

Teaching the Practice of History with *The New York Times*

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OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I have adjusted my introductory world history survey to focus more on the development of historical skills and historical thinking and less on the acquisition of historical content. While roughly three-quarters of my class time is still devoted to explaining and discussing important historical events, ideas, developments, and people—content that is tested in midterm and final exams—I now use a series of writing assignments to deepen and evaluate historical skills and historical thinking. The best of these is my “*New York Times* Mini-History,” in which students write a five-page mini-history of a person or event, based solely on a series of *New York Times* articles they choose from one of a number of pre-defined searches I design. In this article, I will outline the nature of the assignment and how I think it teaches my students the mindset and skills required for the practice of history.

Background

While historians and educators have long employed newspaper stories as primary historical sources for research and teaching,¹ the inspiration for my “*New York Times* Mini-History” came from

another innovative, skill-based assignment I adopted a few years ago: Brent J. Ruswick's "JSTOR article review."² Ruswick developed his assignment as a "bite-sized version of the standard book review" that fostered critical reading skills, integrated technology, and was relatively plagiarism proof. Moreover, it was feasible with a small college library and short enough to mark in large batches.³ Since this corresponded to both my educational goals and my teaching circumstances, I adopted Ruswick's "JSTOR article review" for my post-1500 world history survey course, and to good effect. Each time I assign this article review, it challenges my students to read critically, as they learn to identify and articulate the author's argument, to evaluate the author's participation in wider historiographical debates, to assess the author's use of sources, and to critique the author's argument as it is expressed in the organizational structure and explained in the various sections of their journal article. In the process of dissecting a journal article, my students learn a lot about the kinds of skills and thinking that go into historical research and writing.

As I began to use this article review regularly, combining it with primary source analyses, I hit upon the notion of constructing a "next step" assignment that would challenge my students to apply the historical skills and historical thinking they were learning in their article reviews and primary source analyses. Having used newspapers in some of my own research,⁴ it occurred to me that it might be useful to have students write short historical accounts of people or events, based on newspaper articles. There are several merits of using newspaper articles in this way: they include contextual information on the people and events they cover, are written in a vocabulary and length that suits undergraduate students, and possess a liveliness and immediacy that makes them interesting historical sources. Since my institution subscribes to the database *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index*, I had at my disposal a wealth of newspaper source material on all manner of subjects from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

The Assignment

In both my course syllabus and in-class explanation, I frame the "*New York Times* Mini-History" as an exercise in doing history. I explain to my students that they will be researching and writing with

primary sources in much the same way that professional historians do—only on a smaller scale. I show them how this assignment draws on the same historical skills and historical thinking that they have already been developing in their article reviews and primary source analyses, and explain that now it's their turn to apply these historical practices constructively in writing their own “mini-history” of a past person or event. I underline that their mini-history will be unique, in that it will be based on their own particular selection of source material and their own unique interpretation drawn from those sources.

Each time I teach the world history survey, I assign eight to ten topics (i.e., *New York Times* searches) on which the students may write. After only a few years, I have developed a pool of dozens of searches and the ability to easily add new ones as I am inclined. Thanks to the wide variety of topics, students learn about an array of interesting historical people and events, many of which would not normally find their way into an introductory survey course. This also makes possible the exploration of the historical background to significant contemporary issues or current Hollywood films based on historical events. All this promotes student engagement and ownership of their own learning, which is particularly important in the world history survey, a required course in our university core curriculum.

Another pedagogical advantage of this approach is that it allows me to introduce students to diverse genres of history. While the introductory history survey tends to focus on political, social, and cultural history, through the mini-history I can introduce gender, economic, biographical, military, environmental, and religious subjects. Finally, changing up topics from year to year keeps the assignment fresh for me and makes it fairly plagiarism proof. Over the past two years, I have assigned the following searches:

- “Edith Cavell” with a date range of October 1, 1915 to February 1, 1916⁵
- “Amelia Earhart” with a date range of January 1 to October 31, 1928
- “Gandhi” with a date range of March 1 to May 1, 1930
- “Eva Perón” and “women” with a date range of January 1, 1946 to January 1, 1954

