Hist. 84900: Seminar in American History I  
Professor Jonathan D. Sassi | Ph.D. Program in History, CUNY Graduate Center | Fall 2019

Class time: Wednesday, 4:15-6:15 p.m., room 3310A  
Office hour: Wednesday, 2:00-4:00 p.m., and by appointment in room 5112  
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Course Description: This is the first course in a two-semester sequence for first-year students whose major field is the United States. By the end of the second semester, each student will have written an article-length paper that is substantially based in primary-source research, makes an original argument, and advances the scholarly literature on its topic; toward that goal, the first semester focuses on training in the craft of history and the development of a proposal for a well-defined project that the student can reasonably expect to complete by the end of the following semester.

Students will identify topics, hone their questions, develop a bibliography of relevant primary and secondary sources, and write a historiographic essay. They will also become acquainted with issues of professional ethics in research and writing. By the end of the course, each student will have produced a formal research proposal and presented it to the class in the format of an academic conference presentation complete with an accompanying slide show. Seminar members will also circulate drafts and constructively criticize one another’s work.

Learning Goals: Students successfully completing this course will demonstrate their abilities to:

• formulate a historical research question
• assemble a bibliography of relevant sources
• plan a methodology for the research project
• read historical works analytically and critically
• write a well-defined research proposal for an article-length historical paper
• constructively criticize the work of others

Assignments:

• (30%) Six short (1-5 pp.) writings call for either a critical response to an assigned reading or an update on some aspect of your project.

• (40%) Research proposal should be from 10-15 pages long (not counting the bibliography) and consists of the following five elements:
  1. Statement of the problem (1-2 pages)
  2. Historiography (4-5 pages)
  3. Sources and Methodology (3-5 pages)
  4. Possible Significance (2-3 pages)
  5. Bibliography of primary and secondary sources

• (10%) Conference-style presentation of the final proposal will be 15 minutes, replete with a slide show, followed by feedback from a designated commenter and the audience.

• (20%) Attendance and participation. Your attendance is expected at every session, and, since this is a graduate seminar, your active participation in discussion is essential and required.
Schedule of Meetings, Topics, and Assignments:

Week 1, 8/28: Introductions and orientation

Week 2, 9/4: Selecting your topic and refining your question
➤ Read Wayne C. Booth et al., The Craft of Research, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 29-64. [The full text of this book is available online through the library.]

Week 3, 9/11: Visit to the New York Public Library
Meet at 4:00 in the main hall, first floor (Fifth Ave. entrance).

Week 4, 9/18: Developing your bibliography

Week 5, 9/25: Discussion of topics: scope, sources, and secondary readings
➤ By noon on Tuesday, 9/24, circulate to the seminar a preliminary bibliography of both key primary-source collections and around twenty secondary books and journal articles.

Week 6, 10/2: Discussion of Historiography
➤ Read the following articles:
➤ Prepare and circulate by noon on Tuesday, 10/1, a 1-page description of the central question that you propose to investigate and its significance. Discuss in class.

Week 7, 10/9: no class -- Yom Kippur

Week 8, 10/16: no class -- classes follow the Monday schedule
➤ Submit to Professor Sassi via email a 4- to 5-page discussion of the historiography surrounding your topic.

Week 9, 10/23: Elements of the journal article genre
➤ Read the following articles:


For the article that you have chosen, write a 2- to 3-page paper that addresses the following questions: What are the author’s central question and main argument? What major types of primary sources (e.g., newspapers, letters, or government records) does the article rely on? If the author cites unpublished material, what are the principal collections and archives cited? How does the article situate itself within the relevant historical literature? (This is sometimes referred to as the article’s “scholarly intervention.”) Finally, what does the author claim as the larger significance for the article?

Week 10, 10/30: A model for your project

➤ In a 1-page submission, discuss a book or article that might best serve as a model for the type of study that you intend to do.

Week 11, 11/6: Plotting your research strategy


➤ Discuss the research strategy for your paper. It may help you to think in terms of how you propose to structure the various elements of the paper (perhaps in the form of sections) and how this will move the analysis forward to your conclusion.

Week 12, 11/13: Professional ethics in research and writing

➤ Read the following:


➤ Write a 3-page essay addressing one of the fundamental issue raised in this week’s readings.

Week 13, 11/20: Presentations and critiques
➤ By 5:00 p.m. on Mon., 11/18, half of the class will circulate a complete draft of your research proposal. The other half of the class will read the proposals and respond during seminar with constructive criticism.

Week 14, 11/27: Presentations and critiques
➤ Same as last week, but with roles reversed. Draft proposals due to be circulated by 5:00 p.m. on Mon., 11/25.

Week 15, 12/4: Conference-style presentations
➤ Half of the class will make a 15-min., conference-style presentation of their research proposals. One designated commenter will give a 5-min. response.

Week 16, 12/11: Conference-style presentations
➤ Same format as last week for the other half of the class.

Final proposals are due 12/18.