

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!: Structuring the U.S. History Survey Around the Motif of the Newspaper

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I RESOLVED EARLY ON that I would not be teaching about wars and white guys in my history courses. No offense, but my academic and personal interests have always centered on social, cultural, and environmental history. I am not attracted to historical narratives that involve stringing together a series of wars and administrations. As a student, I enjoyed professors and courses that forced me to navigate difficult topics like race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability, and beyond. Once I became a graduate student and instructor, however, I realized that history teachers face an uphill battle to convince many undergraduate students that these groups and topics are important. The majority of my colleagues also prefer to highlight social and cultural topics, but we run the risk of being criticized for leaving out things and we dread evaluation comments about overlooking specific wars and battles. The key is to find a way to incorporate both into our lectures. Unfortunately, we usually have fewer than three hours per week with our students and more information than we could ever possibly cover in twenty or thirty hours per week. We struggle with how to highlight the history from below without ignoring major national events, all with a limited amount of time.

I wrestled with this very issue when I developed my own syllabus in the graduate course HIST 650: Teaching the History Survey, under the direction of my advisor, Dr. John Larson, at Purdue University. I knew

my epistemological and pedagogical priorities, but I did not know how to accomplish all these goals in the classroom. In the same year, my significant other was working as a reporter for a local newspaper. He beamed with pride when his stories made the front page, especially “above the fold.” But I found that these stories typically covered town council meetings, local zoning ordinances, and state policy debates that meant little in isolation. We preferred to read the editorials and commentaries tucked away in the subsequent pages. In particular, a series of columns and editorials by local residents with opposing viewpoints expressed more about the current political and cultural scene in rural America than any of the front-page stories. I started looking at larger newspapers and noticing the same layout. I realized that I was less interested in the headlines on the front page and more interested in the secondary stories. These realizations inspired my syllabus approach.

History in the Headlines

As a graduate instructor for HIST 152: United States Since 1877, I structure the entire course around the motif of the newspaper. I model my curriculum after the newspaper both visually and symbolically and use it as a theme throughout the class. The newspaper is not a gimmick or cliché, but rather a recurring stylistic theme, an instructional tool, a topic for historical discussion, and a prolific source for reading assignments. I have incorporated aspects of the newspaper into my syllabus design, lecture titles, *PowerPoint* presentation layout and images, lecture topics, classroom activities, and reading and writing assignments.

Everyday, I begin my class with the “headlines” title slide that resembles a newspaper cover “above the fold.” I display approximately ten newspaper article titles from the *New York Times Historical* database that describe important events during the time period I would cover that day. These real articles provide an excellent introduction and icebreaker for the lecture and give students the context for larger national events. For most classes, the headlines are labeled by the *New York Times* as National or International news, but when lecture topics allow, I also use different newspaper sections, including Regional, World, Metro, Business, Arts and Style, Education, Opinion, Classifieds, and occasional Special Features. The headlines alert students to larger political and military events in U.S. history and provide recognizable historical benchmarks. During lecture, we “flip” to the metaphorical second page and beyond to learn about less mainstream topics. I select stories and snippets that describe more obscure events that generally receive minimal coverage or allude to cultural trends that can be perceived over time. I elaborate on cultural patterns and the

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HIST152: America Since 1877

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

History is more than just the headlines! The headlines publicize important events and defining moments, but they are often just a small portion of the whole story. In this course, front page news will provide a national and international context for the past, but we will focus more on the people and events behind the scenes. Such people and events are not isolated actors or individual occurrences - they are part of a larger narrative and reflect significant patterns, trends, feelings, and anxieties. The point of this course will be to learn the stories that did not make front page news and figure out how they fit into the bigger picture.

My lectures and your assignments will be centered around the motif of the newspaper. Every day we will come to class and read the paper together, so to speak. We will be aware of the "headlines," including major events and



Hetch Hetchy Valley, CA, c.1900

national developments, but we are more interested in how they influenced the lives and ideas of ordinary people. We will focus on the social, cul-

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**EXTRA EXTRA!
READ ALL ABOUT IT!**

Textbook
Jacqueline Jones, et al. *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States, Volume II*.

You are responsible for learning the headlines from your textbook!

* The book stores ordered the Brief Second Edition of the textbook but you may purchase the Brief OR Full, 2nd OR 3rd Edition online because the chapters are all pretty much the same.

