Chapter 5 Roadmap

Focus on Learning: Why Am I Really in College?



In this chapter you will learn about the types of attitudes and approaches to learning that help make students successful.

This chapter roadmap page presents the formal learning goals for this chapter and a checklist that you should follow as you read and study the chapter.



Student Learning Goals for This Chapter

After completing this chapter you should be able to do the following:

- 1. Compare and contrast the focus-on-grades approach with the focus-on-learning approach.
- 2. Explain why the focus-on-learning approach is most effective.
- 3. Explain why long-term learning is more productive than cramming for an exam.
- 4. Describe the characteristics of a responsible learner.
- 5. Explain how failure to take responsibility for learning—both on the part of students and on the part of professors—can be detrimental to both individuals and society.
- 6. Explain the difference between deep learning and surface learning.

Checklist for This Chapter

deadline	completed	Ac	tivity
		1.	Complete Critical Thinking Activity 5.1.
		2.	Convert the learning goals above to questions that you can answer as you read the chapter. Write your questions on the study guide pages near the end of this chapter.
		3.	Read the chapter.
		4.	Try to answer the reading comprehension questions as you come to them in the chapter. Check each answer by comparing it to the list of correct answers in the back of the book. If any answer was not correct, then review the passages preceding the question to see why you missed the question.
		5.	Use the study guide pages near the end of this chapter to write down the answers to the questions you created in Step 2. Once completed, these pages will be your study guide.
		6.	Write down any questions, insights, or comments that you have as you read so that you can bring them up in class (if applicable).
		7.	Complete Review Questions 5.1.
		8.	Complete Assignment 5.1 (Form a study group).



CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITY 5.1

Consider the following questions; select the answer that most closely matches your personal preference for each situation described.

- 1. You have been rushed to the hospital after an auto accident. Which would you prefer?
 - a. To be treated by a nurse who earned her credentials by cheating on the final exam in nursing school
 - b. To be treated by a nurse who, thanks to her excellent negotiating skills, was able to graduate nursing school by bargaining with the professor after failing a final the exam
 - c. To be treated by a nurse who earned her credentials, not only by learning enough to pass her exams, but also by making sure that she understood everything that she was supposed to learn
- 2. You are an elementary school principal who is interviewing applicants to teach a second grade class at your school. Your child is in that second grade class. Which would you prefer?
 - a. To hire an applicant who passed her math class by taking the class online and having a friend who was good at math take all of the exams for her
 - b. To hire an applicant who says in the interview, "I only want to teach at the first, second, or third grade levels because I don't like math"
 - c. To hire an applicant who struggled with math initially, but who passed the class because she spent extra time doing practice questions and getting help from the tutoring lab until she mastered the subject
- 3. You have won the lottery and are now 100 million dollars richer than you were yesterday. You don't know how to properly manage this large amount of money or how to deal with the tax issues associated with it, so you decide to hire a CPA to help you. Which would you prefer?
 - a. To have your finances managed by an accountant who earned his credentials by cheating on the final exam in college
 - b. To have your finances managed by an accountant who believes in investing as little effort as possible to get the most benefit possible (When he was in college he used ratemyprofessor.com to figure out which professors were easy and took only easy classes. This way he was able to get his degree without having to invest very much time in studying or learning.)
 - c. To have your finances managed by an accountant who is good at his job because when he was in college he took responsibility for his own learning and researched topics deeply until he gained a clear understanding of everything he needed to know to earn his degree and to do his job well

Is there a patter page about wha	•	_	-	me notes on the next

Focus on Learning:

Why Am I Really in College?

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Learn as if you will live forever; live as if you will die tomorrow.

— Gandhi¹

While grading an essay, an English professor noticed that the student author had obviously not taken the time to proofread before submitting the paper. With a quiet sigh of disappointment, the professor marked the freshman paper with a C (average) and then inserted a small note in the margin which read, "Is this your best work?" Years later, at the retirement dinner for the English professor, the president of the college stood to make a few remarks and read from a letter that he had recently received from one of the professor's former students. The letter of gratitude recounted that moment when the professor had written "Is this your best work?" on a poorly written essay. In the letter, the former student explained, "Those words changed my life." Inspired by those words, the student decided never to take a mediocre approach to learning again. The student began to apply an above-average effort and to produce above-average work. The student eventually graduated with honors.

