to be clearer for students, so they can find the contextual essays very easily to orient themselves. The contextual essays help foreground the context of which many know little. The essays have a narrative structure so students can make better sense of the collection of unconnected documents. Because of their size and scope, digital libraries can be very difficult to explore without such guides.

Our courses had a large number of students from the United States and other southern African countries, who repeatedly requested more contextual information. The contextual essays and other secondary sources do help these students unfamiliar with the historical context, however these documents are not easy to find unless one knows of their existence. In some newly designed Aluka pages a distinction between primary and secondary sources is made clearer in some cases, but this is not yet done consistently. One must either browse down to the appropriate collection or use the right search terms, neither of which are straightforward for a first-time user. We did also provide hyperlinks directly to the contextual essays and have explored the use of maps and timelines as additional ways of visualising the scope of the collections. Some documents were discussed in seminars and lectures.

In the first release of Aluka, at the beginning of 2007, there were additional difficulties locating contextual essays as these were text documents and appear different to the more common PDF documents. There is no document image icon associated with
the text documents making them look different or incomplete compared to other
document types. Students consequently assumed 'contextual essays' were empty
documents, not realising they should click the 'text' link to see the formatted text. In
documents having a PDF version, the 'text' link displays an often almost unreadable
version so is likely to be ignored unless one is aware of this special case. We made
the Aluka developers aware of this potential confusion. The ‘text’ link now
distinguishes between the two forms, using the ‘text’ link for formatted text and ‘raw
text’ link for the OCR text. This has made things much more logical.

Recently our library had a trial access to the http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk/
digital library on primary sources relating to the British Empire. It was interest-
ing to compare how academic publishers targeting schools had approached a similar
challenge. They foregrounded the equivalent of the contextual essays almost to the
extent that the primary sources were considerably more difficult to find and it seemed
that there might well have been very few primary source documents. This must
reflect a marketing strategy to attract teachers to using their material by making it
look easy for students to use, but must also risks undermining authority and
introducing bias as one cannot access large collections of documents.

We had several ideas to contextualise Aluka documents students had found. There
are powerful tools to create timelines, where students can add their Aluka document
and add dates and context. As all the students in the class and their documents to
related documents will appear close to one another. Additionally some of the
contextual essays and readings can be added. The second strategy is to map the
documents geographically rather than temporally. This was trialled with one of the
courses using the Map tool in our Vula course management system. A screen grab
illustrated how the various Aluka document are placed on a map.

Creating references
Academic must always reference their sources. It is though a little difficult to create a
reference with the very long Aluka document URLs or extract the necessary
information from the metadata to produce an appropriately formatted reference.
Some other digital libraries do allow one generate academic style references and
short stable URLs, making it much easier to reference and refer people to specific
documents. This often includes generating references for citation databases such as RefWorks and EndNotes. RefWorks is used by students and EndNotes by academics at UCT.

We had a number of queries about how to point a reader to a page within a longer document. This was important in large documents. Some other digital libraries support one to dynamically create PDF documents with selected pages and will include the full reference on a coversheet. These are examples of routine problems academic users encounter. In the Masters course we gave a short introduction to RefWorks and gave some guidance how student could cite Aluka documents.

**Quoting text**

Related to creating references is the ability to quote text. Frequently historians must quote text from documents in their writings. One cannot simply copy-and-paste the words from a scanned image. Other than retyping, the obvious alternative is to use the 'text' version of a document and correct any OCR mistakes. In practice this was often fiddly and sometimes counterintuitive since there were no hyperlinks to the 'text' version while viewing the PDF or Viewer versions without going back again. Some digital libraries are using a form of PDF that does allow one to select text and will then return the OCR text for the selected area.

**Structuring search results**

Many students, after searching in Aluka, wanted more flexible ways to explore the returned documents. The suggestions included being able to find 'related documents', to hide similar documents or get an overview of all results on one screen. It seemed they had found similar features useful elsewhere. For example, in a search related to 'land reform' the first document might be published by the Black Sash. If this were interesting then one would want to be able to look at other Black Sash publications on land reform. Alternatively if it were uninteresting one would want to ignore all Black Sash publications. One might also want to see all the categories of document and hide some of little interest. Some features have been added in Aluka during 2007 that make searching within results easier, but one does not have much control.

**Logging in**

During the trial period in the first half of 2007, many students experienced difficulties accessing the Struggles for Freedom material. The Aluka people were very helpful and despite a few isolated problems everyone was eventually able to find a document. Access problems, especially for students off-campus, continued in the later courses. Again this did not affect all students and eventually everyone was able to find an Aluka document. Later there have been problems with 'credentials', meaning UCT access has been blocked.

