

HIST 480, Sec. 3 SEMINAR IN HISTORY: MODERN AMERICA, Fall 2012

TUTH 9:30-10:45

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Office hours: MW 10-12, TU 2-4, by appointment

“[T]hirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. . . . [H]e was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.’” Anne Lamott

“One of the saddest things I found about teaching is the conviction of too many of my students that they have nothing fresh and interesting to say about their topics. They don’t trust themselves.” Richard Marius

*“[T]he more you wish to describe a Universal the more minutely and truthfully you must describe a Particular.”
Brenda Ueland*

Course description

A first goal of this class is for its members to make strides in asking their own historical questions, in locating and analyzing primary and secondary sources to respond to those questions, and in writing a history research paper. The place and time boundaries are the United States from roughly 1865 to the 1980s. This work includes choosing a topic to investigate, defining a research question, using a variety of research tools, developing a record-keeping system, reading and reflecting, outlining, citing sources, and writing multiple drafts of a historical research paper with documentation.

Since we all struggle with these solitary, labor-intensive tasks, a second goal is to build camaraderie, also useful in historical work. The excitement of finding unused or underused sources or of asking new questions of well-known sources becomes an enriching experience as that work is shared and discussed with other researchers. As your research proceeds, the ability to give and receive critical readings of each other’s writing will further this historical conversation.

The final paper you produce this semester should be one that demonstrates your skills as a historian in conversation with other historians and as a writer able to convey significant ideas in story, analysis, and interpretation.

Required reading (on Moodle):

William Cronon, “Learning to Do Historical Research: A Primer for Environmental Historians and Others,” last modified March 23, 2009,

<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm>.

Patrick Rael, *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 2004), <http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/>.

Additional readings are on reserve and on Moodle.

Recommended books:

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers* (2007) (reference section)

William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (any edition) (on reserve)

Course requirements

The bulk of course work is individual research, writing, and revising of a historical research paper. A number of assignments in addition to the final essay will document your progress in this process. Individual sessions and peer reviews of each other’s work will also

be a part of your course work. That means we will not meet every week as a full class. When we do meet, your attendance and participation are essential

Therefore, meeting deadlines and class attendance are part of your final grade. More than one absence or missing an individual sessions will result in an unsatisfactory participation grade. Arriving late or leaving early will also result in a lowered participation grade. Failure to turn in one or more of the assignments will result in an unsatisfactory grade in the 40 percent related to the research process. No late assignments will be accepted. The only exceptions to these requirements are individual cases based on documented emergencies and documented school or military obligations, worked out with me in advance.

Academic honesty is expected. Cases of academic dishonesty will be turned over to campus judiciary and will result in a significant penalty, including the possibility of failing the course for the semester.

Evaluation (See Assignment Guidelines for specifics)

Final paper, based on primary and secondary sources, 20-25 numbered pages, Times 12 pt., 1" margins, double-spaced (50%)

Research and writing assignments (40% You will receive an unsatisfactory overall grade for this portion of your grade, if you do not turn in all of the assignments.)

Participation (10% You will receive an unsatisfactory overall grade in participation if you miss more than one class session or individual session.)

Calendar (subject to change): See Moodle for reading links

Week 1 (Aug. 27-Sept. 2)

TU: Introduction; course overview; the research process

TH: Introduction to library resources: in-house and online (Crumb Library - led by Carol Franck, Librarian)

Week 2 (Sept. 3-9)

TU: Thinking about topics; asking historical questions

TH: Online resources (LTEC, Crumb Library downstairs)

Readings for TU:

- 1) Cronon et al., "Learning to Do Historical Research: A Primer for Environmental Historians and Others" (Introduction only)
- 2) Cronon et al., "How to Frame a Researchable Question"
- 3) Rael, "Introduction"; "How to Ask Good Questions"; "What Makes a Question Good"; "From Observation to Hypotheses"
- 4) One essay in an area of your interest for topic summary assignment (see Moodle)

Assignment due TU: Topic listing

Week 3 (Sept. 10-16)

TU: Archival sources: (Crumb Library upstairs – led by Matt Francis, College Archivist, SUNY Potsdam College Archives & Special Collections)

TH: Identifying and reading primary sources (LTEC, Crumb Library downstairs)

Readings for TU:

- 1) Cronon et al., "What Are the Documents?" (first four sections only)
- 2) Cronon et al., "Research Sources" (Read introductions to all eight in the pull-down menu. Choose two sources that seem most relevant to your interests to read in their entirety.)
- 3) Rael, "How to Read a Primary Source"

Week 4 (Sept. 17-23)

TU: Identifying and reading secondary sources: context and historiography

TH: Note taking and citations; protecting your records and writing

Progress reports

Readings for TU:

1) Cronon et al., "Effective Searching: A Primer on the Search"

2) Cronon et al., "The Pleasures of Note-taking"

3) Rael, "How to Read a Secondary Source"; "Predatory Reading"; "Keeping a Research Journal"

Assignment due TU: Excavating a primary source

Week 5 (Sept. 24-30)

TU: Committing your work to the page; avoiding plagiarism

TH: Progress reports or additional work on research issues

Readings for TU:

1) Cronon et al., "Arguments and Narrative"

2) Lynn Hunt, "How Writing Leads to Thinking (And Not the Other Way Round)"

2) Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*, ch. 5: "An Approach to Style" (on reserve)

3) History Department Citation Guide

4) Rael, "Citing Your Sources"; "Advanced Citation" (gov. docs., archives only)

Assignments due TU: Analysis of two significant secondary sources; statement of a working research question

Week 6 (Oct. 1-7)

TU: Arguments, description, and narrative

TH: Progress reports and individual sessions

Readings for TU:

1) Cronon et al., "Positioning Your Argument"

2) Rael, "Structuring Your Essay"; "The Three Parts of a History Paper"

Week 7 (Oct. 8-14)

TU: Recess

TH: Progress reports and individual sessions

Readings for TH:

1) Cronon et al., "Drafting, Revising, Editing"

Assignment due TH: Working abstract, outline, and bibliography

Week 8 (Oct. 15-21)

TU: Individual sessions

TH: Serving as a peer reviewer; using critical reviews in your revisions; peer review session

Reading for TH:

1) Rael, "Peer Evaluations"

Assignment due TH: Draft #1 (2 copies)

Week 9 (Oct. 22-28)

TU: Discussion of problem areas; writing openings

Readings for TU:

1) Rael, "Formatting Your Papers"

2) D. M. Leeson, "How History Begins: A Note on the Writing of Openings"

Assignment due TU: Peer review #1 (2 copies)

Week 10 (Oct. 29-Nov. 4)

Individual sessions

Reading for the week (as noted on my review of your sheet):

1) Rael, "Grammar for Historians"; "A Style Sheet for History Writers"

Week 11 (Nov. 5-11)

Individual sessions

Week 12 (Nov. 12-18)

TU: Individual sessions

TH: Presentation of papers

Week 13 (Nov. 19-25)

TU: Presentation of papers

TH: Thanksgiving recess

Assignment due TU: Draft #2 (2 copies)

Week 14 (Nov. 26-Dec. 2)

TU or TH: Individual work or sessions, or a group gathering

Assignment due by TH: Peer review #2 (online)

Week 15 (Dec. 3-9)

TU: Last words for the last throes

Reading for TU:

1) Rael, "Paper-writing checklist" with Heisey additions

Week 16 (Dec. 10-16)

Final exam period TBA: Course evaluation, celebration of completion;
presentation of papers

Assignment due in exam period: Final paper (1 hard copy; 1 electronic copy)