Research Seminar in U.S. History: 1945 to the Present

HIST 711, section 1. George Mason University. Fall 2014
Professor Zachary M. Schrag
Syllabus revised 26 August 2014.

Course Blackboard site: http://mymason.gmu.edu.
General advice: http://historyprofessor.org
Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

E-mail: zschrags@gmu.edu (please include “711” in subject header).
Office: Robinson B 357A. Tel. 703-594-1844.
Office Hours: Mondays, 2-4 pm.

While I greatly enjoy meeting students individually, department meetings and other commitments occasionally force me to cancel scheduled office hours, so please let me know in advance if you are coming to office hours. If you would like to meet some other time, please send me an e-mail with two or three proposed times. I am happy to meet with small groups and am open to suggestions for other communications formats, e.g., text chat or Skype video calls.

Course Description

This research seminar is designed to take advantage of the plenitude of primary sources and unexplored topics in the history of the relatively recent past. While we will discuss some of the main trends in postwar U.S. history, students have a great deal of leeway to choose topics about which they care. Students are encouraged to contact the professor over the summer to discuss possible topics. Students interested in non-United States topics of the period are welcome, provided they can locate appropriate primary sources. This course counts as the Research Seminar in the U.S. concentration.

Goals

The chief goal of this class is simple: to give students experience writing original scholarly history using primary sources. While not the only task of the historian, this is the basic task, practiced since the time of Thucydides. The final product of the course is a paper of the length typically published by a scholarly journal. Thus, by the end of the course, students should understand what it takes to produce a scholarly article, and some may even wish to revise theirs for publication. Other goals are reading secondary scholarship critically, supporting peers in their work, and learning about the history of the United States in the post-WWII period.

Readings


• Chicago Manual of Style (online). http://goo.gl/sNWiiKW

• Various articles assigned for September 8 and 15 and October 6. These are designed to illustrate specific techniques by historians. Except for the O’Hara (on Blackboard), these are available through university-owned databases and can be accessed through a search at library.gmu.edu.
Course Organization

Online Components

You will be asked to bring some paper copies of assignments for class discussions, but all assignments should be posted on Blackboard, http://mymason.gmu.edu. Please format these as .doc, .docx, or .rtf files and post them as attachments to Bb, rather than pasting the text.

You will also receive comments on Blackboard.

Small Groups

In early October, I will assign you to groups of three or four based on your chosen topics for individual papers. You will spend two class sessions discussing the work of your group, and you will act as a panel for the presentations. Two or three small groups will constitute Group A and the remainder Group B for purposes of deadlines (see the schedule for November and December).

Individual meetings

Class will not meet November 7, 14, and 21. You are expected to meet with me at least once during this break, either during the regular seminar time or during another convenient time. Please use the time saved from seminar meetings to work on your papers.

I am happy to meet individually during other weeks of the class as well. Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons are generally the most convenient for me.

Assignments

Assuming good citizenship and prompt completion of preliminary assignments, the grade for the course will be based entirely on your final paper. While the following assignments are required, they will not be graded unless they are seriously late or deficient. In this case, they will count for up to 30 percent of your course grade.

Research journal

I have set up the journal feature in Blackboard, and I encourage you to post brief notes about how you are spending your time and what primary and secondary sources have most influenced your thinking. We can discuss these journals during individual meetings, but I won’t be checking them regularly, so please do not us them to pose questions to me. Those are better sent by e-mail.

Discussion participation

The success of this seminar depends on students’ critical reading of assigned texts and each other’s work. Students are expect to come to class ready to talk about these materials and to seek peer comments on their own work.

Basic classroom rules
• Do not eat in the classroom, before or during class.
• Turn off all cell phones, pagers, and other noisemakers.

Intermediate assignments

Throughout the semester, you are asked to submit short portions of your work on Blackboard. These will not be graded individually, but I will check to make sure they are submitted promptly and thoroughly.
Peer critiques

In the final two weeks of class, you will write a critique of one of your classmate’s drafts and present the paper and your critique to the class.

Final paper (70 percent)

The purpose of this research seminar is to give students experience in writing article-length works of original scholarship, informed by secondary sources but based on primary sources. The essays in the assigned readings offer good models for these papers.

The final paper should be an original work of scholarship, running between 6000 and 9000 words, exclusive of notes. The paper must present:

• A clear research question informed by secondary scholarship
• An interpretive thesis that answers the question
• Analysis of primary sources that supports the thesis

The paper must be organized into well-defined thematic or chronological sections. It should conform to the notes-and-bibliography system of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Evaluation for final paper

A: Capable of being developed into a published article.

A-. An original research question, an explanation of how that question engages with previous scholarship, an interpretive thesis, and solid research to support the thesis. Clear organization and writing. Citation conforms to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

B+. Excellent research without a clear thesis, or a clear argument insufficiently supported by research, or good research and argument insufficiently connected to previous scholarship. May have some defects of style or citation.

