History 84900: First Year Seminar in American History

Thomas Kessner Fall, 2015
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This seminar is designed to train incoming graduate students in the craft of historical research and writing. Over the course of the term, each student will formulate a research topic, prepare a bibliography of relevant primary and secondary sources, write an historiographic essay, and present and defend a formal project proposal for the substantial research paper that is to be completed in the second semester seminar. Weekly meetings will discuss common readings, share and critique written work, and develop and refine the research proposals. We will also be devoting some time to methods and issues involved in undergraduate teaching.

Students should focus primarily on framing a topic and honing a well defined, focused and reasonable research proposal for their papers. The purpose of the collateral assignments is to help push this process forward. Thus, from the very beginning students should be thinking about their research project, sampling secondary readings and investigating the availability of accessible sources.

Course learning objectives: Familiarize students with the full range of issues we confront as historians trying to do original work: how to shape researchable questions; how to find and cull through appropriate sources; how to weigh and interpret evidence, construct arguments, and situate one’s own work in the wider debates in the discipline.

Over the course of the semester students will be expected to:

- formulate an historical research question
- master the research process
- assemble a relevant and effective bibliography
- shape a methodology for a historical research project
- demonstrate effective use of evidence and research
- read historical works critically and analytically
- propose a well defined research project for an article length historical paper
- critically review and analyze the work of others

Schedule of class meetings with assignments and timetables

Sept. 2. Introductions, Orientation: Selecting a Topic

Sept. 9. Read:

Barbara Young Welke, “The Cowboy Suit Tragedy: Spreading Risk…,”
Then select an article that appeared in a recent *Journal of American History* volume from 2014-2015. Do not use reviews, panel discussions or literature overviews, like the June 2015 volume on the Carceral State.

Prepare a 3-4 page paper that summarizes the main argument and discusses: the central question; approach and methodology; identifies the main sources used as the basis of the article; and concludes with an assessment of the overall quality and persuasiveness of the essay.

Finally, compare the strengths and weaknesses of the article you have read with the Welke article.

Sept. 16 Individual meetings. Discuss your topic: scope, sources and secondary readings

Sept. 30 “Between Footnotes and Plagiarism: Imagination, Creativity and Scholarship.” Read the *Journal of American History*, March, 2004 Round Table discussion pp. 1325-1357 and write a 3 page essay addressing one of the fundamental issues raised.

Oct. 7 For the topic you have selected do the following:
   a. prepare a list of primary and secondary sources
   b. discuss how these sources are central to your paper and will be useful in addressing your research question


Oct. 21 Prepare a four page discussion of the historiography (the present state of relevant scholarship) surrounding your topic with a bibliography of important monographs in your area.

Oct. 28 In a one page submission discuss a book or article that might best serve as a model for the type of study you intend to do.


Three sets of discussants: Report and Critique. Department requirements, the syllabus, a bow to the local learning culture, selecting texts, preparing lessons, priming discussions, exams, grades.
Nov. 11  Discuss the methodology for your paper. Remember methodology does not mean which library you intend to visit or which sources you plan on working with, it does mean discussing your research strategy. It may help you to think in terms of how you propose to structure the various sections of the paper (perhaps in the form of sections) and how this will move the analysis forward to your conclusion.

Nov. 17  Presentation, critiquing and revising draft research proposals. The seminar will read and critique all proposals prepared by its members. Drafts will be sent by email for review and preparation of oral critiques to be discussed in class.

Nov. 25  Presentation: critiquing and revision of draft research proposals.

Dec. 2   15-minute conference-paper style revised presentations (with comments from critic/ discussant) of the final research plan/ proposal with potential implications of research findings on current scholarly understanding. Group I

Dec. 9   15-minute conference-paper style revised presentations (with comments from critic/ discussant) of the final research plan/ proposal with potential implications of research findings on current scholarly understanding. Group II

Dec. 16  Submit the final proposal