Risk, Pleasure, and Change: 
Using the Cigarette to Teach U.S. Cultural History

Martha N. Gardner
Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Science University

Cigarettes are a familiar part of our current culture—and have been for over a hundred years. All Americans have an awareness of—and usually an opinion about—cigarette smoking. And the product has an oftentimes contradictory cultural position, as both a leading cause of death and as an alluring product. In an age of consumer fragmentation, recognition of the “Marlboro Man” remains virtually universal, as are the serious health risks of the product. Even for those with no interest in or knowledge about American history, this familiarity with the cigarette in our current culture creates an opening for examining it in the past—and for understanding history’s meaning and importance.

As a faculty member at MCPHS University, I designed a social sciences elective entitled “The Cigarette in American Culture” that I have been teaching for seven years. The course has successfully piqued the interest of college students who do not specialize in history or American studies, while providing an in-depth, critical look at change over time. Especially with the wealth of primary source materials available on the Internet—including advertisements, editorials, and internal tobacco industry documents—the course has provided a good opportunity for students to analyze the context and meaning of this consumer product.

Tracing the cigarette’s history provides a window into most of the central themes of twentieth-century American cultural history. As historian Allan
M. Brandt has posited in his Bancroft-Prize-winning book *The Cigarette Century*, cigarettes are “the product that defined America.” Cigarettes became popular as modern consumer culture developed, and the product is intertwined with the development of American business, advertising, and consumerism in the modern age. From flappers to movie stars, cigarettes became an integral, flexible prop. As their consumption skyrocketed, evidence that cigarette smoking was dangerous was yet to emerge. Knowledge of their health effects has since had a complex effect on the public and the industry. American policy, industry strategy, and lawsuits concerning cigarettes have all provided windows into government’s, industry’s, and the public’s confrontation with risk, freedom, responsibility, and blame over the course of the last hundred years.

In this paper, I explain key moments of change in the history of the cigarette, with tangible examples of my classroom approaches to these moments. Additionally, I provide examples of how I have students find and critique primary sources, in order to illustrate both their comprehension of the course themes and their ability to assess the meaning and historical significance of the sources. With Allan Brandt’s award-winning *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America* (2007) as the course’s textual backbone, I also assign illustrative primary source materials for almost every class, as well as supplementing the syllabus with a list of recent news articles, in order to keep students apprised of the most recent developments.

In order to fully appreciate the meaning and complexity of the above themes and changes, I assign three papers in the course, each analyzing a different kind of primary source. Each paper employs the same format, with students finding, describing, and contextualizing a primary source. The first source is a cigarette advertisement; the second, a published opinion piece concerning cigarette smoking; and the third, a tobacco industry document. Over the years, I’ve come to realize that the process of finding an appropriate document is a significant part of the students’ learning experience. If I just handed them a primary source, their understanding of the historical process and the meaning of the documents would diminish significantly. The processes of using search engines, weeding out documents, and understanding what you’ve found are often challenging for students. When I hand out each paper assignment, I devote at least fifteen minutes in class showing students how to search relevant databases and how to print documents. I also make sure that they each have chosen an appropriate document before the paper is due, ensuring better comprehension of the assignment.

After finding their document, students must consider relevant issues about their source, such as when it was written, whether it was published
or private, who wrote it, and who the intended audience was. Answering these basic questions about the document helps to set up its purpose, and provides an entry into each student’s initial analysis of their document. After describing the document as fully as possible, the students then have to explain how it fits into the surrounding historical context, based on what they have read and discussed in class.

Unlike most other consumer products, many sources concerning cigarettes and the tobacco industry are readily available and free via the Internet, whereas research usually entails travel to various archives to examine comparable resources for most other products. The digital Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (www.legacy.library.ucsf.edu), which is full-text searchable, comprises the most important resource. Largely because of the numerous lawsuits against tobacco companies in the past quarter-century, internal tobacco documents have become available to the public, and anti-tobacco activist Stanton Glantz of the University of California, San Francisco has spearheaded an extensive campaign to make these documents available and easily searchable. As of the end of August 2013, this database comprised over 14 million documents. These documents include the materials one would expect to find hidden in the file cabinets at a tobacco company, from memos, letters, and annual reports to relevant media that companies would monitor and gather together, including medical journal articles, newspaper and magazine articles, and other public documents.

