**American Studies**

**Research Paper**

You are about to embark on a major research paper in U.S. History. You will choose a research question to study in depth using primary and secondary sources and situating the information you discover within larger historical questions.

All history questions have many answers – there is no one correct answer to any of them. That’s what makes history research so much fun – you uncover information and interpret what you have found.

There are two main parts to a history paper. The first is chronology. You must tell a story in time order. Secondly, you must try to explain why these events unfolded in this order – the cause and effect. What factors influenced the events and how? Your paper research will follow the steps below, though not always in this order:

* Start with a sincere question that could be answered in multiple ways.
* Make sure your research question is specific enough that you can imagine what some ideal sources might look like.
* Have a rough idea of what you’re hoping to find and a plan for how to proceed with what you do find.
* Approach your documents from many different perspectives and use different imaginative lenses to see the same thing from multiple points of view.
* If you find convincing evidence that leads you away from your initial hypothesis, change your hypothesis.
* Don’t draw conclusions until after you’ve found and searched your documents.

This is a four-month project so my expectations are high; at the same time you can also expect lots of guidance from me.

Listed below are the various parts of this assignment. Please stick with the timeline – the preliminaries help build a complex final project. The best advice former students give is to stick to the timeline. Listen to your elders!

Each of these preliminary steps is for your benefit. Please watch due dates and plan accordingly. Your final paper will be 7-8 pages in length.

**Step 1: Ask a good question** (by January 11)

<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/questions.htm#Top>

Read Professor William Cronon’s website (give it some time, 9 pages), it will help with topics.

You will spend a lot of time over the next few months on this project. BE SURE to choose a topic of interest to you! Browsing through your textbook can be helpful here. Though this step may seem easy, you should take it very seriously. When selecting a topic, consider the following groups: workers, women, blacks, Native Americans, the rich, the poor, athletes, children, gays, scientists, inventors, consumers, protestors, soldiers, reformers, environmentalists, communists, libertarians, musicians, athletes, politicians, immigrants.

At this point, it is appropriate to read Wikipedia or encyclopedia sources to find out more about your topic.

Your topic must occur before 2000. If you have 2 possible topics, do this assignment for each.

1. I am studying\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

because I want to know\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

in order to help my readers understand\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

2. Write down 5 ideal sources you would like to find for doing your research and explain how they would help you answer your question.

3. Your assignment is to share these two prompts on our blog Friday, January 11.

**Step 2: Finding documents and searching for sources** (February 8)

Read from Cronon’s website on finding sources. <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/documents.htm>, and the pursuit of sources <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/searching.htm>

Then look at this section which tells you how to go about finding the sources you need:

1. Find 5 primary sources you can use, put them in proper bibliographic form (MLA format), and explain how these documents can help you answer your question. Remember that primary sources can include maps, interviews, legal records and government documents, images, manuscript and artifact collections, newspapers and magazines, scientific and quantitative data.

2. Find at least 5 secondary sources on your topic – these should be full length books and/or scholarly articles. Put them in proper bibliographic form, and explain how these sources can help you answer your question.

4. If you use websites, use the following questions as a test:

***Tips for Evaluating Websites***

* What is the website’s tag (ex: “.gov,” “.org,” “.net,” “.com,” etc.)? What does the tag tell you about the website’s intent? Is the website there to inform or to sell something?
* Are there ads present on the website? What are the ads selling? What does that say about the organization that maintains the website?
* Does the website make the author’s identity clear? Is the **intent or bias** of the author or website clear? Is the author associated with a college, university, or other organization?
* Does the author provide citations to any information conveyed? Does the information strike true to other research you have conducted? Has the site been updated recently?
* If you cannot confirm the website’s reliability, **assume that it is NOT reliable!**

**Revise step 1:** How has your question that you are trying to answer changed? I am

studying\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

because I want to know\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

in order to help my readers understand\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

My question is. . .

Be sure to locate the BEST sources on your topic. You need to have at least 2 sources for each section of your paper.

**10 sources, typed in proper form by February 8**.

**STEP 3 Note–taking [February 8, 15, March 8, 15]**

Take notes from the sources you found. High school students find note cards to be successful, but there are a number of possibilities. Notes must be coded by source and page. By February 8, you should have taken notes on 2 of your sources. By February 15, you should have taken notes on 2 more sources and by March 1 on 2 more sources, etc... You will hand the note cards in on these dates. You will probably still have more notes to take, but these are the ones I will check. For each checkpoint, you need 20 notecards.

