Successful completion of a graduate research seminar is one of the requirements for the M.A. degree. The objective of this seminar is for each student to write a major paper (25-30 pages, 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 and geographical location, as long as they have access to the primary sources they need to complete their work over the course of the semester.

Experts struggle to provide a single concise definition for the term “disaster.” All agree that disasters involve unintended collective or community suffering, and not merely individual losses. Some favor quantitative measures—typically the number of fatalities or the 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, moreover, 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.”

General course requirements: Students are expected to adhere to the Course Schedule, below. As the schedule indicates, sometimes the 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—most weeks, and students are responsible for completing these assignments even if they are absent from class. Also, note that because this class meets infrequently and because it uses a participatory seminar/workshop format, missing class will likely lower your final grade.

Because the main work for this course is researching and writing a major research paper, there is little assigned group reading and no books to purchase. Assigned journal articles are accessible in electronic format via the library catalog in JSTOR or other electronic databases; book chapters have been placed on eReserve, as noted in the Course Schedule, below, and are accessible via the course Blackboard site, which we will use only for posting such readings and other course resources (such as this syllabus) and not for other purposes.

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

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.
**Written work:** Each student will write one short paper at the beginning of the semester and one much longer final paper. In between, graded written work (research proposal, archival source description, historiography, and draft) will all contribute to the completion of the final paper as the end product of a multi-stage process. The final research 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 diverse sources and sophistication of historical analysis
- Organization of the paper’s contents and quality of writing
- Correct use of Chicago-style citations and bibliography

Students must submit work electronically as an email attachment (Word) unless otherwise noted. Late submissions will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade. 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 formal oral presentation (10-12 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 grades will be determined as follows:**

- Short paper (due 12 September) 10%
- Participation (including oral presentation) 10%
- Research proposal (due 3 October) 15%
- Omeka archival donation (image and text; due 17 October) 10%
- Historiography (due 31 October) 15%
- Draft of final paper—minimum 15 pages, excluding notes and bibliography (due 11 November) 20%
- Final paper (due 7 December) 20%

**Course Schedule:**


**Short paper due:** Drawing on at least four of the readings assigned during the first three weeks of this course, choose a shared theme or topic (e.g., disaster as process, public policy, historical memory and commemoration) and write an explicitly historiographical essay about it. (3-5 pages) For hints on how to write historiographically, see the directions for the assignment due on 31 October, below.

**Wed. 19 Sept.:** Individual meetings to formalize student topics. Please submit your preliminary topic and your research question in writing to me via email before we meet.

**Some good advice for picking a topic:** At least initially, your research question, and hence your topic, should be very narrow. (Hint: If someone has written an entire book on a subject, that subject is far too broad for good a 25-page paper.) Try Googling “deadliest tornadoes” or “American factory explosions.” Wikipedia has some excellent disaster-related lists and articles.

In addition, the course readings may give you some ideas (and possibly some sources) to start your project. For more secondary sources, find articles in *America: History and Life* (U.S. and Canada) and *Historical Abstracts* (everywhere else). For primary sources, try some of the databases that are highlighted in the library’s subject guides for History at [http://infoguides.gmu.edu](http://infoguides.gmu.edu). Playing with these resources will also be good preparation for the next class session at the library.

**Wed. 26 Sept.:** Library Orientation and Info Session with Dr. George Oberle, Fenwick 1014B

**Wed. 3 Oct.:** No class meeting. **Research proposals due.** Proposals should be roughly 3-4 pages (excluding bibliography) and must include the following:

- An overview of your topic and why you chose it, including the historical question you seek to answer in your paper. Please state your research question explicitly, as a question.
- Your tentative thesis (which is the provisional answer to your question).
- An overview of where you have already looked for sources (Fenwick catalog, other library catalogs, *America: History and Life* or *Historical Abstracts*, specific primary
source databases, Library of Congress or other research library) and what, generally speaking, you have found, especially in terms of primary sources.

- A research plan or schedule with dates. In what order will you examine these sources—and why? When do you plan to complete your research and begin to write? What will be your schedule for writing a complete draft of your paper?

- A preliminary bibliography of sources that you know are available on your topic and that you have already examined. The bibliography should consist of two sections: primary sources and secondary sources. Each source must have a full and correct bibliographical citation formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style (which is what historians use). For examples, go to http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

**Wed. 10 Oct.: In-class discussion of pre-circulated research proposals.** I will likely break you up into topically based smaller groups for at least part of the class period.

**Wed. 17 Oct.: Primary sources and Omeka exhibits.** Read about Omeka (https://omeka.org/about/) and the Dublin Core (https://omeka.org/codex/Working_with_Dublin_Core) to prepare your primary source object/document submission to the Disaster History Archive (see http://disasterhistoryarchive.cynthiakierner.org).

Special guest: Megan Brett, Ph.D. candidate and Digital History Associate, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

**Bring a primary source (and its metadata) to class.** Omeka archival object/document and caption due, for which you will need to prepare and submit (via email by noon on Sunday) two files, as follows:

- Primary source object/image or text with transcription (jpeg, or tiff)
- Information to complete the following Dublin Core metadata categories:
  
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor (your name as you would like it to appear in the archive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original format</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Come to class prepared to discuss your primary source and its significance for your project. You will post your contribution on the site in class.

**Wed. 24 Oct.: No class meeting. Research week.**

**Wed. 31 Oct.: In-class discussion/workshop on the structure of a research paper.** **Historiographical essay on your topic due.** (4-6 pages)

A historiographical essay examines the different ways in which various scholars have approached or interpreted a specific question or topic. For this assignment, you will examine a sample of the secondary literature pertaining to the research question (and topic) you have chosen for your final project. Choose your sources wisely. The quality and relevance of your
sources will determine the extent to which you will be able to discern the issues that define your topic and its larger field—which, in turn, will play a major role in determining whether what you write now will be useful for your final paper.

Unlike a research paper, a historiographical essay focuses less on facts, details, or narratives about the past than on scholars’ interpretations or arguments. One way to focus your reading (and note-taking) on the latter is to force yourself to complete the following sentence for each of your sources:

In [insert book/article name], [insert author's name] argues that ____________.

A version of this sentence, which concisely states an author's thesis, is an ideal topic sentence for a paragraph in which you go on to discuss a particular book or article.

Please be sure that your essay has an introduction and a conclusion, as well as thorough analysis of your sources. In your introduction, you must state your thesis, which is an argument about the scholarly literature (and not about the specific topic on which your scholars have written).

Finally, use either footnotes or endnotes formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style. For examples, go to http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Special guest: Andrew Kierig, Digital Publishing Lead for Mason Publishing Group.

**Wed. 7 Nov.: No class meeting. Writing week.**

**Wed. 14 Nov.: Drafts due to me via email by noon on Sunday 11 November (minimum 15 pages, plus properly formatted notes and bibliography),** I will immediately forward them to students to prepare for them for in-class peer review. The idea is that students will have at least two sets of comments—including one from me—to help them revise the paper.

**Wed. 21 Nov.: Thanksgiving Break—no class.**

**Wed. 28 Nov.: Oral presentations.**

**Wed. 5 Dec.: Oral presentations.**

**Fri. 7 Dec.: Final Papers Due by midnight via email.**