Books
J. Samuel Walker. *Firestorm: The Destruction of Tuscon and the Use of the Atomic Bomb Against Japan*. 2004.

Jonathan Kozol. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. 1992.

* All three books will be on reserve at Hicks for limited in-library use.

* Seriously! Buy on Amazon for half the price!

Discussion Readings
You will need to read variety of newspaper articles, primary sources, scholarly articles, etc., for discussion sessions and reading responses throughout the semester. These readings will be available on Blackboard, online, or in printed form, in some cases. You may also need to do some brief research on Google for some discussion activities.

Figure 1: Course syllabus for HIST 152: America Since 1877 at Purdue University, presented in newspaper motif.

experiences of everyday Americans during my lectures and relate their lives to broader historical events and trends. I try to find newspaper titles that indicate hints of social and cultural attitudes, and we discuss these during lectures, or I assign full articles for discussion readings. For example, I give the military aspects of World War I minimal coverage in my lectures.

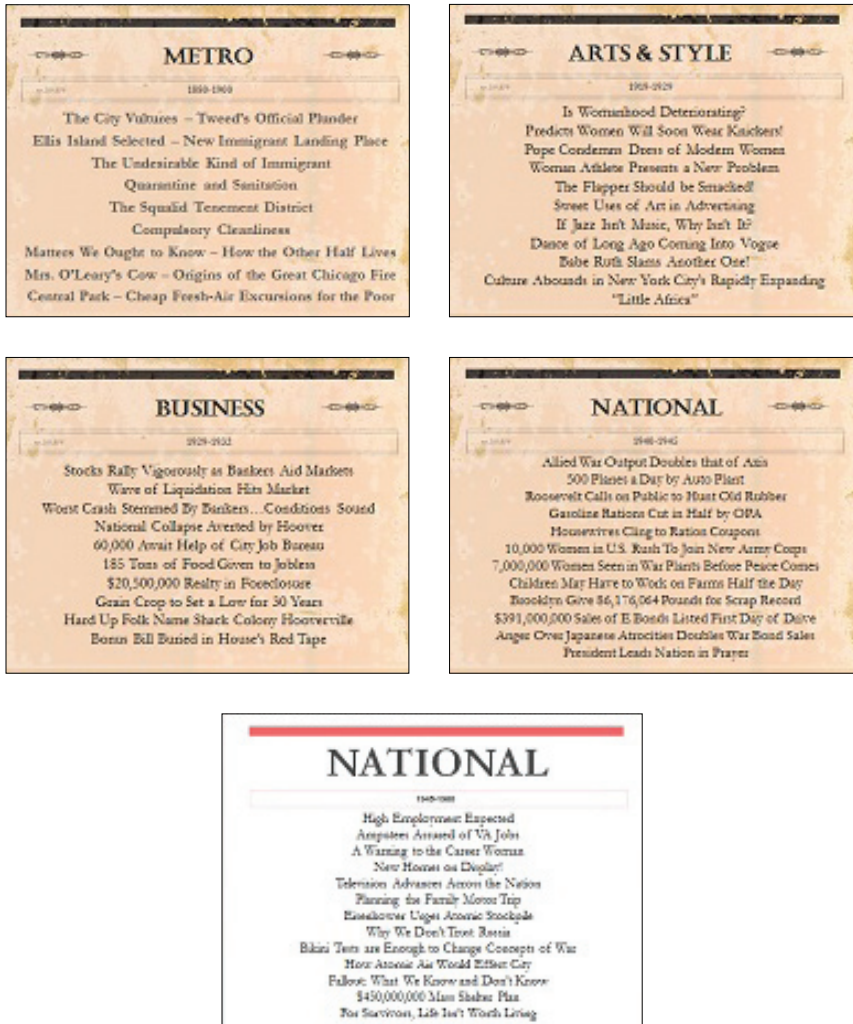


Figure 2: Newspaper headlines from various sections retrieved from the *New York Times Historical* database.

