

# Identity, Historiography, and Evidence: A Framework for the Upper-Level History Methods Class

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HISTORY DEPARTMENTS at many colleges and universities offer upper-level courses that focus upon the craft of the discipline. These stand-alone methods classes often lack the specific time period and geographic region that typically anchor history curriculum. Although most graduate programs in history provide in-depth exposure to historical theory, translating this knowledge into useful pedagogy for classes at the undergraduate level can be a daunting challenge. Furthermore, it is rare for graduate students to gain much, if any, *practical* experience with teaching such courses, since at most Ph.D. granting universities, full-time faculty, rather than teaching assistants or ABD instructors, offer methods classes. In terms of textbooks, instructors face complicated decisions about whether to use short handbooks, lengthier analyses of methods and historiography, or some combination of the two.<sup>1</sup> If all of this was not enough to complicate the development of such courses, newly hired faculty often receive “the methods class” as one of their first teaching assignments when starting a new position. Thus, history professors often face a lonely and poorly supported task when developing syllabi, selecting readings, and creating a basic pedagogical framework for undergraduate methods courses in history.

This essay's purpose is to provide one way to organize an upper-level undergraduate methods class in history. I base my framework upon experience gained while teaching a class titled "Craft of the Historian" at Saint Cloud State University for the past fourteen years. Many of my enrollees have been first-generation college students and many of them have expressed an interest in public history or business careers. A few students at Saint Cloud State have pursued, in some notable instances quite successfully, long-term academic aspirations, but this is the exception at my institution. The methods class at my university, which I typically offer in the fall semester, also needs to prepare students for a senior thesis project that they will complete in the spring. This means that students not only need broad exposure to historical methods and historiography, but they also need to devote at least some of their time in the fall semester class to specific preparation for individually crafted research projects that they will finish in the subsequent spring semester. Due to all of these factors, my goals when teaching this class therefore center upon exposing history majors and minors to only the most essential aspects of historical methods and historiography rather than diving deep into the intricacies of historical theories or advanced methodologies.<sup>2</sup>

### **History as an Ongoing Conversation**

Although college faculty often take it for granted that history consists of a collection of diverse interpretations that depend upon evidence gathered from primary sources, undergraduate students often cling to the view that history is primarily a collection of facts or truths. At my institution, our faculty make a concerted effort, in both lower-level surveys and upper-level courses, to focus upon diverse historical interpretations and a critical reading of source material. We also encourage students to develop their own interpretations that are rooted in primary sources of various types. Some students struggle to grasp this vision, however, and other students begin their junior or even senior years as transfer students. Minnesota requires its state universities and community colleges to embrace a commonly held "transfer curriculum," which includes the United States, Western Civilization, and World History surveys. Consequently, transfer students often arrive having completed their history survey coursework at community colleges, at high schools through

concurrent enrollment, or at other state universities. Our department's experience indicates that the coursework at these institutions is of varying rigor, and it is definitely true that history majors who transfer higher education credits from high schools or community colleges have yet to encounter a substantial research library or a significant collection of archival manuscript sources. When considered together, all of these various limitations mean that many students who enroll in the methods course have an extremely basic or even inaccurate perception of history as a professional discipline.<sup>3</sup>

One of my first tasks in the methods class is helping students understand the conversational nature of history as a field of study. In the first or second class session, I present the metaphor of a round table to students, which not too subtly represents the "democratic practice of history" articulated by prominent scholars and commentators.<sup>4</sup> I then ask students to pose and collectively discuss significant interpretations of a sample historical topic. Sometimes, students will begin with a quite broad topic, such as the Civil War or the Holocaust, while at other times they might suggest a topic they have already studied in a different history class. Either way, this topic provides me with a launching pad to discuss how competing and/or corroborating interpretations function within the discipline. On a chalkboard or markerboard, I draw the round table and divide it into pizza slice-shaped sections, which allows me to visually portray the different methods, sub-topics, and primary sources utilized by scholars who might study a given issue. I then ask students, "Where might you 'sit' at this table?" In other words, when considering the historiography of a given topic, which approaches and interpretations align with your own? This usually transitions into a conversation about the importance of listening (a.k.a. reading historiography) before speaking (a.k.a. using evidence gleaned from primary sources to advance an argument) when joining any discussion. Most students grasp the intellectual and social importance of locating themselves and their interpretations within a broader conversation when they visualize their potential contributions to the discipline in this manner. They also begin to understand how diverse perspectives, methods, and interpretations add depth and validity to human understandings of the past. They also start recognizing that historical "conversations" often occur over many years through books and articles, as well as through face-to-face discussions at conferences and other venues.

