

Example Assignments

Demographic Trends in Rural America (Johnson)

Six ready-to-distribute assignments spanning a low-stakes data exercise through an advanced analytical essay. Demography rewards working with real numbers for a real place, so most of these ask students to pull actual Census data for their own county and pair it with local observation or interviews — which also makes the work hard to outsource, since an AI tool cannot reliably retrieve or interpret a specific county’s current figures. Each lists level, format, and target objectives, followed by student instructions, a deliverable, and a 100-point rubric. Objective numbers refer to the Instructor Teaching Guide.

Getting the data: students can use Census QuickFacts (census.gov/quickfacts), data.census.gov, and the USDA ERS county typology and rural-urban codes. Ethics: interview professionals or consenting adults about their work, not people about sensitive personal matters; use only public data. Add your course’s consent and AI-use policies before distributing.

At a glance

Assignment	Level	Format	Length	Primary skill
1. My County’s Demographic Profile	Intro (101)	Individual	~700 wds + data	Data literacy, classification
2. Components-of-Change Analysis	Intro–Interm.	Individual	~800 wds + table	Demographic decomposition
3. Local Interview or Observation	Intro–Interm.	Individual	notes + ~800 wds	Fieldwork
4. Rural Trajectory Essay	Advanced	Individual	900–1,200 wds	Analytical argument
5. Two-County Comparison	Interm.–Adv.	Individual/pair	~1,000 wds	Comparative analysis
6. Demographic Policy Op-Ed	Any level	Individual	600–800 wds	Public-facing writing

Assignment 1 — My County's Demographic Profile

Level: Introductory (101) **Format:** Individual **Length:** ~700 words + a small data table

Objectives: 1, 2, 3

Purpose

Put the chapter's framework to work on a real place you know. You will profile your home county (or another assigned county) using actual Census data.

Instructions

1. **Pull the data:** from Census QuickFacts or data.census.gov, record your county's population for the two most recent decennial censuses and the latest estimate, plus recent births and deaths if available.
2. **Classify it:** is it metro or nonmetro? Where does it sit on the continuum (adjacent or nonadjacent; micropolitan or not)? Which USDA county type fits best (farm, manufacturing, recreation, retirement, other)?
3. **Describe the trajectory:** is the county growing or shrinking? Is it in natural increase or natural decrease? Cite the specific numbers you found.
4. **Connect to the chapter:** does your county fit the patterns Johnson describes for its type and location, or is it an exception?

Deliverable

A ~700-word profile with a small table of the figures you pulled and their sources (with dates). Real, cited numbers are required.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Accurate data	25	Correct, current figures pulled and cited with sources and dates.
Classification	25	Correct metro/nonmetro, continuum, and county-type placement.
Trajectory read	25	A sound account of growth/decline and natural increase/decrease.
Chapter connection	15	A thoughtful link to Johnson's patterns.
Clarity	10	Organized, readable, table included.
Total	100	

Assignment 2 — Components-of-Change Analysis

Level: Intro–Intermediate **Format:** Individual **Length:** ~800 words + a table **Objectives:** 2, 5

Purpose

Take a population change apart. Using real data, you will separate a county’s recent change into its two engines and interpret the result.

Instructions

1. **Choose a county and period** — your own county is ideal. Use the most recent multi-year span for which you can find births, deaths, and population estimates.
2. **Compute the components:** calculate natural change (births minus deaths) and, where possible, net migration (population change minus natural change). Show your work in a table.
3. **Interpret:** which engine drove the change? Is the county in natural increase or decrease? Is migration adding or subtracting people?
4. **Situate it:** compare your county’s pattern to the chapter’s findings for 2010–2020 and 2020–2024. Is it following the “migration surprise,” the depopulation pattern, or something else?

Deliverable

An ~800-word analysis with a components table (births, deaths, natural change, population change, and net migration where derivable), fully sourced. Note any data limitations honestly.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Correct computation	30	Accurate natural change and, where possible, net migration, with work shown.
Data & sourcing	20	Real figures, cited; limitations noted honestly.
Interpretation	30	A sound read of which engine drives the change.
Chapter connection	10	A fair comparison to Johnson’s patterns.
Clarity	10	Organized, readable, table included.
Total	100	

Assignment 3 — Local Interview or Observation

Level: Intro–Intermediate **Format:** Individual **Length:** Notes + ~800-word analysis **Objectives:** 1, 4

Purpose

See demographic change on the ground. You will either interview someone who works with population change or document local signs of it, then connect what you find to the chapter.

Two options. Interview a professional — a county planner, economic developer, school administrator or enrollment officer, Extension agent, realtor, or public-health worker — about how population change shows up in their work. Or, if an interview isn't feasible, do a structured observation of local indicators (school enrollment signs, new or stalled construction, vacant storefronts, senior services, new arrivals). Interview professionals or consenting adults only; observe public places.

Instructions

1. **Choose your method** (interview or observation) and plan it. For an interview, prepare 6–8 questions; for observation, prepare a checklist of indicators tied to the chapter (growth, decline, aging, in-movers).
2. **Gather material:** conduct the 20–30 minute interview (notes, or recording with permission) or spend time documenting indicators with notes and, where appropriate, a few photos of public places.
3. **Connect to the data:** pair what you learned with your county's actual Census figures. Do the ground-level signs match the numbers?
4. **Analyze** in ~800 words: how does your evidence illustrate the chapter's themes — natural decrease, out-migration, amenity in-migration, aging, the depopulation spiral?

