

HI 190--FALL 2014  
Prof. Bruce J. Schulman

THE MHS FINAL PROJECT:  
APPROACHES TO THE PAPER AND THE TRANSCRIPTION

I. MAJOR PAPER (DUE DECEMBER 4).

How to tackle your major paper will depend in large part on your particular assignment. An excellent essay about a seventeenth-century book will differ from one about a painting or a weapon. Even within those categories, several approaches are available. Should the analysis of a portrait focus on the artist, the subject, the socioeconomic conditions that produced it, or the audience that viewed it? Is the most significant feature of a printed pamphlet the details of King Philip's War it describes, the mindset of the author it reveals, the circumstances of its publication, or the impact it had on readers? You will have to decide. The most important part of this assignment is to figure out what the important questions are.

In the early stages, as you read, view, or hold your object, ask yourself this: how can I explain this object to someone who knows absolutely nothing about it? And: how can I do it in a way that does justice to the thing itself? It may help to have a person you know in mind: your best friend, your grandfather, your favorite teacher from high school.

Whatever approach you take, you will need to complete three tasks, each one of which must be part of the final paper. First, you will need to identify and describe the object--to answer basic questions about its origins and major characteristics. Basically, you should think of this task as offering a sophisticated answer to the deceptively simple question "what is it?"

Second, you must contextualize the object--situate it in its time and place. Sitting alone in a glass case, the object has been ripped from its history. You need to restore it to its context, to explain the how it came out of and how it fits into the larger patterns of its time and place (in this case, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Massachusetts). Think of this as a sensitive, nuanced response to the question "where did it come from?" A nuanced response to that question will not merely state that it came from the collections of the MHS or from a house in Plymouth, but will explain how it fit into a larger context (for example, Atlantic trade networks, Puritan ideas about Godliness, Native American land management practices, etc.).

Third, you analyze the object; you will build an argument for its historical significance. Having identified and contextualized your object, you will explain its importance through the persuasive assembly of historical evidence. In this task, you are answering your friend's (or teacher's or grandfather's) hardest question: why should I care?

Every paper must accomplish those three tasks, but no paper can be comprehensive.

There are many important questions you could raise and answer about every one of these objects. For each one you could become curious about, research, and write about any number of questions. How then do you identify interesting and important research questions? What collections/resources should you seek out for your research? How much research will you need to do? None of those questions have a simple answer; as the pioneering Monday Night Football announcer Dandy Don Meredith liked to say: “there’s nothing to it but to do it.” You begin with some preliminary detective work (see tips below), and you can then develop your own ideas, ask Professor Schulman or the Teaching Fellows for help, discuss it with classmates and friends. Once you have some ideas about what you need to know, make sure to consult the professionals at MHS. They know the collections, can steer you to the good stuff, and offer solid practical advice. You’re about to start an adventure. Enjoy it.

**Here are some basic starting points:**

**\* *Describe the object:***

- If it’s a book, letters, or diary, what is its content? (Take detailed notes as you read, including verbatim quotes on the important and/or quotable parts.)
- If it’s a gun, sword, or bowl, what are its physical characteristics? What is it made of? How was it made?
- If it’s a painting, what are its features?

**\* *Who was its creator? When was it created? Where was it created?***

- What can you find out about the author, manufacturer, or style (if anonymous)?
- When did the author write the work? What was the author’s life like? What else did he or she write?
- Where was the object made? In England or the colonies? In what town?

**\* *Why was it created?***

- What did the author intend by writing? Was it to convince or persuade? To document? To clarify his or her own thoughts?
- For whom was the book written, or weapon made, or portrait painted?
- Who actually read, or used, or looked at this object?

**Here are some questions you may have to answer as you write your paper:**

**\* *What is the story?***

- Do you use the book, letters, or diary as a window onto the author’s life? (the Puritan preacher in New England; the traveler naming plants and animals; the New England governor . . . )
- Or do you use it as a window onto its subject? (“praying Indians”; Native cures for sickness; a particular interpretation of the course of the war . . . )
- Do you write about the object in a general way? (colonial flintlocks, their function, and use; Native bowls and the meals they contained; the production of swords in England and America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century .

..)

- Or do you write the story of this particular object (who shot the gun? why did they take the bowl, and how did it come to the MHS? who carried the sword?)

**Chances are, you will do a little of each. But your assigned object—its content, function, and use— will lead you to see that certain emphases are more essential than others. As a historian, you must decide what the *story* is, i.e., what the *essential emphases* are. This is a judgment call. Other historians will make other calls. Your task is to tell the story of your object—in your paper’s organization, evidence, and presentation—in a way that *demonstrates* these emphases.**

**\* *What do I leave out?***

- You shouldn’t include everything you know about your object in the paper. You will learn things in your research that are not part of the story. This is, once again, a judgment call, and other historians will make other decisions. If you tell your story well, you will convince your readers that you have used only the relevant information.

**\* *What will inform, amuse, fascinate, or surprise your friend or grandfather?***

- Include details that will make people want to keep reading. These include things that are informative, funny, repulsive, tragic, factual, fanciful, spooky, cruel, poignant, accurate, incredible, reprehensible, admirable, vicious, and noble —**in short, make your story *informative and human*.**

II. TRANSCRIPTION (DUE NOVEMBER 11). In addition to the object or artifact, each group will receive a manuscript for transcription (to be made and available on the Blackboard course site). Your task is to provide three items: a word-for-word transcription with original spellings, capitalizations, and punctuation; a rendering of the transcription using modern spelling, capitalization, and punctuation; and a one-paragraph (200 words or fewer) museum label setting the document in its wider historical context.