**Cigarettes as a Marker of Cultural Shifts: Production and Consumption**

Cigarettes have not always been as familiar as they are now. On the first day of class, I show a slide with two pie charts (Figure 1), one showing American tobacco consumption in 1900 and one showing it in 1952. Whereas in 1900, only 2% of Americans who consumed tobacco smoked cigarettes, by 1952, 81% of tobacco consumers did. These two charts initiate student speculation about the reasons for the astronomical increase in their popularity during the first half of the twentieth century. This marked shift presents fertile ground on which to start a conversation about the potential reasons behind the shift: clearly something (in fact, numerous things) happened to bring about this change. Cigarettes become a vehicle to understand the emergence of modern industry and consumer culture in the U.S. Promotion, production, and urbanization all factor into the shift towards cigarettes as the primary mode of tobacco consumption. With the development of the Bonsack Machine in the 1880s, mass production of cigarettes began, making the product plentiful and cheap.
As cigarette producers rolled out this product, modern advertising and national brands were just emerging. As many Americans moved into cities (or non-Americans migrated from other countries into American cities), there was a shift from agricultural to factory jobs, and the cigarette fit well into the more regimented schedule of the factory jobs.

Conversely, it is also important to help students recognize the contingency of this product’s popularity, harder to see sometimes in retrospect. A key point in Brandt’s book is that the innovators who made the cigarette’s overwhelming popularity possible did not predict its success. For instance, some tobacco companies did not think mass production of the product was a good idea, concerned that it might take away from the product’s quality. Also, when the product first emerged, cigarettes were conflated with weakness, poor health, and weak morals. With juvenile delinquent boys stereotypically characterizing the original market, the positive image that would dominate by the 1930s and 1940s was by no means evident. Helping students to understand the unpredictable nature of historical change is an important part of our conversation in class.

First Primary Source Analysis: Cigarette Advertisements

With the rise of the cigarette—and patterns of consumption, promotion, and public attitudes—comprising the initial phase of the course, cigarette advertisements work well for the first paper assignment. Since this
assignment comes along relatively early in the class, when we have only examined the increase in the cigarette’s popularity from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth, I limit the years from which students can choose an advertisement. Providing them with links to cigarette advertising databases that tobacco researchers have compiled, I assign students the task of finding an ad from before 1950. This date limitation helps to focus students on the history we have been learning in class about the rise of American consumer culture and about the cigarette companies’ respective successes and strategies. Also, before 1950, the harms of the cigarette were not at all clear, so this overarching issue of health does not yet color the advertisements in the same manner that it later will—helping to focus the issues that students should discuss in their papers.

Fortunately, the advertising databases available are relatively simple to use, have fairly clear images, and offer variety as well. During one class session, I have students work in groups of four or five, sharing their chosen ads and considering important issues to raise in their papers. First, I have group members guess the year of the ads that each respective group member has selected, then have them explain why they guessed the year they did. Issues including social acceptance of the cigarette, attitudes towards women smokers and soldiers, as well as popularity and competitiveness between various cigarette companies provide important clues that students help each other to consider. I also have students discuss whether each ad seems like it was effective at promoting the product represented, having students consider consumers’ motivations and desires, and advertisers’ tactics.

One brand that reveals the importance of context is Marlboro cigarettes. Although we now have an unmistakable image of the independent “Marlboro Man” in “Marlboro Country,” a typical 1935 ad (Figure 2) provides a clear example of how this image was not how the brand originated. First, Marlboro was not a very popular brand, and the Philip Morris Company was not one of the first successful companies. When Philip Morris introduced Marlboro cigarettes in the late 1920s, they targeted women specifically just as that market opened up. This 1935 ad illustrates key aspects of this ongoing campaign. Rather than a rugged man outdoors in the rough elements, this ad shows a woman’s full lips with dark lipstick, along with a manicured hand pulling a cigarette out of a pack. The few words included on the ad comprise two slogans: “Mild as May” and “Ivory Tips Protect the Lips,” as demonstrated by the undisturbed lipstick adorning the lips in the ad. Important issues for a student to raise in his/her paper about this advertisement would include their knowledge of Marlboro as a cigarette brand targeted to women just as it became socially acceptable for women to smoke.
Figure 2: 1935 “Mild as May” ad for Marlboro cigarettes. Available at both Tobacco.org and the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library.
Cigarettes and Knowledge of Health Risks: Suspicions and Science