- “John F Kennedy” with a date range of November 10 to December 10, 1963, then limit by choosing “front-page article” from the “Document Type” category
- “Martin Luther King” and “Selma” with a date range of January 1 to April 1, 1965
- “hockey” and “Canada” or “Soviet Union” (both country names go into the search) with a date range of July 1 to October 1, 1972
- “Exxon Valdez” (in quotation marks) with a date range from January 1 to August 1, 1989
- “Germany” with a date range of September 1, 1989 to January 1, 1990, then limit by choosing “front-page article” from the “Document Type” category
- “World Trade Center” (in quotation marks) with a date range of September 1 to September 16, 2001
- “Munich and Olympics” with a date limit of September 3 to December 31, 1972
- “Sarajevo” with a date range of June 1 to August 25, 1914
- “Canada and Confederation” with a date range of January 1 to July 31, 1867
- “the Beatles” with a date range of before January 1, 1966 and select the subject area “music”
- “Nelson Mandela” with a date range of January 1, 1952 to July 1, 1964
- “Billy Graham” with a date range of before July 1, 1957 and select the subject area “religion and churches”
- “liberation front Quebec” with a date range of 1965 to 1973 and select subject area “French Canadians, issue of”
- “Armenia massacre” with a date range of before 1930 and select the subject area “atrocities”

By fine-tuning the searches using date ranges, subject limiters, and document type limiters (e.g., front-page article), I have created searches that direct students to focus on the immediate build-up to or aftermath of an event, or to consider the very early career of a noteworthy person, or to focus on a particular aspect of a person or event, or simply to capture an event in its immediacy. To that end, I have found that it is important to use a date range that includes a

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index
 Basic Search | Advanced | Obituaries | Publications | Topics

Advanced Search

Look Up Citation | Command Line | Find Similar

Field codes | Search tips

edith cavell in Anywhere

AND () OR () in Anywhere

⊞ Add a row | Remove a row

Search options

Publication date: Specific date range...
 Search for a range of years, years and months, or specific dates

Start
 October 1 1915 (yyyy)

End
 February 1 1916 (yyyy)

Show less

Looking for a specific topic?
 Try using Topics and searching for a Subject, Person, Company.

Search subject areas
 Use search forms customized for each subject.

Search Clear form

Figure 1: Using “Advanced Search”

specific end date—even if it doesn’t seem germane to the topic—in order to weed out retrospective or commemorative articles written years later. I want students to discover the people and events in the moment, through the on-the-spot newspaper coverage, and not to latch on to someone else’s reflection published long after the fact.

In order to do the search properly, students must go to the database through our library webpage, so that they are able to log in through our institutional gateway. Next, they click on the “Advanced Search” option and type in their search parameters, exactly as assigned (see **Figure 1: Using “Advanced Search”**).

In some cases, these search results comprise a body of primary source material for the students. In other cases, the initial search results may include thousands of articles, and require refining, by adding any limiters I have provided (see **Figure 2: Subject Limiters** and **Figure 3: Document Type Limiters**).

Finally, students must reorder their search results chronologically. This is very important—for two reasons. First, I want them to approach their historical topics chronologically, walking day by day through the newspaper coverage and learning to understand their people or events as they developed, and not with the benefit of hindsight and the influence of subsequent history. Second, reordering chronologically frees them from dependence on what

The screenshot shows a ProQuest search for "billy graham" with the date limit set to "Before July 01 1957". The search results page displays 3562 results. A sidebar on the right, titled "Sort results by:", shows "Relevance" selected. Below it, the "Narrow results by" section is expanded to show "Subject" limiters. A red arrow points to the "religion and churches" limiter, which has 187 results. Other subject limiters include "general" (132), "boxing" (108), and "deaths and death rate" (83). The main search results list includes items like "Catholics Are Urged to Avoid Billy Graham as Peril to Faith" and "BRITISH FAME WON BY BILLY GRAHAM: U. S. Evangelist Has Become Popular".