With the round table metaphor implanted in the students' consciousness, I then proceed to address four key questions students need to consider as they enter into both broader and more specific historical conversations.<sup>5</sup> The four questions that form the basic framework of student learning in my methods class are:

1. How does my identity shape my interpretation of past events?
2. How have other scholars interpreted the past?
3. How does available evidence shape my interpretation of the past?
4. How does my interpretation of the past relate to other scholars' interpretations?

Although we sequentially and systematically work our way through all four questions during the semester, I repeatedly emphasize to students that each historian must continuously and simultaneously consider these issues throughout their career. In other words, historians do not come up with a definitive answer to one of the above questions that lasts for all time, but must instead reconsider their responses in the light of new developments or evidence. During specific class sessions, however, I often tell students that we will devote the bulk of our attention to one or perhaps two of these inquiries, which often provides a degree of clarity and precision for their learning.

### **Question 1: How Does My Identity Shape My Interpretation of Past Events?**

Earlier generations of historians would likely have recoiled at the thought that a history methods course could include a question about a scholar's identity as part of its core curriculum. Yet, as more and more theorists and advanced scholars have noted, the possibility of maintaining authorial objectivity, or even the feasibility of pursuing such a goal, has become a discredited fantasy. Still, many students insist that bias is somehow a dangerous specter best avoided by historians. A scholar who begins with an agenda or even a hypothesis still begets a degree of scorn and derision from many history students. Perhaps because the history major attracts individuals who care about evidence and careful, detail-oriented studies, it also attracts students who are highly suspicious of bias. Consequently, I have found it crucial in my methods class, for a

variety of reasons, to carefully explore the role that every author's identity plays in shaping historical interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

Often, I begin a discussion about authorial bias and objectivity by continuing to address the topic raised by the students during the previously mentioned round table. For example, in one class session, students discussed the Holocaust and how potential scholars might interpret it. How might the descendant of a Jewish victim analyze the Holocaust? How might a veteran who performed combat roles in the United States armed services view this event? What about a granddaughter of German immigrants? One by one, the students noted how each of these potential authors could possess various assumptions or feelings that might shape their hypotheses and interpretations. At first, some students bristled at the thought of emotionally invested and agenda-driven historians examining this topic. But, when directly confronted with the possibility of denying these individuals the opportunity to study a historical event that deeply affected or involved said individuals, students unanimously agreed that potential bias is not a disqualifier.

A conversation about identity and how it shapes interpretations clearly helps students recognize the impossibility of demanding objective or detached authorship. Such a discussion can also reveal the *potential advantages* provided by a close emotional or personal connection to an event. Students quickly realized, in the above example about the Holocaust, that scholars from specific communities might have unique access to important primary sources. This includes personal connections that enable oral interviews with survivors, access to family-owned records, and an awareness of particular kinds of evidence. In this sense, an author's identity can be an asset, as much or more than it might contribute to bias or a misreading of evidence. This conversation can also illuminate for students how their own unique identities can open up research possibilities that might be unavailable for other historians. Since many students feel intimidated by the idea of research, this activity has proven empowering and encouraging.