It’s hard for any of us to imagine not knowing that cigarettes are harmful now—and this aspect of the product helps to reveal current cultural assumptions as well as the development of scientific knowledge and scientific method. As the cigarette gained in popularity and became a ubiquitous American product, its harms were unclear. As with the cigarette’s rising popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, here, too, is an example of a significant change—this time in the perception of risk. In order to help students get a sense of how unknown the harms of the cigarette once were, I bring in a parallel example from our current culture: cell phones. When I make this comparison in class, I ask my students to raise their hands if they don’t own a cell phone; no one raises a hand. I remind them that even ten or twenty years ago, many people didn’t have them—that their ubiquity is a relatively recent phenomenon. I then mention that we don’t yet know whether they are harmful. They are so much a part of everyday life that the issue of their potential harm seems almost out of place. So, too, was the case with cigarettes in the 1940s and 1950s. Sir Richard Doll, one of the key researchers to establish the risks of smoking, recalled in 1991, “cigarette smoking was such a normal thing and had been for such a long time that it was difficult to think that it could be associated with any disease.”

The latency of smoking’s harms also makes them less visible. In class, I try to make the difference between latent harm and immediate harm clear: if a bus is bearing down on us at an intersection, we all tend to step back to avoid injury. The cigarette’s harm is far less obvious. Even now, when we all know its dangers, the harm feels abstract and far away. If we smoke a cigarette or two today, the noticeable harm won’t emerge for decades. In public health circles—with our clear knowledge that the great majority of people start to smoke as adolescents—the thirty-year latency creates a central barrier in mounting prevention measures. Today’s harm is much easier to sidestep than harm three decades from now, in an unimaginable part of our lives. Especially since my students are primarily young adults, these issues resonate well with what they have already experienced.

But the challenge of coming to terms with a harm that only develops over time is coupled very significantly with the time period in which scientists, physicians, and the public determined that harm. Cigarettes illustrate the much larger theme of the so-called “mortality transition” that occurred in the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century. In class, the key harm that we examine is lung cancer. Similar to my use of the two pie charts to show cigarettes becoming the dominant form of tobacco consumption...
in the initial part of the class, in this part of the course, I present a graph charting the death rates of various forms of cancer in men between 1930 and 2000.\(^9\) (Figure 3) While the other cancer death rates remain steady (with a decrease in stomach cancer), lung cancer rates go through the roof. Our retrospective view of this chart indicates cigarette smoking as the cause, with rates of smoking from thirty years earlier paralleling this cancer death rate.\(^{10}\) However, at the time, such a link was not at all clear—and other factors seemed just as viable. Evarts A. Graham, eminent lung surgeon and pioneering researcher into the harms of the cigarette, was a great skeptic of the connection at first, and reminded many that just because two curves paralleled each other, they did not necessarily have any relation. Silk stocking sales increased with a curve similar to cigarette sales, he argued, but that parallel did not connect stockings to lung cancer.\(^{11}\) For one, scientists had to determine whether the reported rate reflected a real change, or instead a change in rates of diagnosis. But even after there was a general consensus on this point, other environmental factors seemed just as likely to explain lung cancer. Just as cigarette smoking increased as Americans
urbanized and modernized, so too did industrial pollution, construction of roads, and use of cars. All these aspects of twentieth-century American life also affected the air Americans breathed. The process of concluding that cigarettes were the culprit was therefore difficult.12

Relatedly, the scientific method to prove the link was unpopular and not fully accepted at the time. From the early twentieth century, when most Americans died of infectious disease, to the mid-twentieth century, when most died of chronic disease, the tools to understand causes of death and American perceptions of health also needed to shift.13 As skeptical scientists began to notice an unprecedented rise in lung cancer in the 1940s, they searched for an explanation, and the scientific tools were different from those used to understand and combat infectious disease. Instead of microscopes, antibiotics, and vaccines that had brought public confidence in medicine, less-accepted tools were needed to understand and address lung cancer. Here, too, cigarette smoking spearheaded a broader understanding both of causes of death and of science. This research marked the beginning of understanding risk factors as a cause of morbidity and mortality, and an opportunity for population-based epidemiological research to become a vital center of medical research.