Although this choice is controversial to some, I believe that the effects of the war on the U.S. home front, economy, and racial relations are far more relevant in a U.S. history course. As such, the headlines slide for the day is labeled “International,” and listed stories include “Archduke Ignored Warning”, “The War Situation—German Invasion of Belgium”, “Hunger in the Trenches”, “Lusitania Was Unarmed!”, and “Armistice Signed at

Midnight”. The next slide is labeled “National” and includes such story titles as “America’s Greatest Problem: The Negro”, “Southern Lynching and Violence”, “Race Rioters Fire East St. Louis and Shoot Many Negroes”, and “Reds Try to Stir Negroes to Revolt”. Though I briefly describe the United States’ involvement in the war and the significant casualties of the war, I spend a majority of the class explaining changes at home associated with the Great Migration and subsequent racial turmoil in the United States. I also provide the groundwork for future events, including the Great Depression and World War II, which I revisit in subsequent lectures.

Students look forward to the headlines at the start of every class. They settle in and get out their materials, and we discuss the headlines together. We ease into the lecture, rather than jumping into intense note taking and information processing. I enjoy finding intriguing, humorous story titles that lighten the mood and encourage student participation. Often, the titles subtly indicate a significant historical topic or event, like “A Dispassionate Estimate of Edison’s Light” in 1880, “New Horizons for the Tennessee Valley” in 1933, or “Nixon Loses Ground in Poll on Honesty” in 1973. I ask the class if anyone knows what the article titles are in reference to, which gives students with a variety of backgrounds and interests the chance to share their prior knowledge on the subjects. The headlines portion of the lecture lasts approximately five minutes at the start of each class before I transition into a classic lecture format that highlights social and cultural topics within the larger national context.

Immersion in the Newspaper Theme

The newspaper also functions as a primary source throughout the course. Many instructors assign historical documents like legislation and manifestos or excerpts from diaries and journals as examples of primary sources for their students. I believe, however, that the newspaper is far more accessible and a less-intimidating means for students to explore history. All students have seen, held, and read a newspaper at some point in their lives, especially student newspapers on college campuses, but many are also familiar with the presence and appearance of historical newspapers. Therefore, the newspaper is an everyday, informal primary source with observable trends and chronological coverage of countless significant historical events.

In order to familiarize students with historical newspapers and fully immerse them in the class motif, I have an Exploring Newspapers activity and a written Newspaper Assignment due during the first few weeks of class. I devote the first discussion period to explaining the forthcoming Newspaper Assignment, and then lead the class in a hands-on Exploring Newspaper activity. For the Newspaper Assignment, students are asked to

read an entire newspaper from the past, and they are given the freedom to choose any day from 1877 to their own birthday. Some choose significant historical events or days of personal interest or sentimental importance. I give them the option of finding a real newspaper from a local library or family source, examining one on microfilm, or perusing an issue online, and I explain how to accomplish each of these methods. I rely heavily on the *New York Times Historical* database for my headlines and reading assignments because it offers the most user-friendly option for the entire class. I show the class how to search the database online through the library webpage and read an issue on their computer. For many undergraduates, this is their first exposure to primary source research and the resources available through the university's library system.

For the written portion of the assignment, students need to summarize the stories and content of their newspaper issue. I instruct them to compare the front-page material with that on subsequent pages and consider how the organization demonstrates a prioritization of different topics. They must look for indications of important events that are happening during this time period in the nation and around the world, as well as evidence of social and cultural trends. In particular, I encourage them to check out the advertisements, classifieds, movie ads, theater shows, concerts, art shows, book publications, and so on, to see a glimpse of popular culture.

After I finish explaining the Newspaper Assignment in class, I begin the Exploring Newspapers activity. I divide students into small groups and distribute pre-printed *New York Times* cover pages from random days in every decade of the time period we cover in the course. I ask the students to explore the pages together and comment on the story topics, style, and layout. We regroup at the end of the class to discuss everyone's observations. This activity is beneficial on many levels because it stimulates conversation, introduces students to each other, and allows everyone to touch and see a newspaper. As the instructor, I am also able to gauge which students are entering the class with historical knowledge (based on their recognition of story topics), which students are outgoing or more shy in class participation, and different students' interests, such as graphic design or photography, if they comment intuitively on the artistic aspects of the page. Both the class activity and the paper assignment are extremely successful, and I am thoroughly impressed by students' creativity and observations.