**STEP 4 Claim (thesis)[March 15]**

Now that you have read about your topic, develop your claim or thesis. Remember that a claim or thesis is not a description of your topic. It is not a question, or a statement of fact, or a statement of opinion. A thesis statement reflects what you have concluded about your topic, based on a critical analysis and interpretation of the source material you read. It should not be the thesis of someone else – that is, your paper should not be a summation of someone else’s work. The thesis needs to be an answer to a question, be specific, and be arguable. In turn, you need to be able to support this thesis with your evidence from multiple sources.

In a second paragraph, justify why this is your claim. How does your evidence support this statement? What could be an opposing claim to yours? Why is your statement better? Post this on our blog.

Read Cronon on establishing a provocative claim for assistance: <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/arguing.htm#_Develop_a_Provocative>

**STEP 5 Annotate your bibliography [March 22]**

You must annotate your bibliography. Write a short paragraph for each source that includes the following:

• One sentence description of what the source is about, including the author’s thesis.

• Brief description of who the author is and what his or her credentials are

• Brief description of the evidence the author uses to support his or her thesis

• Concise evaluation of the author’s use of sources and the validity of his or her argument

• Brief description of the value of the source for your project

**STEP 6 Conference with the teacher**

You must meet with me for 15 minutes to discuss your paper by March 29. You must come prepared with 3 questions you want me to help you with.

**STEP 7 Final Outline [March 29]**

Include your introductory paragraph and a 2–3 page outline of your topic. Write a conclusion. The more detailed the outline, the more I can direct you. Read Cronon: <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/writing.htm>

**STEP 8 Rough draft including footnotes** **[April 12]**

Be sure that you are using multiple sources. You must cite at least 10 sources.

With no footnotes, your rough draft will earn a “0”)

Read Cronon on developing a narrative <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/arguing.htm#_Develop_a_Provocative>

**Structure:**

* Is the central argument clear and easy to identify?
* Is the paper well organized with logical progressions?
* Are the main points easy to follow?
* Have you summarized each section at points of transition?
* Does each paragraph form a discrete and coherent argument?
* Does the paper start strong and end gracefully, rather than just dribbling off?
* Is there a better way to organize this paper?

**Style:**

* Are quotes well integrated into the argument? Have you identified the speaker?
* Are you using signposts and transitions to communicate effectively?
* Does the writing flow smoothly with clear transitions?
* Is the language clear?
* Is the language vivid?
* Are there errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation?
* Are there run-on sentences or sentence fragments?

**Content:**

* Does the introduction grab the audience’s attention?
* Are the claims valid and substantiated?
* Are you being too vague with your claims?
* Is the writing alive with detail (the pink rosettes on the chocolate cake, the potato soup with three potatoes in it)?
* Is every opinion or argument backed up by facts?
* Have you made sure that your reader can always tell when and where a given event is taking place?
* Is the topic handled creatively?

**STEP 9 Final paper due [May 3 ]**

Hand in your final paper complete with footnotes and bibliography, and attach four primary sources. You must illustrate your paper with at least two visual primary sources. This paper must be typed following the rules of the Modern Language Association (MLA). Please consult the MLA manual to be sure your paper is set up properly.

**Dos and Don’ts**

**Dos**

* **Do** follow the paths that link one writer to another to find the best sources for your paper.
* **Do** set up a good system for note-taking. Make sure that you won’t have to repeat your work later and that you can easily add to your bibliography and your notes on the search as you go.
* **Do** use other scholars’ bibliographies.
* **Do** browse the nearby library shelves when you go to retrieve a book.
* **Do** take time to evaluate websites. Be sure look for **who** wrote the information and **when**, and remember to look for any noticeable **bias** or **intent** on the part of the author.
* **Do** be deliberate when trying to get information out of academic journal articles.
* **Do** use the advanced search screen and options when searching in academic journal databases.
* **Do** search for academic subject review articles when you are beginning your search.
* **Do** keep track of the full reference information of your sources as you find them.
* **Do** be wary of public Web sources and evaluate their credibility.
* **Do** search for primary documents.

**Don’ts**

* **Don’t** cite Wikipedia nor use a site if you cannot verify its trustworthiness. You are only harming your scholarship if you do.
* **Don’t** try to complete each step exhaustively before moving on to the next one. The best researchers circle back to earlier parts of the research process as they go.
* **Don’t** assume that you can find all the useful books in the library with just one catalog search.
* **Don’t** search the library’s catalog or article databases the same way you search the Web—remember that the library requires more precise search methods.
* **Don’t** read all (or even most) academic journal articles you find all the way through.
* **Don’t** read or dismiss *any source* without scanning its bibliography and scouring it for important sources.
* **Don’t** overuse public Web sources of information.

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