Course Description and Objectives:

Senior seminar is the capstone course for the History major. In this seminar, each student will conduct research on a specific historical topic that is in some way related to the course's overall subject, "Disasters in History." Students are free to choose an event that happened in any geographical location. The chronological period is also open, though your sources likely will be more accessible if you select a disaster—or some aspect of a disaster—that occurred after roughly 1750.

Whatever topic you choose must fit current scholarly definitions of "disaster," which are admittedly fuzzy. Some experts favor quantitative measures—the number of fatalities or the dollar amount 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. Nearly all scholars, however, see "disasters" as bad things that happen which result in substantial and unintended losses of lives and property (thereby excluding things like battlefield losses and murders) and include both so-called natural and human-made disasters—a distinction that most scholars reject as both misleading and facile.

This course meets the Synthesis requirement of the university's General Education program, which aims to encourage students to draw on knowledge and skills they have attained through their General Education courses and to demonstrate advanced skills in their written work and oral presentations. In other words, this seminar offers you the opportunity to pull together the results of your educational experience by demonstrating mastery of research, analytical, and communication skills by applying those skills to a particular historical project. This course also counts toward the writing-intensive requirement for the History major.

Finally, HIST-499 is an RS (Research & Scholarship Intensive) course, which means that students will do authentic scholarly work and have the opportunity to disseminate the results of their research beyond the classroom. In this section of HIST-499, students will contribute to an online Disaster History Archive (see below); they are also encouraged to present the poster based on their projects at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium in May.

Course Requirements: Students are expected to adhere to the course schedule. 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. Please note that
because this class meets infrequently and because it uses a participatory seminar/workshop format, missing class more than once will lower your grade significantly.

**Written work:** Each student will write a major research paper (20-25 pages, double-spaced, plus endnotes and bibliography), which will be the culmination of a multi-stage process that includes several graded assignments, all of which are detailed in the course schedule below. Research papers will be graded according to the following criteria:

- Clarity and originality of the paper's research question and thesis
- Use of primary sources in support of a thesis statement
- The degree to which the work is situated appropriately in the existing literature of secondary sources (i.e., historiography)
- Use of diverse sources
- Sophistication of historical analysis
- Organization and quality of writing
- Proper use and formatting of endnotes and bibliography

**Oral work:** Students will do one formal oral report, besides participating regularly in class workshops and discussions. Because discussion and in-class work are integral to this course, attendance will be taken.

During the last class meeting, students will do oral presentations (8-10 minutes) on their research projects, using the poster format that is sometimes featured at scholarly conferences (including Mason's own CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium). Templates for these posters are available on Blackboard.

**Blackboard:** Directions for graded writing assignments are posted in the "Assignments" section of the Blackboard course site. Students should access these assignments and also submit their work electronically via Blackboard unless otherwise noted. Late submissions will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade (which means that anything submitted four days late or more, without an acceptable and documented excuse, will receive at best a failing grade). Other course materials are available in the "Course Content" section of Blackboard.

**Grading:** Course grades will be determined as follows:

- Secondary source analysis (due Wed. 11 Sept.) 10%
- Research proposal (due Wed. 9 Oct.) 15%
- Primary source Omeka contribution (due Wed. 16 Oct.) 10%
- Historiography (due Wed. 30 Oct.) 10%
- Draft of final paper (due Sun. 10 Nov.) 15%
- Oral poster presentation (due Wed. 4 Dec.) 10%
- Final research paper (due Mon. 9 Dec.) 15%
- Participation 15%
Finally, please note that all students are subject to the George Mason University Honor Code (see [http://jiju.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/honor.htm](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.

**Required Texts:** There is one required text for this course: Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 6th edition. This book is available for purchase at Amazon and other online sellers, at the university bookstore, and at Fenwick Library (books and e-book). If you use a different edition of *Going to the Sources*, the chapter numbers may differ, so please be sure that the chapter you read is on the assigned topic! If you're uncertain, just ask.

Other required reading, which is minimal, is available electronically from databases (e.g., JSTOR, Project Muse) in Fenwick Library.

**Course Schedule:**

**Wed. 27 Aug.: Introduction.** Read Brundage, chapter 2: "The Nature and Variety of Historical Sources"

**Wed. 4 Sept.: Context and Analysis of Secondary Sources.** Read the following articles about disasters that occurred before 1870:


- What historical question is the author posing (and attempting to answer)?
- What types of primary sources does s/he use to find evidence to answer this question? (Letters? Diaries? Court records? Legal codes? Newspapers? Maps?)
- What is the author’s thesis (i.e., the concise answer to the research question)?
- Which arguments of other scholars does the author address, and why? (Be sure to read the footnotes, as well as the text, to complete this part of the assignment.)
- How does the author answer the "So what" question? What big issue does s/he address? How does s/he make the case for the importance of the article?

