

On Perusall: A Social Learning Platform for Reading and Annotating

This instructional content, prepared by Lara Allen, draws upon materials originally developed for the guidebook *Online Teaching Practices: Connected Pedagogies for a Fractured World*, compiled in 2020 by instructors from Pratt Institute's Intensive English Program (IEP). For updates, inquiries, or suggestions regarding this material, please contact Lara Allen at lalle116@pratt.edu.

What is Perusall?

Perusall is an online, social learning platform designed to engage students and deepen conceptual understanding of reading materials. “The instructor creates an online course on Perusall, adopting electronic versions of textbooks from publishers or uploading articles or documents, and then creates reading assignments. Students asynchronously annotate the assigned reading by posting (or replying to) comments or questions in a chat-like fashion” (Miller par. 11). In addition to texts, Perusall supports engagement with other media formats, including films and videos.

Why use Perusall?

Perusall supports the successful implementation of a [flipped classroom](#) model, using a collaborative platform to turn reading into a social practice instead of an isolated experience. Perusall is grounded in theoretical methodology, including [interactive research](#) which combines a [peer instruction](#) and [active learning](#) approach, designed to engage students and deepen learning. Additionally, Perusall's “assignment engagement scores use ‘[gamification](#)’ to improve the out-of-class learning process, encouraging students to interact with and learn from the material and each other”(King et al.).

For more information, Harvard physics professor and Perusall co-developer Eric Mazur gives a 30 minute [presentation](#):

- 10:17 for an overview of the platform
- 14:01 a breakdown of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors for students including how scoring functions
- 24:09 how the fully automated assessment helps teachers

Overview of Social Features:

- Highlights/annotations** ~ comment, ask and answer questions
- Sectioning** ~ students are assigned to a group
- Avatars** ~ users can see who else is reading
- Upvoting** ~ enables feedback; click to affirm a question or to react to a response
- Email notifications** ~ when a classmate responds to a question or comment
- Assessment** ~ evaluates participation and can populate LMS grade book
- Instructor Tool** ~ a confusion report locates where students may need guidance

Set Up:

1. [Create an account](#).
2. Get [step by step instructions](#) for adding readings to your course, creating assignments, and setting up course policy (general, grouping, scoring).
3. For instructors, [here](#) is the support page with questions about courses, content, assignments, scoring and grades.
4. Upload [documents](#) or browse the [catalog](#) of books already available. Books are free for instructors and can be purchased by students.
5. Generate a course code through settings→access, then invite students to join using that code; or embed in Canvas by going to settings→apps. You will need to contact [Perusall support \(support@perusall.com\)](#) for a *consumer key* and *shared secret*. They will ask you to send a link to your profile on Pratt's website.

Settings Notes:

1. Perusall automatically creates **groups** of 20. You need to **change or bypass** this in settings →grouping. Manually assign groups or place all in one group, otherwise students can't see each other's annotations.
2. Developed by a social scientist specializing in quantitative analysis of social media posts, **scoring** is “a specialized machine learning algorithm that assesses intellectual content.” To enable automated scoring (it only works automatically for classes of 15 or more) you must **send a request** with your class code to [support](#).
3. [Here](#) is more information about scoring. If you've enabled scoring by contacting support, instructors may adjust the scoring. Choose 0-1 points if you want to simplify; just go to settings →scoring. Or, to bypass this gamification facet, turn the scoring off.

Test Course:

Several IEP instructors participated in a test course, as both students and teachers. Below are the results.

Features we like:

1. Perusall is free, accessible in China, and can be embedded in the LMS.
2. There are no advertisements, it's FERPA compliant, and secure for users.
3. It's engaging and provides feedback for both online and in-person classes.
4. Highlighting the text and adding commentary is easy and intuitive.
5. Comments can be attached to specific moments in a video, just like in a text.
6. You can browse comments and search comments.
7. Students and teachers are notified by email when someone replies to their comment.
8. The student activity reports include:
 - a. How many annotations were made

- b. How much time was spent actively reading
 - c. How thoughtful the annotations were
 - d. How distributed the comments were
8. The confusion report provides insight into questions to follow up with.
 9. Perusall provides an editable [rubric](#) and [welcome letter](#).

Other observations:

1. The “Read Aloud” feature (megaphone on right side) uses AI; for English language learners it is helpful for pronunciation with single words, but not for complete sentences. For more information about this and other valuable features, see Perusall’s [accessibility statement](#).
2. The “Notes” feature (pencil) is similar to private chat in Zoom, but can also be used to create your own personal notes that you don’t share with the group.
3. PDF’s full of embedded links can be a bit glitchy when highlighting.
4. You can switch between teacher mode and student view although this does not show the scoring feature. To see and test any feature, create an account and join the [test course](#). Course code is ALLEN-HP3Y9.
5. [Support](#) is available by email. Answers are received within 24 hours -- but usually much sooner.
6. Can be used on a smartphone but is not the ideal device for this platform.

More Instructional Videos:

~A five minute “how to create a class” [video](#).

~For general reflections about Perusall from Eric Mazur, international students and other instructors, here’s [a six minute video](#).

~An eight minute [video platform introduction](#) gives insight into scoring at 5:36. This [video](#) demonstrates how to create an assignment within Canvas.

Works Cited

King, Gary, et al. "Incorporating Engagement Scores into Your Course Grade." *Perusall*, 2015, support.perusall.com/hc/en-us/articles/360033997254-Incorporating-engagement-scores-into-your-course-grade.

Miller, K., Lukoff, B., King, G., & Mazur, E. (2018). Use of a Social Annotation Platform for Pre-Class Reading Assignments in a Flipped Introductory Physics Class. *Frontiers in Education*, 2018(3).

Other Resources

Lee, S.C. & Yeong, F.M. (2018). Fostering student engagement using online, collaborative reading assignments mediated by Perusall. *The Asia-Pacific Scholar*, 3(3).

Liberatore, M. W. (2017). Annotations and Discussions of Textbooks and Papers Using a Web-based System. Paper presented at 2017 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, Columbus, Ohio.

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