Figure 2: Subject Limiters

The screenshot shows a ProQuest search for "john f kennedy" with the date limit set to "From November 10 1963 to December 10 1963". The search results page displays 524 results. A sidebar on the right, titled "Sort results by:", shows "Relevance" selected. Below it, the "Narrow results by" section is expanded to show "Document type" limiters. A red arrow points to the "Front page article" limiter, which has 57 results. Other document type limiters include "Article" (355), "Display ad" (34), and "Classified ad" (27). The main search results list includes items like "FREEDOM MEDAL HONORS KENNEDY: Posthumous Award Is Also Made to Pope John XXIII" and "Mrs. Kennedy Likely to Reside in Capital: CAPITAL HOME DUE FOR MRS. KENNEDY To Occupy City Home Kennedys to Gather Attends Second Mass".

Figure 3: Document Type Limiters

The screenshot shows the ProQuest interface for a search on 'germany'. The search bar is highlighted with a red box. Below it, the search results are displayed, with two results visible. A 'Sort results by:' dropdown menu is open on the right side, with 'Publication date (oldest first)' selected and a red arrow pointing to it. The menu also includes a 'Sort' button and a 'Narrow results by' section with various filters like 'Publication title', 'Document type', 'Subject', etc.

Figure 4: Reordering Search Results

the database determines is relevant, which is based on an arbitrary algorithm and may, in fact, be quite misleading historically (see **Figure 4: Reordering Search Results**). In most cases, the results of these searches are lists of roughly 80 to 180 articles.

The next step is one of selection, in which students scan their search results, ignoring articles in which their people or events are mentioned only tangentially, while viewing and skimming the ones whose headlines seem promising. In this phase of the assignment, students must choose between five and fifteen articles, which will comprise the basis for their mini-histories. This range reflects the fact that articles vary greatly in length and density. Occasionally, a student will ask to use eighteen or twenty articles for their mini-history, reflecting a keenness I am happy to encourage.

Having selected their sources, students must begin to analyze their evidence. My instructions are for them to read their chosen articles carefully, making notes about the things they think are important or interesting.⁶ As they review their source material, they identify key themes, events, and supporting quotations. Ideally, the organizational structure of their mini-history begins to take shape as well. Often, this

is where students will pay me a visit. The combination of the freedom they have to construct their mini-histories and the responsibility they have to be faithful to their sources is, for some, mildly paralyzing. Caught in this uncertainty, some students find that explaining to me what they are learning and hearing a word of encouragement that they are on the right track gives them the confidence to go ahead and construct their mini-histories. In other cases, students just don't know what they're looking for, and need a few leading questions to help them identify some themes or develop structures for their papers.

My in-class instructions suggest that students do a *minimum* of background reading on their topics, so that they acquire the requisite contextual understanding to research. But I also warn them that if they get caught up in what others have written about their people or events, they will read things into their *New York Times* articles that may not be there, or miss details in their sources that are vital to developing their own independent interpretations.

The last phase of the assignment is synthetic. This is the point at which students compile their evidence and construct their mini-histories. My expectation is for them to write a coherent explanatory narrative that includes some context, an indication of important historical events or issues, and some consideration of what might make their person or event historically significant. In my practice, 1,500 to 1,800 words have proven to be a good length for the project—sufficient enough for them to develop a few ideas and do justice to their topic, but short enough to force them to write economically and edit carefully. Moreover, at this length, the mini-histories don't require a great deal of time to evaluate, and can count for only twenty-five to thirty percent of their course grade.⁷

The Outcomes

As I have implemented this *New York Times* Mini-History, I have found that the assignment has indeed facilitated a “next step” in many of my students, fostering a variety of skills and dispositions relating to the practice of history, as expressed in the outcomes of my history program. In terms of historical thinking, students learn about historical perspective, difference, causation, identity, and significance, as they peruse historic newspaper coverage of notable people and events. Naturally, they employ critical reading and analytical skills,

but also the skills of synthesis, as they combine various newspaper articles into a coherent explanatory narrative about the past. Finally, it goes without saying that both writing and citation are required by the *New York Times* Mini-History assignment. All of these outcomes are captured by the evaluation rubric I have developed for marking the assignment (see **Appendix A: Evaluation Rubric**).