Deliverable

Your questions or observation checklist, your notes, and the ~800-word analysis with the county figures cited. Do not identify private individuals by name; describe roles.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Fieldwork execution	25	A real interview or a substantive structured observation, documented.
Link to data	20	Ground-level evidence paired with real county figures.
Concept application	30	Sound connection to natural change, migration, aging, or depopulation.
Insight	15	A thoughtful reading of what the fieldwork adds to the numbers.
Ethics & clarity	10	Consent/public-place norms respected; organized and cited.
Total	100	

Assignment 4 — Rural Trajectory Essay

Level: Advanced **Format:** Individual essay **Length:** 900–1,200 words **Objectives:** 3, 4, 6

Purpose

Explain one county’s demographic path and where it may be heading. Using the chapter’s framework and real data, you will build an argument about a county’s trajectory.

Prompt

Choose one real nonmetro county (your own or another you can research). Classify it on the continuum and by county type, then trace its trajectory across the turbulent era — the Great Recession, the slow recovery, and the pandemic — using its actual population, natural-change, and migration data. Explain which engine has driven its path, situate it among Johnson’s patterns, and argue what its demographic future is likely to be and why.

Requirements

- A thesis that names the county and its trajectory — not a neutral “this essay will discuss...” opener.
- Real, cited data for the county across at least two periods.
- Explicit use of the two engines and the continuum/typology.
- A reasoned projection that acknowledges uncertainty (e.g., whether migration gains will last).

Deliverable

900–1,200 words citing the chapter and your data sources with dates.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Thesis & classification	20	A clear argument and correct continuum/type placement.
Data & evidence	25	Real, cited figures used across periods.
Framework analysis	25	Sound use of the two engines and the era’s shocks.
Projection	15	A reasoned, appropriately hedged look ahead.
Organization & mechanics	15	Logical structure; clean prose and citations.
Total	100	

Assignment 5 — Two-County Comparison

Level: Intermediate–Advanced **Format:** Individual or pair **Length:** ~1,000 words (or 6–8 slides)

Objectives: 1, 3, 5

Purpose

Explain divergence. You will compare two real counties on opposite demographic paths and account for the difference using the chapter.

Instructions

1. **Pick a contrasting pair** — for example, a growing recreation or retirement county and a depopulating farm or remote “other” county. Counties in your own state or region are welcome.
2. **Assemble the data:** for both counties, pull population change and, where possible, natural change and net migration for a recent period. Put them side by side in a table.
3. **Classify both** on the continuum and by county type.
4. **Explain the divergence:** why is one growing and the other shrinking? Which engine differs most, and how do location, economy, and amenities factor in?
5. **Draw a lesson** about what the comparison shows regarding “not one rural America.”

Deliverable

A ~1,000-word comparison or a 6–8 slide deck, with a shared data table and sources. Be fair to both places.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Case selection & data	20	A genuine contrast with real, cited figures for both counties.
Classification	15	Correct continuum and type placement for both.
Explanation of divergence	35	A sound account of why the paths differ, by engine and context.
Lesson drawn	15	A clear takeaway about rural diversity.
Presentation	15	Clear table; organized, readable, cited.
Total	100	

Assignment 6 — Demographic Policy Op-Ed

Level: Any (scale expectations to course) **Format:** Individual, public-facing **Length:** 600–800 words

Objectives: 3, 6

Purpose

Turn analysis into advocacy. Write an op-ed arguing for a demographically calibrated policy for a specific county — supporting growth in a fast-growing county, or managing decline in a shrinking one.

Instructions

1. **Anchor it locally:** name a real county and cite one or two of its actual demographic figures. Open with a hook and a clear headline. Make an argument, not a report.
2. **Diagnose the trajectory:** is the county growing, shrinking, in natural decrease, gaining or losing migrants? Use the chapter’s framework.
3. **Propose one calibrated policy** — e.g., integrating in-migrants and managing growth, or shoring up services and slowing the depopulation spiral — and explain why it fits this county’s demography.
4. **Keep it honest:** acknowledge cost, tradeoffs, or uncertainty (including whether migration gains will last), so the piece reads as clear-eyed.

Deliverable

A 600–800 word op-ed with a headline, written for a local or general newspaper audience. First person and a strong voice are welcome; the county’s real numbers are required. Instructors may add an in-class read-aloud where students defend one claim from questions.

Rubric

Criterion	Pts	What strong work shows
Headline & hook	15	A sharp headline and an opening that will draw attention.
Local anchor & data	30	A specific county with real, cited figures.
Calibrated policy	25	A proposal that fits the county’s demographic reality.
Voice & audience	15	Reads as an op-ed for a general reader, not a term paper.
Mechanics & length	15	Clean prose within the word count.
Total	100	

Adapting these assignments

- **Why data- and field-based:** a specific county's current Census figures, a local interview, and firsthand observation are hard to fabricate or outsource, so the work reflects the student's own effort. Process artifacts (data tables, notes) are built into the deliverables.
- **Data help:** point students to Census QuickFacts and data.census.gov, and the USDA ERS county typology and rural-urban continuum codes. A short in-class demo of pulling one county's numbers pays off.
- **Scale up:** require net-migration derivation, a longer time series, a second county, or an in-class presentation where students defend their read of the data.
- **Scale down:** for 101, assign the county and provide the data links, and shorten the word counts.
- **Sequence:** the profile (1), components analysis (2), and fieldwork (3) each generate material that feeds the trajectory essay (4) or two-county comparison (5) as a capstone.

These teaching materials were generated with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic). All content was reviewed and verified by the chapter authors.