Instructional Technologies Committee, ACRL Instruction Section
Tips and Trends Summer 2026

Perusing Perusall

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Overview and Definition

Perusall is a social annotation software platform, initially developed at Harvard University for their community. It became available to the general public in 2015 and is now a popular choice among digital annotation tools that can easily be integrated within a learning management system (LMS) like Canvas or Blackboard (Allen and Randall 2023). The software provides instructors and students with the ability to work collaboratively on textual analysis tasks like highlighting, commenting, and asking or answering questions. Up until July 2026, the software was free with institutional licenses for special services and institutional customization. However, beginning in July 2026, Perusall will charge an access fee, either at the institutional level or as a courseware fee for students. Perusall does offer some exemptions as well as alternative options which users can explore on their website.

The software platform offers options to annotate websites, PDFs, audio files, and videos. Instructors can create Perusall assignments with tailored instructions and evaluation criteria, and they have both automated and manual grading options. In addition, instructors can assign OER textbooks available through the Perusall database or can provide shared classroom access to paid textbooks.

Why Do You Need to Know?

Perusall can be a great pedagogical tool for instruction librarians and faculty members. Although it was initially designed for text-based assignments and geared towards online courses, its uses have expanded to hybrid courses and adding comments or questions to non-text-based resources, as noted above. One large problem in higher education that the platform seeks to address is the difficulty that instructors have incentivizing students to complete and actively engage with reading assignments prior to class discussions (Clarke 2021). Lemanski and Venneman (2023) also suggest that "Perusall is a useful resource for both university faculty and students to improve feelings of connectedness . . . and satisfaction with the course textbook." Because students are annotating the text collaboratively, they can benefit from the insights or questions posted by their peers and feel less alone in any confusion they might have around a

difficult text. This, in turn, can lead to students being more likely to read and actively engage with assigned texts—and significant majorities of students report enjoying the social annotation process. For instance, Lemanski and Venneman (2023) found that "almost all the students, 91%, [in their study] endorsed enjoyment of the annotation requirements of the class conducted through the Perusall website."

Current Applications in Libraries and Higher Education

In our respective roles as instructional technology and curricular design librarians at Ursinus College, we were asked to lead a workshop for faculty on how to use Perusall and how it might be helpful pedagogically. We worked in collaboration with a faculty member from the English department who has used Perusall for multiple reading assignments in her literature courses.

During the workshop, we reviewed some of the basics of Perusall, including the essential components of setting up an assignment. For instance, Figures 1 and 2 below provide screenshots of the Perusall Library and Assignments tabs. From the Library tab, instructors have the ability to upload their own documents, videos, or other types of online resources into Perusall. As noted earlier, faculty can also assign free ebooks from the Perusall library or assign electronic textbooks for sale through Perusall. Using the Assignments tab, instructors can provide students with assignment instructions, assign point amounts, and choose whether to grade assignments manually or with Perusall's automated grading feature.

