

Cedar Crest College
Department of History, Law, and Politics
Fall 2008

History 350. Research Seminar

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While this course constitutes the capstone experience in the History major, it is very much about the fundamentals of the discipline. Essentially we are starting at the same place as did the Greek fathers of history, Herodotus and Thucydides (although we have the advantage of superior, or at least more convenient, technologies)—searching for evidence, verifying the accounts we see or hear, linking the arguments we present in a coherent narrative structure, and drawing conclusions about why what we have discovered is important. Herodotus wandered widely around the known world of his time (the 5th century BC) and insured that history would broadly embrace geography, culture, religion, and mythology; in other words a rich canvas of human thought, belief, and experience. He also inscribed his history—see his account of the Greek-Persian wars—with passion and moral purpose, qualities all too lacking in much of the history that is written today. Thucydides, who lived a quarter-century later than Herodotus, is credited with writing the first history based on authentic sources, that is, accounts provided by those who had witnessed what they were describing. Rather than the deeds of the gods, the customary subject of Greek art, poetry, and drama, Thucydides wrote about the actions of human beings, and about those of the greatest consequence, war and peace, victory and defeat, ambition and catastrophe. History as we understand it can be said to have begun with Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian Wars, the long struggle that set Athens against Sparta and led, a half century later, to the eclipse of Greek independence. No greater drama could have been imagined by the first tragic playwrights, who were Thucydides' contemporaries.



<<http://kinchi.net/peloponnesian-war.gif>>

Course Objectives

By completing this course, students will learn how to conduct historical research, analyze historical sources, and write a historical narrative, all at an advanced, if not pre-professional level. Students will also learn to exploit—or will increase their knowledge of how to exploit—the resources on which historical research is based, from traditional written documents and print narratives to the ever-expanding universe of information available in digital formats. Students will master the skills of conceptualizing a substantive research project, identifying and accessing relevant source material, assaying this material for authenticity and reliability, and interpreting the evidence they have amassed to extract its historical content and meaning. In addition, students will learn how to develop an authorial voice and will refine the skills they also possess in writing and in the presentation of what used to be called “publication-ready” text.

Other course objectives, secondary to the primary outcomes just described, include learning more about the discipline of history, how it has been conceived over a great expanse of historical time and how it has been practiced by masters of the craft. Undergraduate courses were once offered with titles like “historiography” and “philosophy of history.” Such courses are harder to find today, even in the first-tier of graduate history departments; they are deemed too intimidating. But some aspects of both—and they are not synonymous—will find their way into students’ experience in this course. In particular, students will explore several of the new approaches and methodologies that have significantly transformed the “practice of history” in the last two or three decades. While not as media-visible and controversial as those that have characterized literary studies, these departures from the traditional ways in which history was researched and written have had an equal consequence in bringing the discipline into the twenty-first century, and students completing majors in history need to be aware of them.

Texts

Kate L. Turabian et al., A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 7th ed., University of Chicago Press, 2007, ISBN 0226823377

Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods, Cornell University Press, 2001, 0801485602

Other readings may be distributed in class.

Assessment

One-quarter (25 percent) of your grade for the course will be determined by attendance, completion of the readings, and contribution to class discussions. Three-quarters (75 percent) of your grade will be determined by the paper you complete and submit, in its final, polished (see above) form. The paper will be graded for originality and significance of the topic, character and extent of the research, effectiveness and persuasiveness of the argument, and excellence of the final presentation. The latter criterion refers, not least, to the absence of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation; of inaccuracies or omissions in regard to sources; of careless or egregious lapses in style and syntax that detract from the effectiveness of your argument; and of any other evidence of a sloppy, lazy, or otherwise disinterested performance on your part. The particulars of all of this, and anything else that I or you think relevant to insuring that we get the best possible outcomes in this course, will be discussed in class.

Attendance, Class Format, and Other Practicalities

As the preceding suggests, it’s better to attend class than not. Contributions to discussion, for example, are made in person, not telepathically or by other long-distance transmissions. If missing a class can not be avoided, the courtesy of an explanation either before or quickly thereafter is expected. An extended series of absences, especially if no legitimate explanation is forthcoming, will have disastrous effects on your

grade for the course, the above-cited percentages notwithstanding. Students are required to complete all course requirements to receive a passing grade, not just the high-percentage ones. Faithful attendance and participation in discussion are among those requirements.

The class will not meet every week, particularly in the second half of the semester when, presumably, you will be deeply engaged in individual reading, research, and writing. In these instances, and indeed through the entire semester, e-mail is the recommended means of communication. I will endeavor to respond to all student e-mails within twenty-four hours, and almost always much more quickly than that. All information that you need to have prior to or in lieu of class meetings will also be distributed by e-mail. So, please, stay tuned to the History 350 frequency.

Schedule for the Semester

Week I (25.08) Class organization, distribution of readings

Week II (01.09) No class, Labor Day

Weeks III-IV (08.09, 15.09) Develop research topics, discuss readings, collective brainstorming

Week V (22.09) Final research proposals due (in written form)

Weeks VI-VII (29.09, 03.10) Progress reports, problem solving

Week VIII (13.10) No class, Fall Break

Week IX (20.10) Partial first draft due

Weeks X-XIII (27.10, 03.11, 10.11) Progress reports, problem solving

Week XIV (24.11) Final papers due at class meeting

Topics, Acceptable Approaches, and Research Strategies

A successful research project starts with three considerations: that the topic is well thought out and is manageable in light of the time you have available in this course; that the sources necessary to research this topic can be identified and can be readily accessed (in one or more formats); and that the topic you have chosen is one that enlists your curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm. Do not undervalue the importance of the last. It can be the difference between a mediocre research paper and an excellent one.

