Making Reading Engaging with Perusall

What is Perusall?

Perusall is an annotation tool that helps your students engage collectively with texts. With its capability to integrate into Canvas, students can annotate and discuss course readings easily with their peers. The mission of Perusall is to aim to change the nature of reading from the traditional solitary experience to an engaging and collective one. Perusall aims to change education so all students do the reading, come to class prepared, and are motivated to do so because they care about the content. Perusall aims to advance behavioral science and AI research in the service of improving education using their work at Harvard University and Perusall Labs to improve the Perusall platform and to help students, educators, researchers, and society at large. [https://perusall.com/about].

Why use Perusall?

Using discussions in your class can be critical to increasing students' enjoyment of the class and strengthens students' understanding of concepts [TeachingPurpose.Org] As an annotation tool that allows students to annotate PDFs and share comments to each other within the document, Perusall can be used to replace or continue the use of a discussion based on PDF readings.

“I found it to be a kind of light in the darkness of trying to get my online students to interact with one another. I started with two articles the first semester, replacing two weekly Discussions, then went to four and six articles after that. In feedback surveys, students consistently rated it as their favorite element of the course...”

-Glen Davenport, STEM Education Evaluator, Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, Yale University

Case Study: First Exposure to Journal Articles

One of the most important learning outcomes for an undergraduate course on research methods is exposure to peer-reviewed research articles. For many undergraduates, a second-year methods course will be their first exposure to this format. With no experience or context for academic writing, these articles can be very intimidating. With Perusall, we can ease some of that anxiety by allowing students to explore the format together.

In an unfamiliar context, some students don't even know where to start asking questions, so one strategy that has been successful is to seed the article with a few discussion questions. We aim for four, each targeting a different part of the article. Here are some example questions that were applied to a nutrition science paper:
“Why did the authors choose to use pre-existing groups here? Why not randomly assign participants to treatment and control groups?”

“There is a statistical test being reported here. How does this test relate back to the authors’ research questions?”

“Why did the authors include this table? What point is being made with this data?”

“Are there other possible explanations for the data that the authors observed? Looking back at the study design, are there any threats to validity that might lead you to an alternate conclusion?”

The aim with these prompts is to ask open-ended questions that do have some specific answers, but could lead to wider discussion. Another strategy used was to ask students to make connections between different sections of a paper, subtly emphasizing that research articles have many pieces but that those pieces should be telling a consistent story.

Case Study: Perusall for Advanced Hebrew, by Orit Yeret

I started using the Perusall platform with an advanced language course I taught at Yale University, HEBR 167 - Creative Writing in Hebrew. Since the course involved reading various texts, in addition to writing, before the semester began I searched for a technological tool that will enable a preliminary ‘shared-reading’ of each text.

As I began using Perusall in that course, I found it to be very helpful in preparing students for class discussions. Students were asked to review the materials beforehand, to raise and answer questions, to comment on the pieces they read and to mark new words they had learned from reading each text.

This activity produced a lively in-class, as well as outside-of-class conversation, where students became much more informed about the materials and about each other’s initial thoughts and speculations. As a result, the students arrived better prepared for each session, after having considered different perspectives on every text; they reacted to the online discussion and expanded their vocabulary in the process.

When asked about the use of this tool in our course, students responded positively. They enjoyed having access to all the materials they needed in one place, through our course site on Canvas, and they liked reading their classmates ideas as well as sharing their own ideas, before having our in-class discussion. Overall, I find Perusall to be a good platform for a collaborative class activity.

How do I use Perusall in my Canvas course?

Perusall can be integrated into your Canvas course by following these steps. Once Perusall is in your course, you can begin adding Assignments from Canvas into Perusall.

You can use Perusall to:
1. Assign readings and annotations
2. Motivate students
3. Grade interactive discussions
4. Engage students through reading
5. Non-adversarial grading

You can use Perusal to encourage your students to:

- Share questions, answers, perspectives
- Share knowledge through threads
- Annotate text, images, or equations

**Setting Up Perusall Assignments**

Perusall assignments ensure that your students do the reading and come to class prepared. The goal of each reading assignment is to stimulate discussion by encouraging students to post good questions or comments, to help others by answering their questions, and to upvote good questions or comments to draw the attention of their classmates to important ideas [https://perusall.com/](https://perusall.com/).