Although this research successfully and clearly demonstrated the harms of the cigarette, public and governmental acknowledgement and understanding of this harm took much longer. Especially with tobacco companies’ effective public relations campaign to obscure these scientific findings, recognition of these harms was very difficult. The process of compiling the 1964 Surgeon General’s Report, Smoking and Health, as well as its profound impact, mark what many experts have called the signal public health achievement of the twentieth century in the United States.14 The report carefully presented causal criteria for population-based research, and was widely recognized as establishing the harms of the cigarette beyond any reasonable doubt. As scientific technique went through a sea change, the public and policy makers had to also undergo a significant shift in order to understand and confront the meaning of the evidence that began to emerge. Furthermore, the governmental validation of scientific findings—and call to action—became a new, now-familiar type of policy in the United States.

**Confronting Cigarettes as a Health Hazard:** Government, Public, and Industry Politics, Policy, and Blame

The Surgeon General’s report provides a key turning point in this course, as well as in Americans’ relationship to the product. The report concluded:
Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men. Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action.\textsuperscript{15}

After 1964, Americans entered a “new era” in which Americans know cigarettes are harmful. Having answered whether cigarettes are harmful, the question becomes what we should do about it.\textsuperscript{16} After presenting the class with this report, and the process behind it, I ask students to consider what should have happened next, with politics, ethics, and individual rights all central issues. What regulations would make sense, knowing that cigarettes are among the leading causes of death in the United States? Even in the abstract, this question is difficult to answer. And, of course, what actually did happen was grounded in a world of politics, industrial power, and uncertainty. The report did not define what type of “remedial action” should occur in order to address this health hazard. Especially since the topic was so politically charged, with powerful southern Democrats from tobacco states controlling much of the legislative branch and with tobacco industry lobbyists wielding a great deal of influence, the need for regulation did not lead to effective changes. Additionally, in American society, individual rights and choice are highly valued, so it is difficult to determine what the appropriate action would be, even without industry and political influence.

We then examine what did happen after the report was issued, and it becomes clear that the federal regulations instituted were quite weak and ineffective at decreasing cigarette consumption. However, by the 1970s, the public was becoming less and less tolerant of secondhand smoke. The language of rights was central here, first with the tobacco industry promoting the idea of freedom of choice: that a smoker should be able to make his/her own decision about whether or not to smoke. This message was effective at limiting regulations, until other rights came into view: those of the non-smoker. As the headline in a 1972 article in Today’s Health written by anti-smoking activist and lawyer John Banzhaf makes clear, while smokers perhaps should have the right to decide to smoke, they should not have the right to harm others: “Please Put Your Cigarette Out; The Smoke Is Killing Me!”\textsuperscript{17} Over time, attitudes towards smoking and smokers shift markedly, from popular and accepted to denigrated and considered rude.

While tobacco companies tried to maintain sales by asserting that it was every person’s right to choose to smoke if they wished, a grassroots movement emerged by the early 1970s, with non-smokers asserting their right to clean air. This movement was effective in marginalizing smokers by focusing on the “innocent” non-smokers’ exposure to secondhand smoke. This theme evolves over time, as the public gets more and more intolerant of smoke in public places. Whereas in the 1930s, a Camel
cigarettes ad proposed that consumers should have a cigarette between the courses of a meal at a restaurant “for digestions sake,” by the 1980s, no-smoking sections were not enough to satisfy the non-smoking public. Across the country, regulations shifted from smoking sections to smoking bans in the workplace, in restaurants, and on airplanes. Currently, there are even smoking bans in parks, on beaches, and in public housing, indicating how significantly this social norm has shifted.