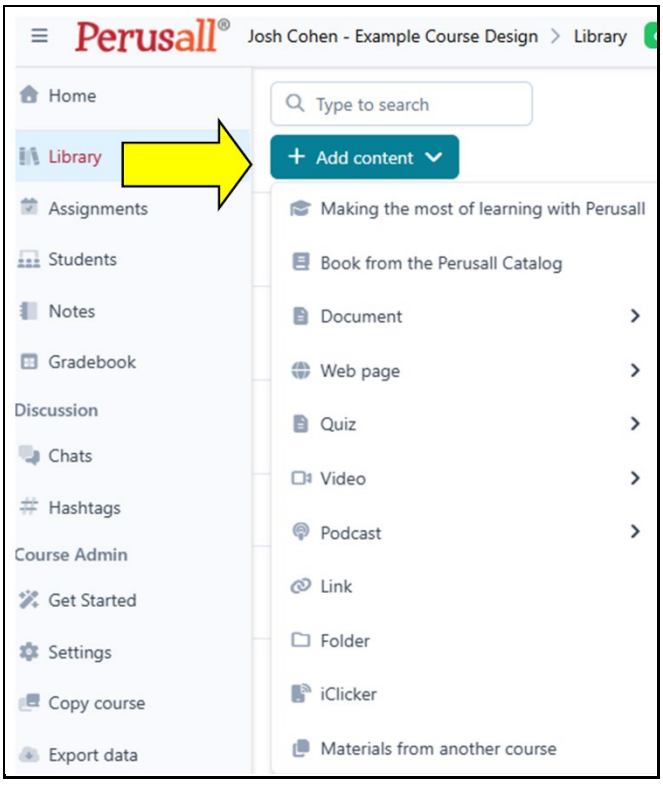

Figure 1: Perusall Library Tab

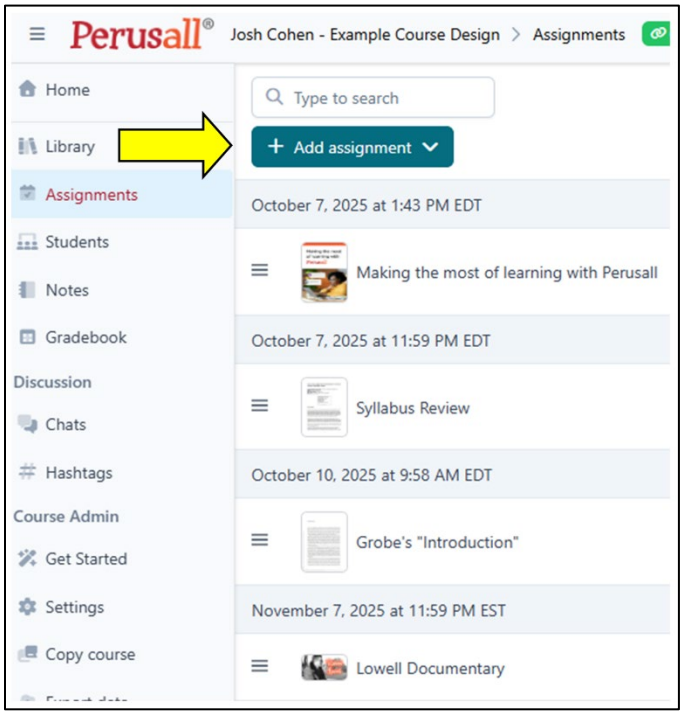

Figure 2: Perusall Assignment Tab

Our sample assignment for the faculty workshop was a Syllabus Review. We created a mock-up syllabus and added questions for faculty to answer about the syllabus, from text highlighted in blue. As "students," they were able to highlight text in yellow with either comments or questions. Figure 3 is a screenshot from this assignment and shows where we highlighted the text "Confessionalism" in blue. Clicking on this highlighted text, a student would pull up the question which asks, "What do you think of when you read the word 'Confessionalism?'" A faculty member in the workshop, accessing the assignment as a student, chose to highlight and comment on the quotation from Robert Lowell.