For example, from one of my favorite papers, one student wanted to choose the day(s) after the Wright Brothers successfully completed their first flight because he was an aeronautical engineering major and that topic personally interested him. He diligently searched the *New York Times Historical* database keyword option, but discovered that the Wright Brothers were not mentioned on the front page until nearly five years after

this momentous event. He picked this belated date for his assignment. First, he described the Wright Brothers article in depth and then summarized and commented on the other stories and advertisements of the issue to provide an excellent glimpse into this time period. This type of assignment gets the class excited about the newspaper motif and provides students from a wide variety of majors and interests the freedom to explore the topic of their choice. Almost everyone in the class makes an outstanding effort to become involved with this paper. I frequently refer to their paper topics and findings throughout the rest of the course.

In addition to the ongoing headlines activities and the newspaper assignment, I incorporate story titles, newspaper articles, magazine articles, modern media such as television reports and commercials, interactive database searches, letters to the editor, cartoons, advertisements, and interviews, as well as special lessons on photojournalism, exposé journalism, and television journalism, into classroom assignments and activities. I prefer a three-day-per-week class schedule, which allows me to lecture and hold discussion sessions every week. I establish a routine for lectures with the *PowerPoint* presentation appearance and lecture outline, and I follow the exact same organization for the entire course. The instruction is never monotonous because I bring very high energy and excitement to every lecture topic, and the repetition of the newspaper style helps students become accustomed to the pattern. Like the newspapers we study, the course exhibits continuity of style, yet diversity in information.

On my syllabus schedule, every lecture title is taken from a *New York Times* article, and the majority of student reading assignments for discussion are a batch of brief *Times* articles. For example, after I lecture on the 1920s, the students read a collection of articles on the Scopes Monkey Trial, the Palmer Raids, the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and the public uproar about female “flappers.” From the previous lectures, the students already know that the 1920s were a chaotic decade full of transition, migration, and change. From the articles, though, the class is able to see how panicked many Americans felt during this time period and how they lashed out at the forces of change. In particular, I ask students to identify the core values that each article topic was challenging (e.g., religion, democracy, race, and gender) and why these ideas would have been difficult for people to understand and accept. The articles offer an opening to discuss the magnitude of the cultural shift from Victorianism to Modernism and the reaction of ordinary Americans.

Incorporating Aspects of the History of Journalism

During course lectures, I also highlight the appearances of different types of journalism or significant journalists in American history, such

as “yellow journalism” and “muckrakers” at the turn of the century, and photojournalists like Jacob Riis, Lewis Wick Hines, and Dorothea Lange. For example, in order to introduce the Progressive Era of social reform, I divide the class into four groups and have students read the works of four prominent “muckrakers” or investigative journalists—namely, Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, and Ida Tarbell. Then, I put on my press hat—literally. I tell them to imagine that they are aspiring young journalists required to “give me the scoop” and pitch their stories. I play the ornery old editor of a newspaper as each group explains the social problem(s) their muckraker described and why the public needs to know about them. The class activity helps each student explain his or her position and use persuasive language to convince me. As a group, everyone interacts and teaches each other about a variety of problems. After reading and hearing about some of the atrocities and injustices in the U.S. food industry, harsh working and living conditions, and corruption in big business, students grasp the need for reforms in worker protection, public health, building standards, and other areas of society. In addition, the class can easily see the important role of exposé journalism in raising awareness of these problems and instigating effective change.

Another of my favorite classes is our discussion of Dorothea Lange and photojournalism. I spend nearly two weeks explaining the causes, consequences, and attempted solutions to the Great Depression. During these lessons, newspaper articles also offer excellent means for demonstrating historical parallels or cycles. For example, I display the 1929 stock market crash headlines alongside article titles about the economic downturns in 2008, and the similarities are astounding. These comparisons help students see the repetition of themes and relevance of history in their lives. I want students truly to understand the magnitude of devastation and poverty that occurred in the United States in the 1930s. To this end, I have the students examine the works of Dorothea Lange, a well-known photo documentarian during the Great Depression. I ask them to select a favorite or most compelling image, print it out, and bring it to discussion. I also assign an excerpt from Timothy Egan’s book, *The Worst Hard Time*, to give students more context about the conditions of the Dust Bowl. As a class, we all share our photos and explain why we chose them. With this assignment, students are able to see the faces of impoverished Americans and better connect with the suffering that they experienced.