In this chapter you will learn about the attitudes and approaches to learning that help make students successful. The proper attitude and approach to college learning can convert the average student into an exceptional one. You will learn to develop a focus on learning instead of a focus on grades, to be a responsible learner, to use learning goals as a guide to studying, to engage in deep learning instead of surface learning, and to distribute your study workload over the entire semester instead of cramming the night before for exams. These principles will help you to do your best work.

In the pages that follow, this chapter examines the student's approach to learning with regard to focus, goals, pace, depth, and responsibility.

5.1 Focus

Most students have been socialized to view the acquisition of a credential as the paramount purpose for college, and therefore they focus on grades rather than on learning. However, the focus-on-grades approach is not as effective in reaching the desired educational outcomes as is the focus-on-learning approach. Figure 5.1 illustrates this point.

Students who employ a focus-on-grades approach will naturally learn less than they could because they are likely to think of the grade as something separate from learning. Given this focus, students attempt to achieve the desired grades with the least investment possible—such that the driving question becomes, "What is the least (time, learning, effort, etc.) I can invest and still pass?" Some students who employ this focus on least effort may be satisfied if the result is a passing grade because that grade will not prevent them from acquiring a credential. However, this model may prevent them from acquiring the level of true learning of which they are capable. In fact, a focus on grades may result in very little true learning. True learning is distinguished from the type of short-term learning that is produced by cramming for exams.

In contrast, students who focus on learning as the goal will seek to learn as much as they can. They are more likely to embrace, "What is the most I can learn?" as their driving question. In this case, higher grades will be an automatic result (a side effect) of greater learning. These students will earn a credential, and

they will also experience a greater degree of true learning with long-term benefits. They may also achieve a higher grade point average since true learning equips them to earn higher grades.

Figure 5.1 Two Approaches: Comparison of a Focus on Grades with a Focus on Learning

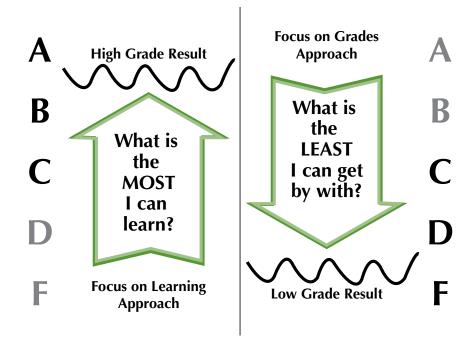


Table 5.1 Contrasting Questions Associated		d with Academic Focus	
	Focus on Grades	Focus on Learning	
What is the least I	can do to pass this course?	What is the most that I can learn in this class?	
What will be on the	e test?	What are the lesson objectives?	
What do I have to memorize?		What am I supposed to learn?	
What shortcuts can I use to prepare for the exam?		What can I do to best learn the important material in this lesson?	

Consider the questions listed in Table 5.1. Which focus describes your approach to learning in college? You will be more successful if you focus on learning because higher grades are automatically a result of better learning. The best way to score highly on exams is simply to learn the lesson. Don't settle for a focus-on-grades approach because that approach results in less learning, and as a consequence, lower grades. After all, if you are going to invest years of your life in going to college, don't you want to get more than just grades for your investment of time? You deserve more. You deserve an education, rather than just a credential, because once you truly learn something no one can ever take that away from you.

5.2 Goals

As T. A. Angelo noted, "When learners know what their educational goals are and figure out how they can best achieve them [and when they] know how and how well their goals fit the instructor's, they tend to learn more and get better grades." Researchers and educational experts have found that goal alignment between teacher and student is key to learning success.² Therefore, students will be more successful when they identify the learning goals or objectives for each course, lesson, or exam and incorporate them into their study routine.

Even if you adopt a focus-on-learning approach, you can't learn everything in one semester or course. Therefore, in order to be successful in each course, you will need to identify the goals for that course. The course goals are usually listed in the syllabus. They are usually somewhat broad because they apply to the entire course. Some professors also publish learning objectives (objectives are more specific than goals, and are measurable) for chapters, lessons, or exams within a course. Sometimes chapter objectives are listed in the textbook. Lesson objectives make an excellent guide for you to use when you design your study plan. Your focus should remain on learning as much as you can; however, with the addition of specific measurable lesson objectives, you will know what you are supposed to learn—and you will have a way to assess what you have learned.