Second Primary Source Analysis: Editorial/Published Opinion Pieces

As we establish public attitudes and opinions about cigarettes, and how they have changed over time, I have students take a closer look at the historical documents related to these opinions. For the second paper, I have students find an opinion piece (editorial, op-ed, or letter to the editor) on some aspect of smoking published between 1964 and 1994. Again, the locating of the document is the first challenge. The Legacy Tobacco Documents Library website is the best resource, since the tobacco companies themselves collected millions of newspaper articles, charting the public’s opinion of their product. As students look for a source, they find it difficult to determine the difference between an op-ed and a simple report. The process of understanding that an opinion piece puts forth an opinion, rather than simply reporting on others’ opinions, is a significant, important task for my students.

Of course, what those opinions are, and how typical they are of the time period, is another key aspect to understanding and analyzing their historical significance. I provide an example in class as we look at the changed opinion about secondhand smoke over time. I display a 1984 op-ed that appeared in The New York Times and other newspapers across the United States by well-known syndicated columnist William Safire. In it, he discusses whether smoking should be restricted in a piece entitled “Blow Some My Way.” Safire’s tone here is light-hearted, and he bemoans the stridency of anti-tobacco activists, citing the “butt-inskies” who are making smokers the new persecuted minority. Calling for “simple courtesy” rather than regulation, Safire promotes tolerance, while dismissing anti-smoker concerns, comparing smoking to exposure to the bad breath of a garlic lover.

Safire’s piece, I explain in class, was much more accepted in 1984 than it would be now. He was alarmed at the call for smoking sections, but now, many towns have outright bans on indoor smoking altogether. Such an opinion piece—both in terms of tone and specific facts mentioned—illustrates a noticeable change in cultural conventions much more vividly than just reading a historian explain how these mores had changed.
The attitude shift towards people smoking in public is a central aspect of the evolving place of the cigarette in our culture, but smokers themselves also need careful consideration. My students tend to blame smokers themselves for smoking—especially in our current culture in which the overwhelming prevalent attitude is that everyone knows cigarettes are harmful and therefore, smokers have no one to blame but themselves. In class, I try to complicate this attitude. First, although it is (now) clear that cigarettes are highly addictive, it was the 1988 Surgeon General’s Report, *The Health Consequences of Smoking: Nicotine Addiction*, that established the fact that cigarettes were addictive, with Surgeon General C. Everett Koop comparing them to cocaine and heroin in terms of the power of that addiction. The choice to smoke becomes much less clear once addiction emerges as an issue. The issue of youth compounds the issue of addiction. In class, we discuss how the overwhelming majority of smokers begin to smoke as teenagers, undermining the idea that smoking is a well-informed, adult choice. Coupled with the addictive nature of the product, blame and choice become much more complex. Also, of course, cigarettes are both legal and heavily promoted, which obviously influences their consumption and success.

Finally, the tobacco industry adds a whole other layer to the question of blame and to the cultural position of the cigarette. Evidence now clearly shows that cigarette companies strategized to obscure and downplay the idea that cigarettes were harmful, that they manipulated nicotine levels to promote and maintain addiction in smokers, and that they tried to get underage smokers to smoke (with the notorious example of the “Joe Camel” cartoon depiction deserving discussion in class). Companies’ strategies and, ultimately, the legal challenges to their actions are central to the story of the cigarette, especially since the 1990s, when internal documents of the tobacco industry began to come to light.

*Third Primary Source Analysis: Industry Documents*

The final paper assignment is therefore on an industry document. This assignment definitely interests the students, but their desire to reveal a “smoking gun” sometimes makes the finding of a document difficult. As lawsuits became successful against tobacco companies in the 1990s, their reprehensible strategies came to light. Company executives publicly claimed that cigarettes were not addictive, while private documents showed that those same executives knew they were—and that the manufacturers manipulated nicotine levels to keep smokers addicted. Company executives claimed that they were not marketing to anyone under the age of 18, yet some documents showed their strategies to focus on attracting
December 17, 1953

Mr. Hoover:

Re: Disclosure of Invention

Subject: Filter Tip Materials Undergoing Color Change on Contact with Tobacco Smoke,

I have observed, and believe it to be generally true, that the cigarette smoking public attaches great significance to visual examination of the filter material in filter tip cigarettes after smoking the cigarettes. A before and after smoking visual comparison is usually made and if the filter tip material, after smoking, is darkened, the tip is automatically judged to be effective, the degree of darkening being considered as a criterion of filter efficiency. There is, incidentally, some merit in this type of qualitative test, though it is far from accurate. Because the smoking public attaches significance to this visual inspection, the possibility of incorporating chemicals into filter tip materials that would darken or otherwise change color on contact with smoke appears attractive.