Awareness of excellent scholarly work that embraces authorial identity as a positive force can also help students understand the relevance and usefulness of considering their own backgrounds. For example, in *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (2010), Chia Youyee Vang powerfully demonstrates

how her identity as a Hmong immigrant enriched her study. In addition to conducting traditional historical research through primary documents, Vang relied upon her community connections, linguistic skills, and oral interviews with other Hmong immigrants to gather and analyze evidence in a manner unavailable to many other scholars. Likewise, David Roediger's classic book, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), includes autobiographical material. These portions of the book showcase how Roediger's own childhood memories and upbringing played a key role in generating important historical questions and reflections. Even though at first glance Roediger's identity as a working class white male might seem mundane, he explains how his answers to deep questions about race, class, and ethnicity led to the publication of a study that has become hugely influential. In terms of environmental history, W. Jeffrey Bolster's experience with seafaring occupations helped him gain perspective for several important monographs, including *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (2012). These are just a few studies that highlight some of the ways an author's identity can, and perhaps should, shape historical research. I'm sure the readers of this essay could locate many others and use them to likewise demonstrate this larger principle.<sup>7</sup>

Once students begin to appreciate the relevance of an author's identity, I ask them to complete an intellectual autobiography questionnaire (see **Appendix A**). This exercise prompts students to carefully consider their own background, beliefs, and intellectual leanings. After repeated reassurances that I will not penalize them or attempt to correct them for expressing disagreement with me or for indicating affiliation with particular groups, I ask them basic questions. My inquiries initially focus upon broad issues related to background, including ethnic identity, age, political affiliation, religious beliefs, and geographic origin. Most scholars would immediately recognize the relevance of these categories for historical research. Certainly, the ethnic identity of authors has played a role in many scholarly investigations, particularly in the fields of immigration history and racial history. Likewise, politics and religion have been powerful factors in generating important historical questions and in shaping authors' research agendas. At my institution, geography has been surprisingly influential upon

students' work. As an institution in the central region of Minnesota, Saint Cloud State University draws students from the suburbs of the Twin Cities metro area and from rural areas nearby. The rural and urban backgrounds of history majors has been of extreme significance in shaping student research interests and opinions at my university.

My questionnaire then moves to more individualized questions about family life and a student's previous experiences. Without getting overly personal, I ask them to consider their relationships with siblings, parents, and friends, particularly in terms of how these might affect their intellectual development and historic interests. "Where did they grow up?" "What were some key features of their early educational experience?" I close this section with the unusual question, "What makes you angry?" I've found that a student's response to this question can often provide a window into their passions and deep-seated questions. Several years ago, a student answered this question by indicating that negative political campaigns were infuriating, so he launched an innovative study of the history of attack advertisements in nineteenth-century Minnesota. Likewise, in many other cases, this question helped a student discern an area of historical research about which they possessed significant curiosity. Since most history majors are familiar with writing papers only within the framework of course-driven geographic boundaries, time frames, or themes, the open-ended nature of a senior thesis project is a new experience. By asking detailed questions about their intellectual history, I hope to aid students as they begin the unfamiliar process of selecting a research topic on their own.

I also request that students consider their previous intellectual and academic experiences. In our department, we prefer, but do not require, that as students complete their culminating project, they investigate a topic they have already studied in one of their regular classes. This encourages students to build expertise in their subject area and read more deeply than might otherwise be the case. By asking students to reflect upon their earlier coursework, I hope they will realize that they have already gained intellectual exposure to specific geographic histories and thematic issues that could prove useful for their senior project. In addition, a student's research track record often provides at least some insight regarding their tendencies and interests. Have they repeatedly chosen to study

religious, military, or environmental topics? Do they already have some expertise with African or United States history? Have there been courses and subjects they have disliked or have been apathetic about? These sorts of questions help ensure that their ultimate selection for the culminating project will align with their passion, interests, and knowledge base, improving their odds for completion.

