The Historian’s Craft

History (HI) 200

Spring, 2016

Class Meetings:
Wednesdays 3-6pm
Room: CAS 318

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History Department, Boston University
Office: HIS 507 (226 Bay State Road)
Office Hours: Monday 10-12, Friday 10-11, and by appointment

Overview

This course is designed to introduce undergraduate history majors to some of the major approaches and methods of professional historians. For history majors it is a requirement. Students will learn basic and advanced skills that will help them become better history majors and more effective historians at BU and beyond.

Although there is some topical continuity in this course, our purpose will be to examine the craft of historical research and writing more broadly. Together we will examine closely several exemplary works of history and explore how historians ask historical questions, gather and use evidence, make arguments, and tell stories.

Over the course of the quarter, students will also work independently and collaboratively with the instructor and their peers to design, research, and write original essays on topics of their choosing.

This course is a seminar, which means that classes will be conversations, not lectures. Thus, it is extremely important that students come prepared to speak about the readings. To receive a passing grade, students are expected to attend class and to contribute actively to discussions. Students will also be required to meet with the instructor at least once during the semester, during office hours or by appointment.

This is a group effort. Some days we will devote some class time for students to conference with one another on their projects, and you are expected to help one another
in shaping research projects by reading each other’s work and offering constructive comments, criticisms, and suggestions.

**Evaluation**

Weekly class participation and attendance 25%
Class discussion lead and response paper 15%
Prospectus 10%
Primary Source Reflection 15%
Annotated Bibliography 10%
Final Presentation and Paper 25%

**Attendance and Participation**

Attendance is mandatory. For every unexcused absence, students will be marked down 5 points in their participation grade (out of 100 points). You are allowed one unexcused absence without penalty. Up to one unexcused absence may be made up by submitting a two-page reflection essay on the week’s readings.

You are expected to contribute thoughtfully every class.

**How to Participate Each Week**

Participation is a large part of your final grade and an important component of any seminar. Classes will consist of open conversations in which students will be required to participate. Do the reading and take notes. Prior to class, spend 30 minutes to an hour writing out your thoughts to some of the following questions, which we will draw upon for class discussion:

1. What is one surprising or interesting thing you learned from this reading? What caught your attention?
2. How does this work compare and contrast with other material we’ve covered so far?
3. What do you see as the writer’s purpose?
4. What is the writer’s main argument? (Boil it down to 1-3 sentences.)
5. Using the main text and the footnotes, what is the source base of this work?
6. What is the time frame and geographic frame of this essay or book? Why do you think the author chose to limit themselves in those ways?
7. What do you see as the main arguments and takeaways from this reading?
8. What additional questions does it raise for you?
9. What is one thing you think the author did well? Why were they successful?
10. What is one thing the author did not do well?
11. What, if anything, do you see as least convincing?
12. What did this reading make you wish you could learn more about?
If you are shy or would like to discuss strategies for participation, please see me during office hours.

Discussion Lead and Reflection
Each week 1-2 students will be assigned to lead discussion and write a reflection essay (~3 pages) on the readings for that week. In addition to submitting their reflection on the essay, students will prepare a set of discussion questions for the class (emailed to the professor at least 2 hours before class). Dates will be assigned early in the semester. When it is your day to lead discussion, please come prepared with several discussion questions and ideas about what important questions these readings raise.

Prospectus
Students will assemble a prospectus of about 2-3 pages, which will include a brief description of your topic, what you are thinking in terms of your argument, and your research agenda (including primary and secondary sources).

Bibliography and Primary Source Assignment
On this day, students will bring in two things a copy of one “primary source” they intend to use for their final paper, along with a write-up about the source (details on the written portion TBA).

We will spend class time presenting and discussing these materials.

Presentation
At the end of the semester, students will make a 10 minute presentation about what they found in their research papers. Students are not required to have a PowerPoint presentation (or slideshow), though it is highly encouraged.

Final Paper
Students will write a 10-12 page paper on a topic of their choosing, using both primary and secondary sources. We will talk about this assignment in class.

Students with Disabilities and Special Needs
Students with special needs will receive appropriate accommodations. Please speak with me at the beginning of the semester. Students may also wish to contact the Office of Disability Services at (617) 353-3658. All discussions will be confidential.
Materials

The following books are required (and, where possible, on reserve at Mugar Library):

Paul Johnson, *Sam Patch: The Famous Jumper* (978-0809083886)
Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (978-0809015832)
Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (978-0812979961)

You may also wish to purchase Jules Benjamin’s *A Student’s Guide to History* (there are several editions), which is useful as a basic text for undergraduate history majors. I would recommend having resources at your fingertips to guide you on how to cite using Chicago style. Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* is a small but excellent book that will help you write more clearly. I would suggest purchasing a copy and keeping it near your desk for reference.

SCHEDULE

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) will be available on Blackboard.

January 20
Overview and Introductions
How to Read Like a Historian

January 27
What is History? Why is it Important?

William Cronon, “Why the Past Matters,” *
Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History*, pp. 1-16 *
Sam Wineburg, “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts” *
MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-11)

In Class: The Five C’s of Historical Thinking

February 3
William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (selections)*
Brian Donahue, Colonial agriculture and land use in Massachusetts*

In Class: What is a Primary Source? How do we go about reading one?

February 10
The American Revolution: The War that Never Ends
Timothy Breen and Gary Nash, excerpts *
Intro, The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*
David Hackett Fischer, “Historiography: Myths After the Midnight Ride”*
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Paul Revere’s Ride”*
Gordon Wood, “No Thanks for the Memories”*

In Class:
What is a Secondary Source? How do we think about interpretations and arguments?
Book Reviews: How to find them and how they’re useful.

February 17
Stories Small and Large
Paul Johnson, Sam Patch (all)

In Class:
Narrative and Scale
Locating Secondary Sources
**Final Paper Check-In: What is your topic? Where do things stand?**

February 24
Larger Scales: Systems and Networks
Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, Part I

At 3:50 our class will walk together to the Mugar Library for a Bibliography workshop.

March 2
Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, Part II
Coclanis, “Urbs in Horto,” Reviews in American History*

**First-Draft bibliography due in class**

In Class:
Finding Primary Sources
Citing and Plagiarism

March 9

NO CLASS – SPRING RECESS

March 16
MacMillan, Dangerous Games, chapters 2-6
Blackboard essay TBA
In Class:
Narratives and Interpretations

March 23
Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (all)

**Primary Source Assignment Due – Students will present and discuss their findings.**

March 30
**The Future of the Past in a Digital Age**
Students will pick a single digital project from one of several websites (stay tuned for more information!)

Pay close attention to the methods being used here. What are the sources and how are they being used? Which projects do you see as effective?

April 6
**Individual Meetings with Professor Robichaud**
Students will sign up for a 10-15 minute block of time to meet one-on-one about their final projects.

**Prospectus Due:** Please bring it with you to your meeting.

Continue working on your final projects!

April 13

MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*, chapter 7-8 and conclusion
Check blackboard for additional articles (TC, Freedom Trail, etc.)

**Annotated Bibliography Due**

April 20
**NO CLASS – MONDAY SCHEDULE**

April 27
Presentations and Conclusions

**Papers Due after April 27, exact date TBA**