Note that this week's work--and next week's, too--should help you to pose historical questions that may lead to your own research topic. These exercises will also force you to
think analytically about secondary sources, an essential skill for writing the required historiographical essay.

**Wed.: 11 Sept.: Context and Analysis of Secondary Sources.** Read the following case studies of disasters that occurred after 1870:


- What historical question is the author posing (and attempting to answer)?
- What types of primary sources does s/he use to find evidence to answer this question? (Letters? Diaries? Court records? Legal codes? Newspapers? Maps?)
- What is the author's thesis (i.e., the concise answer to the research question)?
- Which arguments of other scholars does the author address, and why? (Be sure to read the footnotes, as well as the text, to complete this part of the assignment.)
- How does the author answer the "So what" question? What big issue does s/he address? How does s/he make the case for the importance of the article?

Submit a secondary source analysis of one of the assigned articles for last week and one from this week (i.e., two articles total), following the instructions in the Assignments section of Blackboard.

**Wed. 18 Sept.: Individual meetings to formalize student topics.** Submit your preliminary topic and the research question you are asking (in the form of an actual question, please) in writing to me via email at least one hour before we meet.

**Some good advice for picking a topic:** At least initially, your topic should be as narrow as possible. (Hint: If someone has written an entire book on a subject, that subject is far too broad for a 25-page paper.) For instance, you cannot write a paper on the great Chicago Fire of 1871, but you could write one on how newspapers reported the fire in urban and rural areas throughout the Midwest. (Were rural people less sympathetic to urban fire victims, many of whom were immigrants?) Similarly, the role of women in disaster relief work is far too big a topic, but the experiences of one woman (or of women relief workers in the aftermath of one disaster, such as the Johnstown Flood) would be viable.
Wed.: 25 Sept.: Library Orientation and Info Session with Dr. George Oberle in Fenwick 1014A. Browse Brundage, chapter 3: "Finding Your Sources"

Wed. 2 Oct.: Proposals, Notes, and Bibliographies. Read Brundage, chapter 8: "Engaging with Primary Sources," and appendixes C and D; read directions for the research proposal in the "Assignments" section of Blackboard.

Wed. 9 Oct.: Research proposals due. Submit electronically via Blackboard, but also bring a paper copy to class to share.

Wed. 16 Oct.: Primary sources (Omeka primary source contribution). 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. For some examples of previous student contributions, go to http://disasterhistoryarchive.cynthiakierner.org. Guest: Megan R. Brett, Digital History Associate, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

Follow the directions for this assignment in the Assignments section of Blackboard and submit your source, caption, and other required Dublin Core data via Blackboard by 10:00 a.m. We will load your materials on the Omeka site in class.

Also, to prepare for your next written assignment, read Brundage, chapter 7: "Exploring Changing Interpretations."

Wed. 23 Oct.: No class meeting. Research week. Request an appointment if you have questions and/or need help.

Wed. 30 Oct.: Historiographical essay on your topic due. In-class discussion/workshop on historiography. For specific directions on how to prepare your essay, see the Assignments section of Blackboard. (Submit electronically via Blackboard, but also bring a paper copy to class to share.)

Wed. 6 Nov.: No class meeting. Writing week. Request an appointment if you have questions and/or need help.

Wed. 13 Nov.: Peer review of drafts of final essays. Drafts (minimum 12 double-spaced pages and a detailed outline of the remainder of the essay, plus correctly formatted endnotes and bibliography) must be submitted to me via Blackboard by noon on Sunday 10 November. I will immediately forward them to the appropriate peer reviewers to prepare for them for in-class peer review. The idea is that each student will have at least two sets of comments—including one from me—to help revise the paper.
Reviewers should read their and comment on their classmate’s paper in writing, before coming to class, using the Paper Assessment Rubric found in the Course Content section of Blackboard.

**Wed. 20 Nov.: Individual meetings to discuss revisions.**

*Thanksgiving Break ~~~ No class.*

**Wed. 4 Dec.: Oral presentations/Posters.**
Formatted poster templates are available in the Course Content section of Blackboard. Before completing your poster, consult OSCAR's "Poster Information" at [https://oscar.gmu.edu/students/poster-info/](https://oscar.gmu.edu/students/poster-info/). Please submit completed posters on Blackboard before coming to class.

**Final papers due (on Blackboard) on Monday 9 December by 5:00 p.m.**