Finally, I encourage students to imagine their future work as scholars. What kind of a museum exhibit or documentary film would they produce if they knew they would be successful? This kind of a question provides students with at least a momentary opportunity to set aside practical considerations, which the methods course will eventually address, to think idealistically about their interests and long-term research agenda. I also ask them to consider problems or dilemmas of personal or wider significance that remain unsolved. Although this kind of idealistic dreaming might come unnaturally to those history majors who are more detail-oriented and evidence-based, it is an essential step as students select a research agenda for themselves. Ultimately, each student, like all historians, will need to strike a balance between idealistic vision-casting and practical considerations related to source material when crafting a research agenda for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

## **Question 2: How Have Other Scholars Interpreted the Past?**

Having previously addressed the issue of identity with a separate question, my hope is that students already appreciate how a diverse set of scholarly voices benefits humanity's collective understanding of the past. At the same time, helping students gain a deeper appreciation for the many different philosophical and methodological approaches utilized by scholars is a challenge. Most students have a hunger and thirst for the practical, hands-on exploration of primary sources and they express little patience for learning about the nuances of theory. Yet, by framing a discussion of methods and theory as a means toward helping students eventually unpack data and interpret evidence effectively, I have experienced some success in overcoming their disinterest.

I have found that students need to complete two not entirely different objectives when they study historiography and methods. The first goal students need to complete is obtaining a broad

understanding of approaches to historical thinking and research. In other words, generally speaking, what are an author's options when it comes to studying the past? This typically involves offering students a basic description of a particular theory or method, followed by an examination of a case study that utilizes this approach. Quantitative history, ethnohistory, and oral history are just a few of the approaches students need to understand. Reading about these methods and then analyzing an actual book or article that employs the approach helps students better comprehend the varied options they can utilize when they develop interpretations. I do not spend a great deal of time with each of these theories, but instead seek to impart a basic understanding of them with the belief that students will pursue additional familiarity and expertise with particular approaches they find useful and important.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to learning, in a general way, about various historical methodologies, the second historiographical objective for students who take my methods class involves developing expertise in regards to a particular event, process, or issue. That is, once a given student has decided upon a region, time frame, theme, and/or subject group for their individual research project, they need to explore interpretations presented by other scholars in regards to this particular topic. Most students are amazed to discover the sheer number and variety of articles and books they need to consult before they can even begin their own sustained foray into primary source research. Some become disappointed, fearing that there is nothing worthwhile left to study. On the other hand, some students who hoped to examine Gettysburg, D-Day, or other well-worn events have decided to shift their emphasis to more cutting-edge and understudied issues. Although I offer guidance, encouragement, and limited amounts of advice, it is ultimately up to each student to decide whether or not they want to join a particular historical conversation. So long as they can develop a doable study that is somewhat innovative and has the potential to offer a meaningful contribution, they have (mostly) free rein when it comes to which issues they will examine.

In addition to learning about the specific interpretations scholars have presented regarding a particular historical topic, students also sometimes need to learn about a specific methodology. That is, when a student decides to use an unusual primary source or special

methodology, I ask them to read works by scholars who have used a similar source or approach. This often includes reading books and articles that relate to radically different time periods or geographic regions from the student's chosen area. For example, I once worked with a student who was interested in studying children's perceptions of a traumatic natural disaster that occurred in the Great Lakes region of the United States. For primary sources, they were using memoirs and the collected memories of adults who had experienced these events as children. I encouraged this student to read Suzanne Vromen's *Hidden Children of the Holocaust* (2008) and Paul Escott's *Slavery Remembered* (1979) to better understand some of the potential benefits and challenges associated with using sources in this way.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, students who wanted to examine psychological issues read psychohistorical studies, while those who were interested in utilizing oral interviews read studies that incorporated that methodology. Although the need to consult methodologically relevant scholarship might seem obvious to advanced scholars, undergraduate students often become so attuned to the geographic and temporal boundaries of their particular projects that they often overlook this important work. Requiring students to consult historical work of methodological, but not necessarily geographic or temporal, salience has repeatedly added perspective, legitimacy, and sophistication to the students' senior theses and culminating presentations.