Lesson objectives simply state the desired outcome of the lesson. In other words, they state what the student should be able to do after completing the lesson. Instead of the term "objectives," we could call them the "intended learning outcomes" because they state what you should be able to do after learning that you could not do before. A typical lesson objective may begin, "Upon completion of this lesson, the student will be able to …" followed by a specific type of knowledge, analysis, skill, or behavior. Following are some examples of different types of learning goals based on Bloom's Taxonomy:⁴

Knowledge Goal: Upon completion of this lesson, the student will be able to list and describe the characteristics of a mammal.

Application/Analysis Goal: Upon completion of this lesson, the student will be able to compare and contrast a democratic society and a communist society.

Application/Skill Goal: Upon completion of this lesson, the student will be able to perform CPR on an infant and demonstrate this skill using the first aid dummies.

Behavior Goal: Upon completion of this lesson, the student will design and implement a three-week personal weight-training program to strengthen gross motor muscles.

Since the objectives are usually presented as statements of outcome rather than as questions, it may be useful for you (the student) to convert the objectives into one or more questions that can be used as a study guide. For example, the first learning goal for this chapter can be converted into at least five questions (see Table 5.2). Once you have created your own questions based on the professor's objectives, you should identify information relating to those questions as you read the chapter, and attempt to answer them afterwards. If you have difficulty answering any of the questions on your own, you can bring them up during class discussion or ask for help outside of class. Professors set aside office hours specifically for the purpose of helping their students with such questions.

You may recall from Chapter 1 that one of the differences between high school and college is that in college, professors schedule regular office hours in order to meet with students individually. Scheduled office hours are usually posted in the syllabus, on the professor's website, and on the office door. As Chapter 1 already noted, you are not interrupting or bothering professors when you meet with them during their office hours. That time has been set aside especially for you. In fact, professors are often impressed by students who take the initiative to write down a question about the reading or lesson and to ask about that question during an office hour visit. So when you have questions about the lesson that are not answered by the reading, lecture, or class discussion, make an appointment to see the professor during office hours. It is important that you close any gaps between what you have learned so far and what you are supposed to learn.

Table 5.2

Example of Study Guide Questions Based on a Lesson Objective

Objective:

Upon completion of this lesson, the student will be able to compare and contrast the focus-ongrades approach with the focus-on-learning approach and explain why the focus-on-learning approach is more effective.

Questions:

- 1. What is the focus-on-grades approach?
- 2. What is the focus-on-learning approach?
- 3. In what ways are the two approaches, focus-on-grades and focus-on-learning, similar?
- 4. In what ways are the two approaches different?
- 5. In what ways is the focus-on-learning approach more effective than the focus-on-grades approach?

If neither your professor nor the textbook provides lesson objectives or exam objectives, then you may wish to inquire about them. In the absence of having objectives provided, you will need to create your own list of objectives in order to organize your study regimen.

Reading Comprehension Question 5.1 (Knowledge)

Researchers and educational experts have found which of the following?

- a. That goal alignment between the teacher and the student is key to learning success
- b. That goals are not a significant part of the educational process
- c. That goals cause students to focus on grades and not on learning
- That students who have goals tend to get bogged down and not learn as much as those who do not have goals



5.3 Pace

Many students wait, incorrectly, until the night before an exam (or a day or two before) to begin studying the material that will be covered. This is famously known as "cramming" for the exam. It is a strategy that may have worked in high school, when less material was covered on a single exam, but it is much less effective in college. Many college courses have only two exams—a midterm and a final—and sometimes the final is cumulative (covering everything taught in the course). Therefore, the student must master a large amount of information in order to perform well on each exam.

Researchers have discovered that *how you study* is more important than *how long you study*.⁵ Students who spread out their study time over days and weeks score higher grades than students who study the same number of hours all in one night.