The most common type of research project is an inquiry that makes use of primary source material, supplemented by a thorough reading of the relevant secondary literature, usually in monograph or article form. Some of you will choose this approach, particularly if you are working on a topic that relies entirely on English-language sources. Another approach is to write an analytical or interpretive paper on a major event, issue, or controversy that relies mainly, if not wholly, on secondary sources, i.e., the work of other scholars. This may be the approach that some of you choose if, for primary source material, you would need foreign language skills. Finally, you might choose to write a historiographical paper, one that reviews a wide range of scholarly interpretation and opinion characterized by strongly differing points of view or powerful ideological antagonisms. Examples of the latter are the (continuing) debates among traditional, revisionist, and post-revisionist historians on the causes, character, and consequences of the Cold War; or the (continuing) debates between those scholars who believe that the Holocaust was the result of deliberate, ideologically-driven actions by the leaders of the Third Reich (“intentionalists”) and those who argue that circumstance, contingency, and the dynamics of bureaucratic systems explain this catastrophic experience in European and world history (“functionalists”).

You may write your paper using any of these approaches. This is why the first several weeks of the semester will be devoted, in part, to developing your research proposals. A thorough and frank description of where you are or are heading, on your part, will be complemented by an equally frank, critical-minded interrogation on my part. The purpose of this exercise is to identify potential problems, dead ends, and wild goose chases right at the start, and to point you in more promising (and feasible) directions.

The use of text and electronic bibliographies, indices, guides to sources, and other vital research aids will be discussed in class and is covered in part in the assigned readings and in other readings I will distribute in class. Similarly, the use of online resources—e.g., the ever-increasing array of information, interpretation, and commentary that is available through H-Net—will also be discussed in class. If helpful, we can employ some hands-on demonstrations.

For any project that involves encounters with other people, e.g., oral history interviews, IRB approval is almost certainly required. As the review process can take some weeks, especially if additional information or revisions to a proposal are needed, this should be addressed as early in the semester as possible. Again, we can discuss particulars in class.

The Final Paper

Your paper should be 20 to 25 pages in length, in 12-point type, double-spaced, with conventional margins. All footnotes should appear, consecutively numbered, at the end of the text, and ahead of the bibliography. In a paper of this length, “chapters” are not appropriate, nor is a table of contents necessary. Depending on what topic and approach you’ve chosen, sub-headings might be useful, but are not required.

For all questions of composition or formatting, Turabian (the “Chicago manual”) is your immediate reference point. We will discuss alternatives and variations, within Turabian’s recommendations, in class. For all matters of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and the like, you are responsible, hence the crucial importance of (repeated) proofreading. Do not make the mistake of relying exclusively on the MS-Word “Tools” function, although it can be useful as you write or as an initial scan for errors. In the end, however, the old-fashioned way works best.

Your paper must consist entirely of original work. All borrowings, quotations, and citations must be accurately and thoroughly recorded in your footnotes. All sources consulted and cited must appear in the bibliography. In practice this means that a source you’ve looked at, or even read to significant extent, but that is not cited in your text should not appear in the bibliography.

Keep all the notes you’ve made during the course of your research, and any or all drafts you’ve written in preparation for the final paper. For everything that you’ve recorded or downloaded in digital format, be sure you have saved it in two or more locations. “I lost the disk,” is not an acceptable excuse in this course.

The worst offense a historian can commit is plagiarism. This involves not merely copying someone else’s words and presenting them as your own. It also entails borrowing ideas, themes, and methods of argument, along with a wide range of other kinds of appropriations, of the intellectual work of others without giving proper credit. We will discuss this subject in class, extensively and probably repeatedly. Any work that can be shown to be plagiarized is not acceptable in this course and will result, at least, in a failing grade for the semester.

Other Course Policies

Classroom Protocol: Students have the right to a learning environment free of interruptions, distractions, and inconsiderate or uncivil behavior. Accordingly, cell phones and all other electronic and/or digital communication sources are to be turned off during class. No exceptions to this rule.

Honor Philosophy: This course is conducted in accord with the College Honor Philosophy, as detailed in the [Student's Guide for 2008-09](#).

Documented Learning Disability: Please refer to the [Student's Guide for 2008-09](#) for the resources the College makes available to assist students. If special accommodations are needed in class, you should discuss these with me in the first two weeks of the semester. I will be happy to cooperate in ensuring the best possible arrangements for a positive learning experience in this course.

Final Thoughts

“The owl of Minerva takes flight at twilight,” the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who thought seriously about history, wrote in 1820. With this aphorism, Hegel put into words the idea that after all events of lasting significance, it is wisdom or understanding—symbolized since antiquity by Minerva’s owl—that comes last to the scene. Other qualities of mind or spirit—passion, conviction, wrath, exhilaration, regret—may have been there when the event occurred, and the principals themselves have probably long since departed. Hegel was cautioning against hasty judgement and against the assumption that philosophy, into which he would have folded history, can tell anything about the future. History looks backward, and some chronological distance is required before real understanding becomes possible. Hegel has always defied easy classification. For some, he is deeply conservative in his attitude toward human existence and human endeavor. For others, his ideas represent the legacy of the Enlightenment. He once famously identified Napoleon as the embodiment of history itself. Among those who owe an intellectual debt to Hegel are Karl Marx, Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Bakunin, and Charles Darwin.



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By no means are you required to adopt Hegel as your philosophical mentor. However, Hegel might serve to remind you of the limitations and difficulties inherent in whichever inquiry you choose to pursue. You’re not going to get it all, you might not even get it right. But if you can achieve a greater measure of understanding about events and individuals in the past, that’s probably enough—at least in regard to this course.