**Search strategies**

Some students claimed not to be able to find anything. On investigation they had been using naive search strategies or were confused by how Aluka searches behaved and thus needed some support. Searches for 'women' and 'woman' produce different results while intuitively one might expect them to be equivalent. As another illustration, someone had been interested in the role of women in the liberation struggle and thus typed in 'woman's liberation struggle', which returned only 44 documents. This was far fewer than she anticipated. Looking at her search together we observed that these search terms would not necessarily locate documents of interest since 'liberation struggle' is a collective name for activities people and organisations were involved with. We suggested she try 'ANC Woman's League' or
'women struggle'. It was also unfortunate that searching for 'women' and 'woman' do not generate the same results. There are gaps in students' expectations of both the archive's content and search mechanisms that are especially disorientating for first-time users.

Many students were unsure of how to work between using categories and searches in combination. Some preferred to start with categories, others by searching. A few used the Advanced Search with 'year' constraints but few seemed confident using more specialized searches, often since these could not be saved and revised (maybe saved to 'My Aluka'). Several students were trying text searches after selecting a category that did not work as they expected. One example was search within a periodical. We did explain that this was a feature that was being planned and many students raised this as something they would find useful and how they expected the interface to function. A further special case of 'search within' might be searching Help. The Quick Search box is visible while viewing Help pages but one cannot search the Help pages.

**Text searching**

Our understandings of the inner workings of text searches are naturally superficial, but we had to know enough to warn students of some of the pitfalls and guess what they might have done wrong. Here the 'text' of a PDF document appears important in appreciating what the automated OCR managed to recognise (or did not manage to recognise). In discussing with students that archives are simply a selection of all the potential documents – we extended this to say that searching OCR text is another selection. We are not guaranteed to find every occurrence of a word and likely need to search related words before concluding that a specific document does not exist. Some of the questions from our brief explanation concerned the likelihood of not finding a document that really does contain a specific word. This also led to a discussion on what might be an indicator of the number of errors and someone wanted to be able to correct errors so in future a search would succeed. Students unfamiliar with the Southern African context were most concerned about having some sort of glossary or a concordance of common phrases that appear in many documents.

Consider for example wanting to search for a word in the headings placed over a photograph, at an angle or produced on a typewriter and spaced-out as in: A P A R T H E I D. The OCR mechanism of course fails in these cases. Only through experience will one be able to estimate the number of OCR errors. We used such examples to encourage sensible alternative search strategies when nothing is found, rather than giving up. One of Aluka's strengths is having access to the 'raw text' yet we saw students needing more support while searching to interpret 'errors' and adapt their search strategies appropriately.

One cannot always be sure when some search term is found and when it is skipped (i.e., the search mechanism is not completely transparent). As an illustration for the class we took an arbitrary typewriter written document and counted the number of 'errors' in the OCR text (http://www.aluka.org/action/showMetadata?doi=10.5555/AL.SFF.DOUMENT.nizap 2b00002&pgs=1). There were about 400 words on the first page, about 40 were not correctly recognised, of which only about 4 were unique search terms on the page (i.e., not stop words, grammatical words, duplicate words etc.). We tried to communicate that while the OCR text might appear to have many 'errors', many of these were not likely to prevent one finding a relevant document as many search words are repeated and some might be recognised by the 'fuzzy searching'.

This is more a teaching challenge for us concerning how we concisely communicate how the searching mechanism functions. One student did though ask, but don't they
have computers then, didn’t they save an electronic copy and why did they did not retype the documents! As noted earlier, it would be useful to make some of this information available to help resources and where appropriate communicate how the search mechanism operates though the user interface.

We looked at a few other digital archives accessible though the UCT library portal that all used similar OCR-based searches to see how they differed. These included The Times Archive containing old newspapers and the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. The general impression was that Aluka offers far more features and that the search mechanism is much more transparent, since most of the other sites we looked at appeared to use much older technologies. Some of the differences were the highlighting of search terms on screen, combining category with full text searches and being able to access smaller documents. In all cases though searching is more challenging than with conventional text documents, which our students did not always fully appreciate. The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers had simpler interface to Aluka (e.g., combining Basic, Advanced and Category searches).

**Conclusion**

We have argued that to make effective use of a digital library in a teaching context one needs to like this to an online learning environment. A digital library, designed to support researchers, is otherwise difficult to use with a class of students unfamiliar with the content and user interface. The Aluka exercise that we used in the three courses is well suited to the type of History courses Christopher Saunders teaches at UCT. We will have to develop more effective ways to setup the wiki pages, so such courses can be easily developed. It is also the intention to refine the learning designs that have evolved and to try to use these in other courses at UCT.