Michaels and Miethe examined more than fifteen variables including study habits and performance for 676 undergraduate college students. They explained the difference that they found between crammers and non-crammers:

The return of study time and class attendance on grades varies by type of study habits. Among students who study throughout the week (non-crammers), both study time and class attendance have significant positive effects on grades. For crammers, the amounts of study and class attendance have no appreciable effect on college grades. In other words, students who study throughout the week benefit from increased study time and class attendance, whereas students who concentrate their studying before exams do not reap rewards from increases in effort.⁵

One problem with cramming is that it relies on short-term memory. It is difficult, if not impossible, to hold as much information in your short-term memory as is often required on college-level exams (especially comprehensive final exams). The key is to study on a regular basis and *learn* the material a little bit at a time. This method will allow you to encode the course material in your long-term memory, which will serve you well when you take the exam.⁶ In fact, some researchers⁷ have found that students who reported that they used cramming "for most of their courses" tended to have lower GPAs.

One key to success in learning is to pace yourself. Design a study plan for each course in which you anticipate what you need to learn for each exam, and then divide that huge block of learning into a number of study sessions. Learning the information in smaller sessions spread out over time will enable you to engage in deeper learning.

5.4 Depth

Do you have high expectations for yourself? Are you doing your best work? One way to do your best work is to employ deep learning instead of surface learning.

Learning has been defined as "an active, interactive, self-aware process that results in meaningful, long-lasting changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes ... that cannot be attributed primarily to maturation." But not all learning is of the same quality. It is useful to distinguish between deep learning and surface learning.

Surface learning is often employed by those who cram for an exam. It involves very limited thinking, analysis, or critical evaluation. Surface learners often separate new material from the context in which they find it, and as a result they have little ability to apply what they have learned to a real-world context. For example, a student who uses surface learning techniques to study for an exam might simply try to memorize the definitions of all the words printed in **bold** in the textbook. Memorization is not always a bad technique—but when words are memorized out of context, the student is often unable to apply the terms that he or she has memorized because the terms are not fully understood.

Deep learning involves critical thinking and the analysis of new information with the goal of understanding the concepts and acquiring the ability to apply them in different contexts. In deep learning, the student intends to move beyond simple memorization to understanding and application.

You may use the information in Table 5.3 to compare the deep-learning approach with the surface-learning approach. These characteristics have been described by Entwistle⁸ and presented by Norton.⁹

Reading Comprehension Question 5.2 (Literal Comprehension)

Which of the following is the main difference between deep learning and surface learning?



- Surface learning is often used by students who study over several weeks for exams.
- b. Deep learning involves critical thinking and analysis of new information.
- c. Deep learning tends to distract students from the main goal of the course.
- d. Surface learning can help the student learn a lot of information in a very short time.

Table 5.3 Com	parison of Deep Learning and Surface	Learning	
Characteristic	Deep Approach	Surface Approach	
Intent of Student	Intends to understand	Intends to complete task requirements	
Mode of study	Interacts vigorously with content	Memorizes information needed for assessments	
Level of understanding	Relates new ideas to previous knowledge	Fails to distinguish principles from examples	
Application of concepts	Relates concepts to everyday experience	Treats task as an external imposition	
Integration of concepts	Relates evidence to conclusions	Focuses on discrete elements without integration	
Level of critical thinking	Examines the logic of the argument	Neglects to reflect on purpose or strategies	

It is important to note that "these approaches [are] not personality traits or intellectual abilities of any kind; *they are simply a reflection of the student's intention* when s/he engages in a given academic task." It may be the case that some students are unaware of the difference between deep and surface learning. Such students may wrongly assume that surface learning is the normal approach taken by everyone. Therefore, now that you are aware of this dynamic, you can adjust your intent and embrace the more effective deep-learning approach. The surface approach nearly always leads to poorer quality outcomes while the deep approach can lead to clear understanding, long-term recall, and higher grades.

Want to learn more?

Try these resources.



View the You Tube video depicting *Surface Learning vs. Deep Learning* at the following URLs (The videos summarize concepts developed by John Biggs in his book, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*):

Part 1: http://bvtlab.com/4n8m8 Part 2: http://bvtlab.com/9E77W Part 3: http://bvtlab.com/67n79

Think About This:

What would be different about the way you read a typical textbook (such as history or sociology) if you used a deep approach rather than a surface approach?



5.5 Responsibility

College is an environment where adult students—who already have a foundation of basic academic skills—come together under the guidance of the professor to learn and engage in higher level **critical thinking**

about a wide range of subjects that will prepare them for leadership roles in society. As a college student you must take adult responsibility for your own learning. Taking adult responsibility means that you do not wait for the teacher to tell you what to do or what to think, or to ask you questions. Instead you ask questions, design a study plan for your classes, and reach out to the professor and your classmates for assistance in the learning process. Learning is not something that someone else does for you or makes you do. Learning is something you do for yourself with the assistance of your mentors and peers.