In addition to consulting scholarly works related to their particular projects, students in my methods class often need careful coaching when it comes to citing sources. The way historians cite sources often confuses and frustrates undergraduates at my institution, many of whom are familiar with the formatting requirements of the American Psychological Association or Modern Language Association. Having already exposed students to the varied methods and sources of historians, however, I have found that linking this awareness of source diversity with the mechanics historians employ in their citations is helpful. Simply listing an author's name and a date of publication within a paragraph might work well in many disciplines. But when I ask students to list all of the potential types of sources a historian might use in a project, it quickly becomes clear to them that a more precise and detailed approach, specifically footnotes, is more effective and clear for our discipline.

This also transitions nicely into a conversation about the need for correct formatting, since students can see that all of the italicizing, capitalizing, and spacing requirements have a rationale and purpose, namely, communicating essential information to the reader about the type of sources being consulted.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to discussing the process of citing sources, I have found it imperative in my methods class to conduct in-class labs that specifically address formatting issues. It is not enough, in other words, to hand students Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* and tell them to abide by its rules and examples in their papers. They need to actually work with the required style manual in class, thumb through its pages, and learn how to find specific answers to formatting questions. When done collaboratively in the classroom, students learn from each other and the exercise becomes a type of scavenger hunt (see **Appendix B**). Although I would never over-exaggerate student enthusiasm for this kind of work, it does promote learning more effectively than a lecture or a list of rules provided by the instructor. It also makes the style manual less intimidating to students and helps them perceive the guide as a helpful resource rather than an imposing collection of obscure rules.

### **Question 3: How Does Available Evidence Shape My Interpretation of the Past?**

Exploring answers to this question in my methods class also involves significant amounts of collaborative and practical work. As we move through the semester, students engage in a series of labs, in which they read and discuss a variety of types of primary sources. In terms of traditional written sources, students examine handwritten documents, published sources, and materials initially produced for private viewership. These labs help students gain familiarity with problem-solving techniques related to deciphering various kinds of written materials. Collaborative learning further reinforces the message that a scholar's identity matters in terms of historical research. I have shared Spanish-language sources with the class when I knew that some, but not all, students possessed the ability to read this language. I have also used sources that lent themselves to statistical analysis when I knew that some students were capable

with quantitative work. In this way, students realized firsthand how a researcher's particular skills and background could empower or hinder their historical research. Of course, we also tackle essential questions related to authorial intent, authorial identity, and changes in language over time as we explore these documents.<sup>12</sup>

With the increasing reliance upon personal electronic devices and the pervasiveness of typing, as opposed to writing by hand, some students face significant struggles when it comes to reading old, handwritten documents. Paleography labs have become an essential component of my methods class, and I have found that collaborative learning helps students overcome their individual struggles and failures in this area. As a scholar with expertise in colonial North American history, I have incorporated copies of handwritten documents gathered during my own research forays at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Newberry Library, and Huntington Library. In other cases, various documents available online include handwritten originals and typed transcriptions, making it easier for students to check their own work. Many students also express amazement that the spelling of words and shape of individual letters has varied so much over the course of time. This offers me a chance to further expound upon the shifting meanings of the English language in human history as well as the desirability of consistency within forms of communication today.<sup>13</sup>

As is the case with studying handwritten sources, I devote in-class space to learning about various techniques associated with analyzing various forms of visual imagery in my methods class. Students often feel quite comfortable, too comfortable in fact, with video and photographic primary sources. I try to help them move beyond accepting imagery at face value and discuss various problems and challenges associated with these types of sources.<sup>14</sup> "The Case of the Moved Body," an online exhibit related to Civil War photography hosted by the Library of Congress, helps students learn about the potential challenges of trusting photographic evidence at face value.<sup>15</sup> Through incidental learning, it also helps them gain perspective on the history of the technology and methodology of photography and how these shaped early historic imagery. Whether or not students actually end up using these kinds of sources in their individual research projects, it remains essential for them to possess a basic understanding of how historians approach visual material.