**References**


Appendix 1: HST3041S Student Feedback

The overwhelming majority of comments were positive. Only some are included here:

'I had no problems using the Aluka digital library. I liked how it is organized'; 'I found that the Aluka digital library was easy to navigate and was a great tool for finding primary resources.'; 'I had no trouble using the Aluka library and found it to be very useful. Browsing and searching were very straightforward. I especially liked browsing through old issues of Dawn, Umkhonto we Sizwe's journal.'; 'The library was extremely useful in finding primary documents related to specific topics. The index and categories were extremely useful search options. The indexing of so many primary documents is extremely useful for researching issues of the liberation movements in Southern Africa. The text version of PDF files was also useful, allowing me to look through documents more efficiently. It's great. I'm a big fan.'

Queries and suggestions

Some students pointed to their expectations and frustrations regarding the content:

'It seemed like the vast majority of the documents that I found were different editions from the same three publications or meeting minutes, which I did not find particularly informative. It would have been more interesting to have a greater variety of documents.'; 'The documents and articles that are featured on the Aluka site seem to have a decidedly American influence and flavor as many of them are taken from journals and pamphlets created by anti-apartheid movements in the United States.'; 'wanted broader base of topics; also lacks documents from regimes trying to maintain power…'; 'The website could be improved by including a wider variety of documents in its collection.'; 'The documents appeared to be mainly very liberal and I did not find a single document by or in support of the Nationalist government…'; 'wants more contextual essays…'

Problems of access were raised in some comments but more typically in e-mails and after class questions: 'Many times I attempted to access the website, it failed and this problem is magnified when many international students only have internet access while on campus.' 'I would consider the usefulness of Aluka to be about the same as any web sit of its type, that with careful use it can be quite helpful, but it is not without its flaws. If Aluka were to post documents stating terms and expressing opinions by the apartheid government, it would be much more complete in its historical representation.'

Some pointed to their expectations of the search mechanisms: 'no Find Similar Article option…'; 'It would be helpful if we could do a word search with in specific documents'; 'The text version of my document had many spelling errors.'; 'I wish there was a way to narrow my searches better because I would always get hundreds or thousands of documents when I did the advanced search.'; 'Also, when I did an advanced search and entered specific years that I wanted narrowed down, the search results ranged outside of these specified years.'; 'When searching journalism it would have been helpful if the headlines in that particular issue were listed on the main results search page…It would have been helpful if the number of pages that the document is was listed on the main search page as well.'; 'It would be useful to restrict the search on Aluka by more than one parameter at once. For example, to search for a term like “American Committee on Africa” within a broad time frame like “1950-1964” would have been helpful when trying to situate my document in history.'; 'When performing an advanced search, the results often ranged outside of the years that I specified. Additionally, I was slightly disappointed with the lack of variety of documents, as many of them, at least for the years, 1950-1964, were primarily meeting minutes or editions of the same three journals.'; 'The only downfall of Aluka were the many mistakes in the HTML version of the documents. They had many
spelling, punctuation and capitalization mistakes. As long as I had access to the PDF form, these mistakes were not much of a hindrance.'; 'had difficulty finding the topics I was originally interested in...'

A number of comments concern navigation and usability: 'The biggest and most frustrating problem I found with Aluka was that there is no back button. If you click on an article, download it, then decide that is not what you need, there is no way to go back to your search. I would have to restart my search from the beginning. Also, when I log in, I could not find the articles that I had tagged from previous searches. When I did tag articles, I did not like that the default tag was “untagged” unless it was changed. Finally, articles were often difficult to download even in the economy size. If you downloaded a text version, often the text would be formatted wrong or just not the right words all of the time.'; 'while browsing and conducting searches, there is no back button on the browser, so if one tries to load the previous page, you must begin your search again. Also, there is no task bar where the web addresses usually are and I was confused about how to find the urls I utilized.'; 'some results come up with entire journals rather than specific articles'; 'difficult to navigate in text format; not all internet connections handle large pdf files; text should be formatted for easier navigation, e.g. by having a table of contents to link the user directly to the section he/she is interested in...'; 'would be nice to have long lists of results grouped automatically. The text versions were unreadable due to spelling errors etc.'; 'difficulties in downloading documents'; 'When going on Aluka the address bar and standard buttons are not on the website, so it is difficult to manoeuvre your way through...I found the 'viewer' option to be very tedious and tiresome. Trying to zoom in or out took a long time as well as the loading time for the document to become readable.'
**Extract from the outline syllabus for HST5030Z:**

1. Select a document relevant to your research from the Aluka digital library. Put up the URL on the wiki, with a short description of the document and about one page of critical analysis of the provenance, nature and significance of the document.

2. Look at what others have done and post a critical response to another person's analysis of their document.

3. After we have discussed these responses in class, you will have an opportunity to revise your analysis before handing it in. This counts 50% of the overall mark for the course.

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