These are just a few examples of how I incorporate the newspaper and journalism into my class motif and instructional materials. Later, as technology advances within the time frame studied in the course, I switch to a more modern newspaper layout in a *PowerPoint* graphic, and I add new forms of media like radio and television. For example, we listen

to and watch segments of FDR's fireside chats, a clip from the Army McCarthy hearings, the atomic age "Duck and Cover" public service announcement, the newsreel of JFK's assassination, an excerpt from the Watergate tapes, LBJ's infamous "daisy ad," and the *Challenger* explosion. These examples not only represent significant historical events, but also crucial transformations in the style, scope, and rate of news availability, leading up to the current atmosphere of social networking and almost instantaneous broadcasting. By following the development of broadcasting and technology, students can see a relevant chain of events that connect to their current lives.

The Purpose of the Newspaper Motif

The newspaper format is both pedagogically valuable and appealing to my audience. Current students are part of an incredibly media-savvy, technology-saturated generation, and the newspaper is a form of media with which they are familiar, but one they also deem slightly antiquated and historic. Therefore, the newspaper is a far more accessible, less-intimidating means for students to explore history through primary sources. Didactically, the format and presentation of the newspaper is an exceptional tool to demonstrate the hierarchy of certain historical information and actors of the past. The information on the front page in the headlines of a typical newspaper covers major national and international events, often pertaining to politics and wars, but I am more concerned that the class grasps the effects of these events on ordinary Americans in the past and the development of political, social, and cultural trends over time. As a historian, I can explain the slow progression of such trends and incorporate current historical scholarship into my lecture. The newspaper motif helps students understand that, while social and cultural topics are significant and interesting, they cannot be reported in daily news. My objective is to challenge the notion that "nothing important happened" to average people—especially women, minorities, immigrants, and the poor—and question why they were left out of the historical narrative for so long.

My emphasis on recurring historical themes and social and cultural history serves to transform students' perceptions of history and stimulate their interest in new topics. I am very realistic about my students' lives and interests. I recognize that many of them do not like history, and my course is probably not their first priority. I want to improve their opinion of historical instruction and open their eyes to new types of information. The newspaper motif helps many students better connect to the course material and recognize that history is real—historical events happened to real people in a real place and time in the past.

The newspaper motif resonates very well with students. According to student feedback, course observations, and evaluations, my syllabus approach is engaging and effective, and I plan to use it again many times in the future. I am connecting with a large number of students, positively influencing their perceptions of history, and making class fun, interesting, and relevant for them without sacrificing quality content and instruction. In early and mid-semester feedback assessments, I asked students to comment on the newspaper format, along with other strengths and weaknesses of the course, and my instruction. Many students remarked that the newspaper motif was “fun,” “interesting,” “creative,” “intriguing,” “relatable,” “helps put things into perspective,” and “helps them connect.” Perhaps the best compliments I received were from students who were aspiring teachers. Many of them told me that they planned to use aspects of my syllabus approach and their newspaper research skills in their future classes.

Potential for Future Development

I will definitely continue to modify and improve this course structure as I teach the history survey throughout my career. I want to hone the method and explore the opportunities it affords. The motif of the newspaper could be used in many nineteenth- and twentieth-century history courses. Online databases like the *New York Times Historical* and *Chronicling America* offer hundreds of thousands of searchable newspaper issues that are easily accessible to teachers and students. These resources could be used for general survey courses and upper-level topical courses. Every time I teach this course, I will find new stories, photos, and options for expanding the newspaper motif. I plan to alter the selection of local stories of interest that I mention during my lectures, depending on the location of the university at which I am housed. Currently, I have articles, anecdotes, and pictures from Indiana, Chicago, and other midwestern areas interspersed throughout my lectures, so the places are more familiar to Purdue students.

Many graduate instructors and professors do not look forward to teaching the large survey courses, but I think one of the best judges of an instructor is how he or she teaches the most basic information to the most general audience. The history survey is the most basic type of history course with the highest enrollment. As a result, many instructors tend to rely on a chronological recitation of events and avoid making additional work for themselves and the teaching assistants. I believe that large survey courses remain the best way to reach the most students, and it should not be discounted or devalued by instructors. I know that we cannot “reinvent the wheel,” but my syllabus approach confirms that ambitious instructors can develop many creative new formats, techniques, and activities to improve the history survey course.