After graduating from our history program, my hope is that our alumni will at least be able to review and critique an author's use of visual sources as a form of evidence.

In terms of using video and audio sources, I tend to focus upon how historians can use sources, rather than categorizing a given source by type. That is, rather than suggesting that audio and visual sources bear an eternal designation, such as a documentary film, feature film, or primary source, I reveal how scholars can use virtually all visual sources in a variety of ways. For example, even though D. W. Griffith's *A Birth of a Nation* was originally intended as a work of historical interpretation, scholars today would regard it as being useful only as a primary source. Professional historians of the early twentieth century, such as Woodrow Wilson, hailed the film for its supposedly accurate interpretation of Civil War and Reconstruction history, but now scholars use it as a primary source to better understand the racial attitudes of Americans who lived when it appeared in 1915.<sup>16</sup> The approach of the audience/scholar, in other words, matters every bit as much as the intent of the creator, and this has been particularly true for audio and visual sources. Since most history students have watched a wide variety of historic films, once they understand key underlying principles of analysis, I have found students to be capable and eager participants in critical discussions of how scholars might use these materials in their projects.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to viewing documents and other visual sources in the classroom, I have found it imperative to help students gain practical experience with particular spaces and experiences associated with the historians' craft. This includes archives. Although the Internet has facilitated access to journal articles, online documentary collections, and even some books, its ubiquitous presence within the research landscape has also led some students to mistakenly believe that its resources are sufficient for professional historians. Partly for this reason, but also partly because I too experienced discomfort and surprise during my first visits to archives, I have found it helpful to shepherd students through their early encounters with special libraries and manuscript collections. Fortunately, most history students are curious about special collections of documents and many universities and colleges have a dedicated archivist or at least an institutional repository that is accessible. For students enrolled at smaller colleges in rural areas, or even simply for those students who

want to explore a bit, there are numerous county historical societies, museums, and other local archives available. My experience suggests that even remote areas have courthouses or other repositories that might suffice. In any case, I have found that there is no substitute for requiring and facilitating student visits to repositories. History majors can only gain confidence, familiarity, and problem solving skills through these in-person, face-to-face encounters with librarians and other document-keepers (see **Appendix C**).<sup>18</sup>

As is the case with archives, I have found it crucial to introduce students to practical experiences with oral interviewing. It is helpful to assign the guidelines by the Organization of American Historians for oral interviewing or to require students to watch video tutorials, but when students actually go and interview an actual person face-to face, they gain invaluable familiarity with this methodology. Even if students do not make great use of interviewing in their future lives as historians, they need to be able to critique the work of other scholars. Furthermore, as potential leaders within business, government, or any other occupation, it is likely that history graduates will participate in the hiring and promotion process someday. The ethical and methodological awareness they develop while pursuing their education in history will empower them for their careers, regardless of whether or not they enter history-specific workspaces. Through the process of developing their own questions, managing their own recording equipment, and engaging in conversations with interviewees, history students learn firsthand about the benefits and challenges of oral interviewing in ways that mere reading or watching cannot accomplish (see **Appendix D**).<sup>19</sup>

#### **Question 4: How Does My Interpretation of the Past Relate to Other Scholars' Interpretations?**

The final question I ask students to consider as they complete their methods class in history is, in many respects, the most straightforward. As students select a particular historical topic they wish to investigate for their senior thesis project, they begin to develop a hypothesis that they can verify through analysis of primary sources. Informed by a careful reading of scholarly monographs, articles, and/or exhibits, they analyze an innovative aspect of an event or historical process that contributes to the larger discourse

in some way. Reading secondary sources also provides awareness of commonly referenced primary documents, enabling students to hopefully discover new sources or perhaps find alternative ways of reading widely available sources. Yet, students need to continually reflect upon how their interpretation aligns with, or perhaps contradicts, the conclusions of other scholarship in the discipline.

