JHU Department of Civil Engineering
500.141/560.141: Perspectives on the Evolution of Structures
Spring 2006

General comments on the first writing assignment

General writing comments:

1. Avoid colloquial expressions, these detract from the gravity of your argument.

2. Avoid contractions, see above.

3. Avoid (for now) the first person. There are times when a personal style can be very effective, but for now it makes your essays seem more like opinion, and less like well reasoned argument.

4. Focus your efforts on responding to the assignment. Many papers fill a lot of space with long lists of facts and trivia. That kind of information is not what this assignment is about.

5. The papers contain many unsupported claims. The point here is not merely to state opinions, but rather to present well reasoned arguments.

6. Each essay should have a brief introduction and conclusion. The introduction should not be the brief history of the structure, but should state the thesis or argument of the paper which should be related to structural engineering critique. In the conclusion, no new information should be introduced.

7. Work on paragraph organization. Each paragraph should have once clearly defined idea in it.

Structural critique comments:

1. Identify details of the structural form that are interesting and on which you can comment. Saying, “the suspension bridge is beautiful because of the gracefully curving cable,” is not really what we are looking for. Instead, try to identify specific parts of the structural form to remark on.
2. Figure out what parts of the structure are in tension, compression, and bending, and decide if they look different from one another. Comment on this aesthetic if you can see it.

3. Remember, just because a structure is not expressive as structural art does not mean it is bad, it just means that it is not a form resulting from engineering creativity. Try to focus your arguments on the issue of the connection between engineering behavior and form.

**Help is available:** For help with grammar, organization, and overall clarity of your writing, consider using the JHU writing center. See the website at http://www.jhu.edu/~english/writing_center/