

**HIST-797: Master's Research Seminar: Disasters in History
Spring 2024**

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Horizon Hall 3165

Office Hours: by appointment (meetings will be in-person or via Zoom)

This class meets most weeks in-person in Innovation 328. (Exceptions are noted below.)

What is a “disaster”? Experts struggle to provide a single concise definition for the term “disaster.” Most agree that disasters involve unintended collective or community suffering, and not merely individual losses. Some scholars favor quantitative measures—typically the number of fatalities or the total cost of property losses—as criteria for deciding whether an event qualifies for disaster status. Others argue that certain qualitative features—geographic scope, duration, length of forewarning and speed of onset—are disasters’ defining attributes.

In this course, the term “disaster” refers to bad things that happen which result in substantial and unintended losses of lives and property, and have significant cultural resonance beyond the affected community. Following the scholarly literature, we will reject the rhetorical binary that distinguishes so-called natural disasters from those caused by human error or agency in favor of a spectrum of disaster causation. No disaster is purely the result of natural causes; all are to some degree “man-made.”

What is HIST-797? Successful completion of a graduate research seminar (HIST-797) is one of the requirements for the M.A. degree. The objective of this research seminar is for each student to write a major paper (25-30 pages, double-spaced, excluding notes and bibliography) related to the course’s topic, conducting original research in primary sources and situating their findings in an appropriate historiographical context. This particular research seminar is organized loosely around the subject of disasters in history.

Students are free to research and write on any aspect of disaster history, in any time period or geographical location, as long as they have access to the primary sources they need to complete their work over the course of the semester. Note that “research” for this class means using scholarly research methods to access and use books, articles, and databases available at Fenwick Library—in other words, not just Googling. Note, too, that quality primary sources are generally more accessible for certain geographical areas and for the chronological period between, say, 1700 and 1990. Choose a topic very early in the semester to ensure its viability.

General course requirements: Students are expected to adhere to the Course Schedule, below. As the schedule indicates, sometimes this class will meet as a group, while other days are set aside for self-directed research or individual meetings with the instructor. There are assignments—reading, writing, research, or oral work—due most weeks, and students are responsible for completing these assignments even if they are absent from class.

The work for this course is cumulative, which means that each assignment is a building block en route to completing the final paper—which, in turn, means that simply submitting an acceptable final essay, without doing the required work throughout the semester, will not warrant a good final course grade. Likewise, because this class meets infrequently and because it uses a

participatory seminar/workshop format, missing class more than once will likely lower your final grade for the course.

As the main work for this course is researching and writing a major research paper—and completing various steps along the way—there is relatively little collective reading. All of that collective class reading will come from these two required texts, which we will be using over the course of the semester:

- Cynthia A. Kierner, Matthew Mulcahy, and Liz Skilton, eds., *Rethinking American Disasters*.
- Zachary M. Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact Disability Services at 703-993-2474, <http://ds.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through Disability Services.

For a list of the varied and extensive services the university offers for graduate students, go to <https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/graduate/graduate-student-resources/grad-student-life>.

Finally, please note that all students are subject to the George Mason University Honor Code (see <http://jiju.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/honor.htm>). The penalty for cheating or plagiarism on any assignment will be—at a minimum—a grade of F for this course.

Course grades will be determined as follows:

• Research proposal (due Mon. 26 Feb.)	10%
• Primary source analysis (due Mon. 11 Mar.)	10%
• Historiography (due Mon. 25 Mar.)	10%
• Draft of final paper—minimum 12 pages, excluding notes and bibliography (due Friday 5 Apr.)	10%
• Peer review (due Mon. 8 Apr.)	10%
• Final paper (due Mon. 6 May)	30%
• Participation, including oral presentation	20%

Written work: Directions for all written assignments are posted on Blackboard. Students must submit work on Blackboard unless otherwise noted. Assignments must be submitted on time, as listed in the Course Schedule. Late submissions will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade.

The final paper will be graded according to the following criteria:

- Clarity and originality of the paper's thesis
- Use of primary sources in support of thesis statement
- The degree to which the work is situated in the existing historiography
- Use of library-centric research methods and diverse sources
- Sophistication of historical analysis
- Organization of the paper's contents and quality of writing
- Correct use of Chicago-style citations and bibliography

Please note that I will *not* award a final grade of Incomplete (I) except under extraordinary (and amply documented) circumstances.

Oral work: Students will do one informal oral presentation (8-10 minutes), besides participating regularly in class workshops and discussions. Oral presentations will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Clarity and organization
- Substantive explanation of topic, thesis, evidence, and primary sources
- Completion of presentation's essential elements (see above) within the allotted time
- Ability to engage and maintain the attention of the audience

Course Schedule:

Mon. 22 Jan: Introduction. Read Kierner, Mulcahy, and Skilton, "Introduction," in *Rethinking American Disasters*; and Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, chap. 3 ("Asking Questions").

Mon. 29 Jan.: Case Studies and Approaches I. Read *Rethinking American Disasters*, 11-117.

Mon. 5 Feb.: Case Studies and Approaches II. Read *Rethinking American Disasters*, 118-229.

Mon. 12 Feb.: Individual meetings to formalize paper topics.

Mon. 19 Feb.: Library Orientation and Info Session with Dr. George Oberle, Fenwick 1014A. Read Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, chap. 8 ("Finding Sources"), and "History Citation Guide" (in Course Content on Blackboard).

Mon. 26 Feb.: No class meeting. Read Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, chap. 4 ("Research Design"). **Research proposals due.**

****Spring Break—No Class****

Mon. 11 Mar.: Sources and Citations. Read Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, chap. 5 ("Sources: An Introduction"), and pp. 355-60 ("Citation"). Come to class prepared to discuss some of your most useful primary sources. We will also choose four essays from *Rethinking American Disasters* to revisit next week when we discuss the structure and organization of a good research paper. **Primary source analysis due.**

Mon. 18 Mar.: Historiography and Structure. Read Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, chap. 13 ("Organization") and selected essays from *Rethinking American Disasters*.

Mon. 25 Mar.: Writing week—No class. Historiographical Essay due.

Mon. 1 Apr.: Writing week—No class.

Mon. 8 Apr.: Peer review. Drafts are due to me by 5:00 p.m. on Friday 5 April (minimum 12 pages, plus properly formatted notes and bibliography). I will immediately forward them to pre-assigned peer reviewers so that they can prepare their comments for in-class peer review. Read Schrag, *Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, 384-88 ("Peer Review"). **Peer review due to instructor (on Blackboard) and reviewee (via email) by 5:00 p.m.**

Mon. 15 Apr.: Writing and revising week—No class. Optional Zoom meetings to discuss course-related concerns or issues.

Mon. 22 Apr.: Oral presentations (if needed).

Mon. 29 Apr.: Oral presentations.

Mon. 6 May: Final Papers Due by 5:00 p.m.