As already indicated, when students in the methods class refine their topics and proposed methodology, they consult secondary sources that are relevant in terms of both content and method. By the end of the fall semester, they complete a literature review/historiographical essay assignment that ideally positions them for the senior project they complete in the subsequent spring semester (see **Appendix E**). I remind them, however, that there is, and always will be, a delicate balancing act that all scholars must address between examining primary sources for evidence and continuously reflecting upon how this evidence relates to other historians' work. In other words, students cannot simply cease their reading of secondary sources and turn their attention wholly to primary source research, but must simultaneously evaluate both types of evidence and position themselves and their discovered evidence within the scholarly discourse. This is a complex endeavor, but when portrayed as participants in an ongoing "conversation," students see themselves as valued contributors to humanity's collective historical understanding, instead of mere "assignment completers" trying to make their instructor happy. As students begin their senior capstone projects in the subsequent class in spring, I continuously remind and encourage them to remain aware of the latest articles and even conference presentations relevant to their work.

A challenge associated with teaching the methods class and senior thesis is remaining as up-to-date as possible in the field of history so as to effectively guide students in regards to their historiography. As an active scholar in my own field, I have remained up-to-date in terms of recent work in United States history. To supplement my familiarity with work in my own field, I have often drawn from the knowledge base and expertise of colleagues within my department when suggesting sources for students. As students work on their projects, I help them select a faculty member who will serve as a content advisor. The content advisor has expertise in appropriate and relevant subject areas and helps students locate and

read important secondary sources related to the student's project. Informal hallway conversations, e-mails, and even reviewing promotion and tenure documents have also helped me guide students to important books and articles I otherwise might have missed. Of course, quick Internet searching and reading book reviews in major journals also helps. I never truly feel completely prepared to offer counsel to students engaged in such a variety of research projects, but in some ways this is part of the joy of teaching. I learn from my students as much as, or perhaps even more than, they learn from me and there have been instances when their research has deeply shaped my own reading and scholarship.

As students complete their literature reviews near the end of the fall semester in the methods class, they provide peer review service regarding their progress. I have found that this exercise further reinforces the message that history involves constant participation in scholarly dialogue. It also helps motivate at least some students to work harder to build important expertise in their area of study. Although I never evaluate student work solely in terms of numbers, I have found that some students are surprised by the amount of reading completed by their peers. They realize that at least some history majors are willing and capable of reading dozens of articles and/or books on a given topic and social pressure helps motivate those students who would otherwise read as little as possible. When their colleagues set the standard for historical expertise high, students embrace their workload more willingly than when I nag or complain about their need to consult diverse scholarly works. By reading one another's work, students also gain new perspective about how to organize a literature review/historiographical essay. They can then selectively incorporate or reject the approaches utilized by other students. Of course, everyone, including the instructor, also benefits when students cross-check their papers in terms of grammar, formatting, and citations before final submissions are due.

### **Conclusion**

When I first taught "Craft of the Historian" at Saint Cloud State University, I had my graduate training, a colleague's previous syllabus, and little else to guide my endeavor. Over time, I gradually refined my rough approach and developed the four key

questions described above as anchors for my pedagogy. Each question relates in some way to the three essential ingredients for the development of historical interpretations; authorial identity, historiography, and evidence. As is always the case, student learning and student responses have guided my course revision process and have involved a range of potential outcomes. At the same time, whether measured statistically or analyzed qualitatively, my course evaluations and informal conversations with particular students have been consistently encouraging. As students work on their senior thesis projects in the spring semester, they routinely, if not quite universally, express appreciation for the step-by-step intensive approach I have utilized in the methods class. Those few students who have pursued graduate study have likewise been grateful for the introduction they received to historiography and methods, even as they recognized how much ground they still had to cover while pursuing their master's and doctoral degrees.

## Notes

I appreciate the help that my colleagues at Saint Cloud State have offered over the years as I have developed curriculum, including material for “the methods class.” Dr. Maureen O’Brien and Dr. Betsy Glade were especially helpful, providing me with sample syllabi and textbook samples, among other resources.