It is proposed that filter tip materials, such as cotton, tobacco stem pulp, and the like, be treated with appropriate amounts of suitable pH indicator dyes, or other materials capable of color change on contact with smoke. Preferably the indicator dye, or material, should be colorless on contact with the filter tip material, which should also be light in color, and should undergo color change to a dark color, preferably brown, on contact with tobacco smoke. Other color changes, or combinations of color changes, could also be used. Filter tip material might be treated with mixed indicators, so as to be one color initially, changing to another on contact with smoke; a change from blue to red for example. Many modifications of the basic idea are possible.

While use of such color change materials would probably have little or no effect on the actual efficiency of the filter tip material, the advertising and sales advantages are obvious.

Signature
Claude Teague

Date December 17, 1953

Witnesses

(1) W. A. W. Baker

Date December 17, 1953

(2) Carroll A. Pompey

Date December 17, 1953

(3) Murray Senkus

Date December 17, 1953

From manuscript: bb

Cc: Dr. Murray Senkus

Figure 4: 1953 internal proposal from RJ Reynolds scientist Claude Teague regarding filter tip materials. From the Philip Morris Collection at the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library.
youth. The most egregious documents, however, are only a handful of the overall collection—most are much tamer, bringing out more slowly and subtly the industry’s perspective. For the paper, I ask students to consider more broadly the motivations and strategies of those in the tobacco industry, not just look for a document that shows them to be “evil.”

One document that brings in important issues about industry strategy is from the RJ Reynolds Collection of the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, written in December of 1953 by one of RJ Reynolds’ own scientists, Claude Teague (Figure 4). In this proposal regarding his recent “disclosure of invention,” Teague explains to his boss that he was working on developing components of a filter, and he suggested that an “indicator dye” be added that would be colorless until smoke touched it, and then it would turn brown. The consumer perception of this color change, he posited, would be significant, because consumers would consider it “effective” as a filter because of the color change. Although the color change, in Teague’s words, would actually indicate “little or no effect on the actual efficiency of the filter tip material, the advertising and sales advantages are obvious.”

In 1953, evidence of the cigarette’s potential harm had begun to emerge, and filter cigarettes were on the rise. In 1950, only 2% of cigarettes smoked had filters—by 1960, 50% did. Although cigarette companies did not admit that their products were harmful, they did key into consumer fear by marketing a product that seemed safer, effectively filtering out carcinogens. Public perception did not, however, meet reality in this instance, with no indication that filter cigarettes actually were safer. This distinction provides insight into considering consumer perception and industry strategy as the harms of the cigarette emerged in the 1950s.

Cigarettes in the Twenty-First Century: Regulation, Globalization, and the Public Relations of Harm

As we approach the end of the class, I have the students reflect on the cigarette’s current position, especially in light of all we’ve established about their historical position. At this point, the FDA is regulating cigarettes in the U.S., albeit with some limitations in what the FDA can actually do. Also, cigarette makers are profiting overseas more than in the U.S. Still, 20% of Americans are currently smokers, but they are now from more marginalized populations, disproportionately poor and black. Finally, tobacco companies since the late 1990s have admitted that their products are both harmful and addictive, placing them in a dissonant position as they continue to market their products. So while cigarettes endure strongly, their cultural position is significantly altered.
As we consider the current status of the product, its changing position hopefully provides the students with an appropriately complex historical perspective, as well as the tools to analyze history.

Notes

3. See Brandt, 97.
6. See Brandt, 137.
9. Women started to smoke later than men, so in this case, it makes sense to focus on male death rates specifically.
11. Brandt, 128.
17. John Banzhaf III, “Please Put Your Cigarette Out; The Smoke Is Killing Me!” 
_Today’s Health_ (April 1972), 38-41.