Once you see Perusall in your course navigation, you can continue the integration by creating an assignment. Click Perusall to get started:

You will be taken to Perusall in a new window, in which you will be given several options. You can start by clicking Settings:
You can modify your course settings here, or continue on to create an assignment.

Important to note is the welcome message found on this page. To keep students focused on intrinsic motivation for the material rather than grades or gaming the system, the student welcome message describes the general characteristics of effective reading without giving precise definitions [https://perusall.com/]. Feel free to edit the welcome message to match the goals of your course.

To create an assignment you will first need to upload a document. Click Documents from the Get Started page:

Once the document uploads, click on it to view the options available for the assignment. Click Assign to get started:
You can proceed through the options to assign the assignment. There are three steps to this process, (1) selecting the content to design, (2) setting the name and deadline, and (3) setting optional advanced options.

From option 2-setting the name and deadline, if you give the assignment a name, you will need to use the exact same naming convention in Canvas. This is how Perusall maps to the Canvas gradebook.

Option 3 allows you to set features that you may find important for the structure of the assignment, such as how many annotations need to be made in the document for the assignment, allowing anonymity, and more.

Clicking save changes will save the changes you made to the assignment. Once your assignment is saved, click Copy fill title for LMS:

You will then need to navigate to your Canvas course in order to link the assignment to your Canvas gradebook. From Canvas, create a new assignment and give the assignment the same name as it is in Perusall. From the Submission Type option, choose External Tool, and select Perusall:
Save your changes, and depending on your settings the assignment will load within Canvas or in a new tab. It will look something like this:

Grades are sent to Canvas from Perusall as a percentage, rather than as a raw score. Canvas will apply that percentage to the assignment based on the number of points you have set for that assignment in Canvas. For example, if your lowest possible assignment score is 0 and highest possible assignment score in Perusall is 5, and the assignment is set in the LMS to be worth 10 points, a score of 4 will be sent across to the LMS as 80% and will show up in the LMS as 8/10. For this reason, we recommend that you set up assignments in your LMS to be worth the same number of points as it is worth in Perusall [https://support.perusall.com/].
What will my students see?

A student can find Perusall in their course by clicking on Perusall in the left navigation, or by clicking on an Assignment in Canvas that utilizes Perusall.

From here they will be taken to Perusall where the student has the option to click “work on assignment”. Once they click “work on assignment”, they will be taken to the document that is assigned through the assignment tool.

The student can scroll through the document, and make comments using various Perusall tools throughout the document.

In this case, the student sees four comments left by the instructor under the “All Conversations” tab:
When the student clicks on one of the comments, they will be taken to the part in the document that the comment was made, and have the ability to reply to the comment:

Inform Your Students of How Perusall Works

Feel free to share a one-page rubric that explains what Perusall is, how it works, and how students are graded. (You may need to edit this document to reflect the scoring settings you have set for your course.)

FAQs

Roster Sync

Perusall syncs with your student roster in Canvas. Your student roster in Perusall will automatically populate as students each launch into Perusall from the LMS for the first time.
Gradebook Sync

Grades sync to the gradebook by linking a Canvas assignment into Perusall.

Once you release the grades for a particular assignment, Perusall will send the grades for that assignment back to the LMS gradebook.

Any subsequent changes you make to your course in Perusall that would affect the scores on that assignment will sync back to your LMS so the LMS gradebook and Perusall gradebook are always in sync.

Most grades sync immediately, although it may take up to an hour for a grade update to be reflected in the LMS.

Details of Scoring

Perusall's engagement score allows you to combine multiple metrics of student engagement into a single score. Up to six different components can be combined into a single score to encourage students to engage in behaviors that research shows predict positive learning outcomes. More information can be found here.

Purchasing Textbooks through Perusall

Perusall works with a number of publishers to make textbooks available for students to purchase and use through Perusall. Visit Perusall to find more information on adopting a textbook for use within the tool.