One example of student learning stands out. A young minority student had recently seen the film *Selma* and was eager to learn more about Martin Luther King Jr. After reading quite a few articles, however, she was unsure about how to turn the information she was learning into a coherent explanatory narrative. We talked at length about the project, and she related to me the ideas, events, and quotations she believed to be central to the newspaper coverage of the march from Selma to Montgomery. As she did, it became clear to us that the core ideas for her mini-history should be Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent affirmation of equality, contrasted with the violent assertion of inequality he and his followers experienced at the hands of authorities in Alabama. With these as her themes, she had a straightforward way to understand this ground-breaking historical moment and an effective structure for her paper—not to mention new insights into the movie *Selma*.

Depending on the amount of time available within an introductory history survey course, there are two ways in which the *New York Times* Mini-History can be leveraged for additional learning after it has been submitted and graded. One way is to hold a class discussion in which students are grouped according to their mini-history topic. Here, the goal is to have students share their own learning and to listen to others do the same (see **Appendix B: Discussion Questions**). Discussing variations in the *New York Times* articles used by students reveals how source selection influences historical interpretation. Similarly, discussing variations in the themes that the students imposed on their source material illustrates the way personal backgrounds, values, personalities, and aptitudes all shape the interpretation of sources and the construction of historical narratives.

Another way to maximize the benefit of the assignment is to give students a short published account of the same person or event—perhaps an excerpt from a textbook or article about the topic—and to have them compare their own interpretations with those of other historians. Here, students may discover that having access

to other kinds of source material (beyond newspaper accounts) significantly alters the historical interpretation of their person or event. Alternatively, they might see how *The New York Times* chose to cover the story of their person or event from a particular perspective, and learn something about the nature of bias, the need for critical reading of source material, and the value of incorporating a variety of sources in the writing of history.

All in all, the *New York Times* Mini-History has proven to be an interesting and effective assignment for my introductory history survey course. I have found that it fosters attentiveness to source selection and the constructed nature of history—important insights relating to the practice of history. Indeed, anecdotal evidence indicates that history majors who have completed this assignment in their first year tend to demonstrate a greater awareness the importance of using primary source material in their second- and third-year research papers and periodically return to the *New York Times* database itself for source material, when their topics fall within the bounds of its coverage.

Notes

1. “NIE: Getting Started: A Guide for Newspaper in Education Programs” (Vienna, VA: Newspaper Association of America Foundation, 2005), <<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NIE-Getting-Started.pdf>>; Erica A. Morin, “Extra! Extra! Read All About It!: Structuring the U.S. History Survey Around the Motif of the Newspaper,” *The History Teacher* 46, no. 2 (February 2013): 283-292; Steven R. Knowlton and Betsy O. Barefoot, eds., *Using National Newspapers in the College Classroom: Resources To Improve Teaching and Learning*, The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition Monograph Series 28 (Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 1999); Nola Kortner Aiex, “Using Newspapers as Effective Teaching Tools,” ERIC Digests (1998), <<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-929/using.htm>>; Richard F. Newton and Peter F. Sprague, *The Newspaper in the American History Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, 1974).

2. Brent J. Ruswick, “Teaching Historical Skills through JSTOR: An Online Research Project for Survey Courses,” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (February 2011): 285-296.

3. Ibid., 285.

4. Kyle Jantzen, “‘The Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man’: Mainline American Protestants and the Kristallnacht Pogrom,” in *American Religious Responses to Kristallnacht* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 31-55; Kyle Jantzen and Jonathan Durance, “Our Jewish Brethren: Christian Responses to Kristallnacht in Canadian Mass Media,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 537-548.

5. Most of these searches will be familiar, but a few of them might require clarification. Edith Cavell was a British woman tried, convicted, and executed by Germany for spying during the First World War. The hockey topic refers to the 1972 Canada-Soviet Summit Series, a famous series of exhibition games played in and between the two countries. And the “liberation front Quebec” search revolves around the October Crisis of 1970, when Quebec separatist terrorists engaged in robberies, bombings, kidnappings, and finally the murder of a provincial cabinet minister, causing Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau to invoke the War Measures Act, suspending *habeas corpus* and mobilizing the military in Montreal and other regions of Quebec.