"Learning takes place through the active behavior of the student: it is what he does that he learns, not what the teacher does."

— Ralph W. Tyler¹¹

Responsible adult learners do not need to be told to read the syllabus, acquire a textbook, read the textbook, develop a study regimen, prepare questions in advance to use in class participation, attend class and other academic functions on campus, participate, keep up their grades, evaluate their own progress on a regular basis, plan for early registration in advance, consult their advisor, or seek help when they need it (long before an exam). Responsible students take the initiative to do all of these things and more, not because they wish to please the professor, but because they wish to gain as much from the educational experience as they can.

Responsible adult students do not whine about their grades and beg for points that they have not earned. Instead, they view low grades as a signal that they have not been learning well enough in that class; and they respond by adjusting their study habits, getting help, or making other changes that will enable them to learn more effectively. Assessing yourself and making changes to promote greater learning will naturally result in higher grades.

Georgia Tech professor and physicist, Dr. Kurt Wiesenfield, authored an article in *Newsweek* called "Making the Grade: Many Students Wheedle for a Degree as if It Were a Freebie T-Shirt" in which he underscored how important it is for students to take responsibility for learning in order to become competent leaders in society.¹²

Professor Wiesenfield tells the story of how twelve students called him after the semester was completely over in order to beg him to change their failing grades. One student cried, "I will lose my scholarship if you don't change my grade to a D," while another whined "If you don't give me a C, I'll flunk out." One student dramatically pleaded, "If I don't pass, my life is over." The professor was alarmed that these students were so indifferent toward grades as an indication of personal effort and performance. As he explained,

Many, when pressed about why they think they deserve a better grade, admit they don't. Having been raised on gold stars for effort and smiley faces for self-esteem, they've learned that they can get by without hard work and real talent if they can talk the professor into giving them a break. ... Their arguments for wheedling better grades often ignore academic performance. ... Perhaps these students see me as a commodities broker with something they want—a grade. Though intrinsically worthless, grades, if properly manipulated, can be traded for what has value: a degree, which means a job, which means money. The one thing college actually offers—a chance to learn—is considered irrelevant, even less than worthless, because of the long hours and hard work required.¹²

It appears that focusing on grades and shortcuts, instead of on learning, had very serious negative consequences for these physics students. Perhaps some of them lost their scholarships, perhaps some failed and had to change majors, and perhaps some allowed their GPA to drop so low that they were never able to graduate.

However, Professor Wiesenfield explains that there would also be dire consequences for our entire society if he were to award these students passing grades that they did not deserve:

These guys had better take themselves seriously now, because our country will be forced to take them seriously later, when the stakes are much higher. They must recognize that their attitude is not only self-destructive, but socially destructive. The erosion of quality control—giving

appropriate grades for actual accomplishments—is a major concern ... That's when the misfortunes of eroding academic standards multiply. We lament that school children get "kicked upstairs" until they graduate from high school despite being illiterate and mathematically inept, but we seem unconcerned with college graduates whose less blatant deficiencies are far more harmful if their accreditation exceeds their qualifications. Most of my students are science and engineering majors. If they're good at getting partial credit but not at getting the answer right, then the new bridge breaks or the new drug doesn't work. One finds examples here in Atlanta. ... a light tower in the Olympic Stadium collapsed killing a worker. ... showing real-world consequences of errors and lack of expertise. 12

Want to learn more?

Try these resources.



You can read Professor Wiesenfield's entire article online at any one of the following URLs:

http://bvtlab.com/p6g7q http://bvtlab.com/8gbbp http://bvtlab.com/a78ec http://bvtlab.com/p6u7B

Think About This:

What was Professor Wiesenfield's main message in this article? Why is Professor Wiesenfield opposed to grade inflation? How could Professor Wiesenfield's students have avoided this tragedy?



<u>Reading Comprehension Question 5.3</u> (Inferential Comprehension)

What was Professor Wiesenfield's main point in the above article?