B. Significant research effort and accuracy, but no interpretive argument. Or a clear interpretation based on secondary sources but lacking engagement with and critical reading of primary sources.

B- or below: significant defects; does not meet the standards expected of graduate work.
Schedule

All weekly assignments due on Blackboard at 2pm Monday.

1. August 25. Introduction

   September 1 NO CLASS (Labor Day)

2. September 8. Asking questions

   • Read
     – *Craft of Research*, chapters 1-4 (pp. 3-67)

   • Write: an analysis of each article in the following format. Combine these into a single document and post to Bb.

     For each article,
     – Identify the actors in the story. Whose story does the historian tell?
     – Identify the sources used. Which sources tell the story of each set of actors?
     – Identify the geographical and chronological scope of the essay. When is the main action? How much prologue and epilogue does the scholar include?
     – Write out the research question in the formula provided by *The Craft of Research*, section 3.4 (p. 48).
     – Write out the thesis in the form provided at http://historyprofessor.org/argument/a-thesis-statement-template/
     – Explain which dialectic is used from http://historyprofessor.org/argument/dialectical-thesis-statements/
     – Write a one-paragraph analysis of the essay using one of the tools from http://historyprofessor.org/reading/reverse-engineering-for-historians/

3. September 15. Stating claims

   • Read
     – *Craft of Research*, part III and prologue to Part IV (103-176)

• Reverse-outline each article. Combine these into a single document and post to Bb. Follow the model at “How to Write an Outline.” Be sure to include the thesis statement and write a point outline rather than a topic outline.

• Read Craft of Research, chapters 5-6 (pp. 68-101)

5. September 29. Proposing research
• Read: “How to Write a Prospectus,” http://historyprofessor.org
• Post a research proposal. This will include:
  - One-paragraph description of the event you will study.
  - The chronological scope of your story, and a discussion of whether you will present it as a narrative or a thematic description.
  - Whose story would you like to tell?
  - A research question in the formula provided by The Craft of Research, section 3.4 (p. 48).
  - At least five secondary sources about your topic.
  - A set of primary sources. For example, an official report with eyewitness testimony could be a set, or an archival collection, or coverage in one or more periodicals. Explain how the primary sources will present the views of the people you are studying.

6. October 6. Tracing debates
• Read
• Write: two-paragraph comparison of two secondary sources on your topic. See http://historyprofessor.org/reading/reverse-engineering-for-historians/. Post to Bb.

October 13. NO CLASS (Columbus Day)

7. October 14 (Tuesday).
• Historiographical essay due. Expand your two-paragraph comparison from October 6 into a 500-1000 word discussion of the major questions debated by scholars and the contribution your study can make. See “Assessing the Impact of the Inner Belt,” 1-4, as a model. Post to Bb.
• Oral presentations. Please prepare to speak for 5-7 minutes about your topic. Plan to address the existing scholarship, your research question, your main characters, and the primary sources you will use.

8. October 20. Primary source workshop
Select three primary sources from your research that puzzle you. Format them in 1-2 page handouts, post these to Blackboard, and bring four copies of each handout to class. We will discuss these in small groups.

9. **October 27. Thesis and outline**

Prepare a working outline of your paper. Post the outline and bring four hard copies to class. We will discuss these in small groups.

The outline should feature:

- Thesis in template form (<http://historyprofessor.org/argument/a-thesis-statement-template/>)
- 3-5 main sections, with thesis for each
- Topic sentences for 40 – 60 paragraphs (about 12 – 15 paragraphs per section, plus 3-5 paragraphs each for intro and conclusion)

(See <http://historyprofessor.org/organization/how-to-write-an-outline/> for a model.)

10. **November 3. NO CLASS. Individual meetings. Group A has priority.**

- Prior to your meeting, post a section of your paper, at least 12 paragraphs. Provide a revised outline, if necessary.

11. **November 10. NO CLASS. Individual meetings**

- Prior to your meeting, post a section of your paper, at least 12 paragraphs. Provide a revised outline, if necessary. If you have already posted a second section for the previous week, you need not post a third.

12. **November 17. NO CLASS. Individual meetings with group B. Group A papers due.**

- Group A students should post a complete first draft of their papers on Blackboard and e-mail copies to members of their small group.

13. **November 24. Discuss Group A papers. Group B papers due**

- Group A critiques due. Group A students should write and post critiques of the drafts assigned to them.
- Group B students should post a complete first draft of their papers on Blackboard and e-mail copies to members of their small group.

14. **December 1. Discuss Group B papers**

- Group B critiques due. Group B students should write and post critiques of the drafts assigned to them.

**Friday, December 12, 2pm.**

- Final papers due on Bb. Include a revision memo explaining the major changes since your previous draft. Bullet points are sufficient.