6. Normally, students read their articles on the computer, because the articles—which are PDF copies of the original pages of *The New York Times*—display well onscreen. Unfortunately, these PDFs rarely print well, because they are often very long and narrow or otherwise oddly shaped, reflecting their original layout in the newspaper.

7. This is particularly important to me in introductory courses, in which I generally assign four or five tests and assignments rather than two or three, so that the confusion and missteps of introductory students don’t lead to outright failure in the course nearly as often.

Appendix A: Evaluation Rubric

HI 142 — <i>New York Times</i> Mini-History — Evaluation Rubric	
The following rubric includes the significant aspects of the <i>NYT</i> Mini-History. Explaining (Argument) and <i>NYT</i> Source Material (Evidence) are the two most important categories. If you would like more detailed feedback, I would be pleased to meet with you and talk you through your paper. Please contact me for an appointment.	
Name:	Topic:
<i>NYT</i> Source Material (Evidence)	
<i>Rich in detail. Mini-history is thick with information from a wide array/quality of NYT articles.</i>	
<i>Solid amount of factual information about the topic. Good array/quality of NYT articles.</i>	
<i>Basic facts supplied, but with little extra. Acceptable array/quality of NYT articles.</i>	
<i>Lacking in factual content. Poor use of NYT articles.</i>	
<i>Insufficient or improper use of NYT articles, or improper search.</i>	
Framing the Topic (Introduction)	
<i>Very clear explanation of the time, place, context, and scope of the topic. Completely sets up the rest of the mini-history.</i>	
<i>Good explanation of the time, place, context, and scope of the topic. Explains enough that the rest of the mini-history follows logically.</i>	
<i>Just the basics by way of background.</i>	
<i>Little to no attempt to frame the topic; just jumps into the story.</i>	
Organization of the Mini-History (Structure)	
<i>Material organized around a clear story or trajectory, generally with themes.</i>	
<i>Material rearranged somewhat, according to the needs of the paper.</i>	
<i>Material presented largely article by article.</i>	
<i>No discernable rationale for the ordering of material.</i>	
Explaining (Argument)	

<i>Excellent engagement with “how” and “why” questions. Strong explanation.</i>	
<i>Some engagement with “how” and “why” questions. Some explanation.</i>	
<i>Little engagement with “how” or “why” questions. Little explanation.</i>	
<i>No significant attempt at explanation.</i>	
Writing	
<i>Strong writing. No or almost no copy errors. Clear flow, using paragraphs and linking sentences. Leads the reader right through the material.</i>	
<i>Good writing. Few copy errors. Solid paragraph usage.</i>	
<i>More errors or awkward patches. Needs significant copy editing.</i>	
<i>Deficient writing. Needs significant structural editing, and/or significant copy editing.</i>	
Citations	
<i>Excellent form and usage of citations.</i>	
<i>Proper form and usage of citations.</i>	
<i>Citations largely correct.</i>	
<i>Deficient citations.</i>	
Other comments:	
Grade:	

Appendix B: Discussion Questions

Please come prepared to discuss the following questions in class. Be ready to give specific examples, and have a copy (electronic is fine) of your mini-history with you. Make notes on your conversation and send a copy to me, as evidence of your participation.

1. As you skimmed through your *New York Times* database search results, how did you decide which articles were worth using for your mini-history? How did you select your source material?
2. Which one or two articles seemed most important to you? Why?
3. Having heard other people share their answers to Questions 1 and 2, is there another article you wished you had used? Is there anything you would do differently if you were to do the assignment over again?
4. Why did you choose to write on your topic? How do you think that influenced the mini-history you wrote?
5. Having heard other people share their answers to Question 4, can you identify any differences between the mini-histories in your group? Do you all tell essentially the same story? If so, why? Are there variations between your accounts of the past? If so, why? Does it matter how similar or different your mini-histories are?