- a. That some of his students would be in trouble in the real world because they had an attitude about learning that was not appropriate for a college education
- b. That some of his students asked for grades they did not deserve
- c. That all students are trying to get away with the least amount of work possible in college
- d. None of the above



SUMMARY

In this chapter you learned how the proper attitude and approach to college learning can help you be successful. Successful students focus on learning and ask, "What is the most that I can learn in this class?" Successful students identify the learning goals or objectives for each course, lesson, or exam and incorporate them into their study routine. For each course, successful students design a study plan in which they divide the learning activities into a number of study sessions spread out over time. Successful students practice a deep-learning approach instead of a surface-learning approach. Successful students take adult responsibility for their learning.

In this book you will learn how to take responsibility for your own learning. This starts with identifying and practicing successful learning approaches. Specific academic skills and habits will be covered in the coming chapters.

Reading Comprehension Question 5.4 (Analysis)

Why did the authors write this chapter on "Focus on Learning"?

- a. To enlighten the student on how to approach the topic of learning in a college atmosphere
- b. To chide the student on his/her behavior in college
- c. To show that students are always trying to get away with the least amount of work
- d. To demonstrate that learning is almost impossible in a college setting



REVIEW QUESTIONS

5.1

Instructions: Following are five true-false statements taken from the information in this chapter. First, try to answer them without looking back at the chapter. Then review the chapter to see how well you did.

Question & Answer	Rationale
Circle True or False for each of the following.	Write an explanation stating why each statement is true or false.
 Cramming for exams is a normal part of college life for most students because it is the best way to learn the large volume of material covered in most college courses. True or False 	Your Rationale:
 A successful approach to studying and learning demands a focus on grades because college students must maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) in order to graduate. True or False 	Your Rationale:
 The surface approach to learning nearly always leads to poorer outcomes and/or lower grades. True or False 	Your Rationale:
4. The focus-on-grades model is a failure model.True or False	Your Rationale:
 "Wheedle" is the nickname or label that Professor Wiesenfield has applied to students who try to pass the course by cheating. True or False 	Your Rationale:

Name•

Chapter 5, Goal 1: The student will be able to compare and contrast the focus-on-grades approach with the focus-on-learning approach.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Name:			
Name:			

Chapter 5, Goal 2: The student will be able to explain why the focus-on-learning approach is most effective.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Name:			
Name:			

Chapter 5, Goal 3: The student will be able to explain why long-term learning is more productive than cramming for an exam.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Name			

Chapter 5, Goal 4: The student will be able to describe the characteristics of a responsible learner.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Name:			

Chapter 5, Goal 5: The student will be able to explain how failure to take responsibility for learning—on the part of students and professors—can be detrimental to both individuals and society.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Name			

Chapter 5, Goal 6: The student will be able to explain the difference between deep learning and surface learning.

Questions	Answers & Notes

Study Guide

Name:

Chapter Five

Preparing for Class: Use This Page to Record Questions or Insights to Discuss in Class.



Study Group (2–4 people for four meetings)

Goal:

The purpose of this activity is to enable the student to use study groups to learn more effectively.

Objective

The student will form or join a study group for one of his or her classes and will keep a record of his or her study group involvement and activities.

Instructions:

It is smart to study with other students who are taking the same course and who are serious about learning. Follow these steps to benefit from being in a study group for one of your classes:

Step 1: Consult one or more of the following websites to learn about the value of study groups and how to use them effectively:

Study Groups and College Success from the University of LaVerne, Learning Center (http://bvtlab.com/3wFr6)

BookRags Article: How to Form a Study Group in College (http://bvtlab.com/h5dPe)

Peer Study Groups from the University of Michigan (http://bvtlab.com/8W7v7)

- **Step 2:** Form a group and hold at least four study sessions together. Record the following for each group study session: 1) the date, time, and place of the group meeting; 2) the signatures of all who attended; and 3) a brief description of what the group did during that session.
- Step 3: You can use the Study Group Report Form on the next page to keep a record of your group meetings.

Study Group Report Form

Course:	Your Name:
First Meeting What did the group do at this meeting?	Date: Attendees' Signatures
Second Meeting	Date:
What did the group do at this meeting?	Attendees' Signatures
Third Meeting	Date:
What did the group do at this meeting?	Attendees' Signatures
Fourth Meeting	Date:
What did the group do at this meeting?	Attendees' Signatures