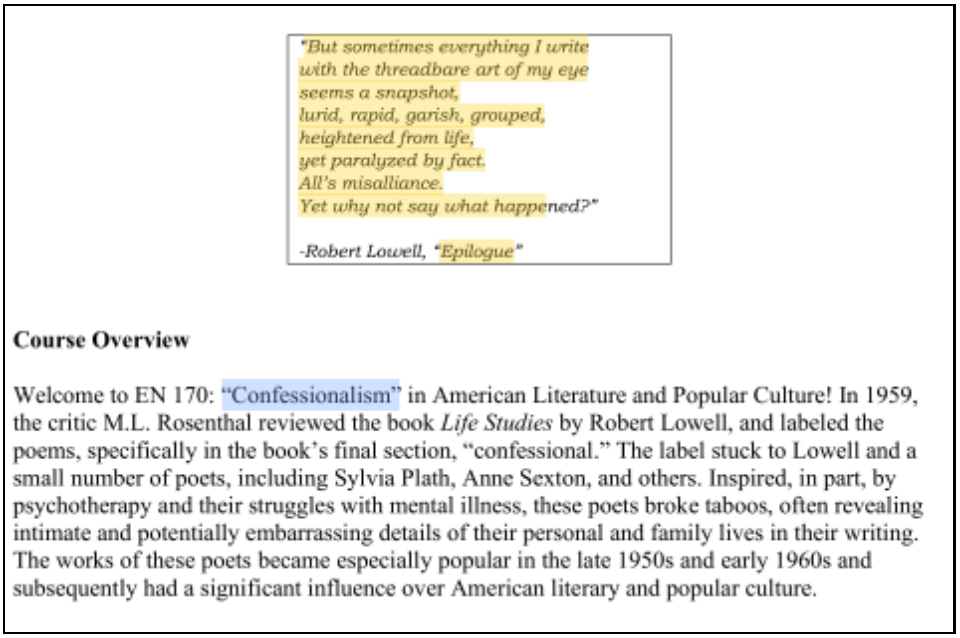

Figure 3: Perusall Syllabus Review Assignment Screenshot

Faculty found Perusall to be quite intuitive and seemed genuinely interested in using it for course readings. It's a really useful tool for flipped instruction that faculty can use to support in-class discussions. It also could provide quieter or more introverted students with an opportunity to participate in reading discussions.

Faculty were most interested in whether, as studies mentioned earlier, the use of social annotation could increase the motivation for reading assigned texts. Multiple faculty members liked the feature in Perusall that requires students to post a response to an instructor's question before they're able to see any other students' responses. They also appreciated that setting up their Perusall assignments through the LMS (Canvas) automatically added their student roster into the Perusall course page.

Perusall could also potentially be useful for librarians teaching information literacy instruction in the context of a flipped instruction model, teaching topics like resource

evaluation. Ahead of an in-person session, they could have students annotate/evaluate a wide variety of source types including articles, ebook sources, online sources (keep in mind that websites with pop-ups will not work with Perusall), or outputs from an AI chatbot. Librarians could use student comments/annotations to open up a discussion of student evaluations of these resources. They could also embed their own questions about the content for students to respond to in Perusall. An interesting point of in-class discussion could focus on how students' approaches to evaluating resources differ, depending upon the perceived reliability or authority of the tool or publisher of the information. For instance, it might be helpful to discuss students' evaluations of information from an AI chatbot compared to an article or website with a clearly identifiable, human author.

Potential Hurdles

If the librarian is only visiting a class once or twice in the semester, implementing Perusall could be challenging if the faculty member is not already utilizing the software within the course.

For faculty, there can be a slight learning curve to using Perusall in their classes. However, faculty resistance tends to more likely occur for those who are trying to have a tech-free classroom experience. Related to this point of resistance, there are faculty who are resistant to the use of the LMS, generally speaking, beyond the inclusion of faculty contact information and as an access point for the course syllabus. However, if the faculty member actively uses their LMS, the software could successfully be integrated into both their course reading assignments as well as activities that support a one-shot session with a librarian.

In terms of limitations on uploaded content, Perusall states in its Terms of Service that "[they] may apply limits to your uploaded User Content . . . if it determines . . . that your use of the Service is excessive or could potentially impact the performance or availability of the Service for other Users." It's also worth noting that use of copyrighted material should abide by fair use rules and that Perusall does not permit users to "upload . . . Content to which you do not have [the] legal right to share."

Conclusion

Given the research and our experience using Perusall currently, academic librarians should consider recommending the software platform to faculty for use within their LMS if they are using online readings. While some faculty may prefer that their students use print sources for their course work, those that choose to utilize digital content for their

course will find that the collaboration on Perusall has the potential to generate more reflective thinking on the assigned text—and can also help to incentivize students to complete course readings. This is supported by the research of Chen et al. (2024) who found a "positive association between students' social annotation behaviors, particularly their interactions with reading materials and peers, and their overall engagement in social annotation." Additionally, the software allows faculty and librarians to utilize the annotated comments for a richer classroom discussion. As mentioned above, if faculty are not already using the tool in their classes, it would make it challenging for a librarian to utilize the application in one or two class visits. Also, with Perusall's recent platform fee implementation, cost will be another important consideration.

While the technology component of using an annotation tool like Perusall may discourage some, the benefits for students and faculty can be worth the effort. As Lemanski and Venneman (2023) note, students tend to appreciate the collaborative aspect of annotating, and faculty are able to increase student engagement with assigned texts.

Tools Discussed

- Perusall

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Additional Resources

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