

History [HSTR] 200: Introduction to Historical Methods

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“The past isn’t dead; it’s not even past.”

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

“History doesn’t repeat itself; historians merely repeat each other.”

“History isn’t what happened; history is what you can remember.”

This course, required of all history majors, will teach you everything you need to know to write a research paper, without actually writing a research paper. More specifically, you will learn about different varieties of history and different approaches to its subject matter. You will learn how historians work, how they frame questions, and how they apply these questions to their sources. You will learn about different kinds of historical source material: primary and secondary sources, yes, but also sub-categories within these. You will learn how to locate them, in the library, in databases, and online, how to evaluate them, and how to use them. Finally, you will learn how to cite sources, both to give credit where credit is due and to guide others in their own research. Our hope, of course, is that you will have numerous opportunities to write research papers over the next few years.

Unlike many history courses you will take here, this course is driven by interaction. It will only work if you make it work. You should come to every class prepared, having completed the assigned reading and homework, expecting to participate and to be called upon to participate.

Half of your grade will be determined by weekly homework assignments (ten assignments worth five points each), and the other half (fifty points) by the take-home, open-book final examination.

There is a text for this course: *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide* [abbreviated hereafter as MASH] by Michael Salevouris and Conal Furay, an accessible and engaging, if often eccentric and cranky, and most importantly brief and succinct introduction to the nuts and bolts not just of historical research, but of the study of history more generally.

Attendance: As this course only meets once a week, regular attendance is essential. Attendance will be taken; unexcused absences will be penalized; excused absences will be policed. You should only miss class due to unpleasant circumstances beyond your control. You will only be allowed to make up assignments missed in the case of excused absences.

Course Schedule

6 September 2018:

The history of history. Read MASH chapter 14, and complete the exercise.

13 September 2018:

History as an interpretive discipline. Read MASH chapter 3, and complete exercises A and B.

20 September 2018:

Causation. Read MASH chapter 4.

27 September 2018:

Context. Read MASH chapter 5, and complete exercises A 1 and 2, and B1.

4 October 2018:

Finding secondary sources. Read MASH chapter 7.

11 October 2018:

Reading secondary work. Read MASH chapter 8, and complete exercises A 1 and 2, and B1.

18 October 2018:

Primary sources. Read MASH chapter 10, and complete exercises A 1-3.

25 October 2018:

Historical analysis. Read MASH chapter 12, and complete exercises A2 and B2.

1 November 2018:

Narrative. Read MASH chapter 6, and complete exercises A2 and B2.

8 November 2018:

Writing. Read MASH chapter 13, and complete exercises A 1 and 2, and B 1 and 2.

15 November 2018:

Documentation. Exercise to be distributed.

29 November 2018:

Plagiarism and how to avoid it. Exercise to be distributed.

6 December 2018:

Course Evaluation; distribution of take-home, open-book final examination.

Characteristics of a topic:

It must be narrow enough to cover in the space and time allotted

Finding a topic. Your topic ought to be something that interests you, since you're going to spend several weeks working on it. It also needs to be focused enough to allow you to treat it comprehensively, given limitations of time and space. Finally, it needs to be a topic that can be thoroughly researched in sources that are available and accessible to you.

It must be approachable from sources that are available to you.

It has to be interesting enough to you to keep you motivated to keep working.

As you undertake preliminary research into your topic (Wikipedia, encyclopedias, textbooks), you will refine your topic into a question or problem, from which you are going to form a hypothesis (that which is to be demonstrated).

Your thesis must be significant, and it must be contestable. (Scientists speak of a "falsifiable" hypothesis.)

How are you going to know if your thesis is significant, and contestable?
Background research.

We're holding off on a homework assignment for next week, as we are having our first library workshop.

Framing a research question. Assignment: for next session, choose a historical subject field for your imaginary research paper. Check out a book on that topic from Mansfield, and bring it to class.

Different kinds of sources: primary vs. secondary, archival vs. printed, popular vs. scholarly, etc. Assignment: for next session, download a scholarly article on your topic from JSTOR. Examine the footnotes, and underline or highlight one citation each of an archival source, a printed primary source, a scholarly monograph, and a scholarly article.

Using sources. Quoting and paraphrasing, citations. Taking notes, Assignment: Use WorldCat to find a book on your topic that Mansfield doesn't hold. Locate the nearest library that has the book. Print out the results of your search.

Online Workshop: Secondary and reference sources. Class will meet in the Buckhous Room in Mansfield Library.

Online Workshop: Primary sources. Assignment: Scavenger Hunt. Instructions to follow.

Local History. Meet in Archive Study Room, Mansfield Library.

Government Document Workshop. We will meet in the Buckhous Room in Mansfield Library.

Quoting and paraphrasing. Writing.
Citation: footnotes and bibliography.