1. A few examples of suitable introductory books on historiography include Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*, second ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, seventh ed. (New York: Pearson, 2009); Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Practical guides for history research and writing include John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, ninth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2017); James West Davidson and Mark Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, sixth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009); Michael J. Salevouris, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*, fourth ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, sixth ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017); Jenny L. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students*, third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

2. A few other historians have also provided suggestions related to teaching historiography and methods courses to undergraduates. See Carol Toner, “Teaching Students to Be Historians: Suggestions for an Undergraduate Research Seminar,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 1 (November 1993): 37-51; Anthony Brundage, “Teaching Research and Writing to Upper Division History Majors: Contexts, Sources, Rhetorical Strategies,” *The History Teacher* 30, no. 4 (August 1997): 451-459; Anthony Rhinelander, “Whence Clio? Teaching Introductory Historiography,” *Perspectives on History* 34, no. 2 (February 1996); Robert C. Williams, “Teaching the Theory and Practice of History,” *Perspectives on History* 40, no. 6 (September 2002).

3. Other instructors of history courses have faced similar challenges. Caroline Hoeflerle, “Teaching Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students,” *OAH Magazine of History* 21, no. 2 (April 2007): 40-44; Elizabeth Belanger, “Bridging the Understanding Gap: An Approach to Teaching First-Year Students How to ‘Do’ History,” *The History Teacher* 49, no. 1 (November 2015): 35-62; David J. Voelker, “Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy,” *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 505-518; Arlene Díaz, Joan Middendorf, David Pace, and Leah Shopkow, “The History Learning Project: A Department ‘Decodes’ Its Students,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2008): 1211-1224; David Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,”

*The American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (October 2004): 1180-1183; Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1363-1365; Linda Sargent Wood, "Hooked on Inquiry: History Labs in the Methods Course," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 4 (August 2012): 555-559.

4. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994); Patrick Manning, "African and World Historiography," *The Journal of African History* 54, no. 3 (2013): 319-330; Geoff Eley, "The Profane and Imperfect World of Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 425-437; Peter Novick, "My Correct Views on Everything," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (1991): 703; Peter Novick, "(The Death of) the Ethics of Historical Practice (And Why I Am Not in Mourning)," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 560 (November 1998): 28-42; Michael Conway, "The Problem with History Classes: Single-Perspective Narratives do Students a Gross Disservice," *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2015.

5. Other instructors have likewise discovered that students initially struggle to see history this way, but they too have found value in posing interpretive questions and asking students to embrace the nuances of varied interpretations. Toner, "Teaching Students to Be Historians," 37-51; Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1065-1066; Jessica B. Schocker, "A Case for Using Images to Teach Women's History," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 3 (May 2014): 421-450; Nancy Shoemaker, "Where Is the History Lab Course?" *Perspectives on History* 47, no. 1 (January 2009); Wood, "Hooked on Inquiry," 555.

6. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Kenneth Cmiel, "After Objectivity: What Comes Next in History?" *American Literary History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 170-181.

7. I have used all of these books in my other history courses at Saint Cloud State, so students in the methods class who have taken these classes with me are familiar with at least some of them. Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), ix-x.

8. Dominic G. Morais, "Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom: Project-Based Learning and Student Benefits," *The History Teacher* 52, no. 1 (November 2018): 54-56; Robert P. Stephens, Kathleen W. Jones, and Mark V. Barrow, Jr., "The Book Project: Engaging History Majors in Undergraduate Research," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 1 (November 2011): 65-80; Brundage, "Teaching Research and Writing," 455.

9. Green and Troup, *The Houses of History*.

10. Suzanne Vromen, *Hidden Children of the Holocaust: Belgian Nuns and their Daring Rescue of Young Jews from the Nazis* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2008); Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

11. Although my colleagues in the History Department at Saint Cloud State University typically introduce students to the citation practices of historians in other classes, we have found that mastery of these skills often requires repeated exposure. Also, the presence of transfer students who have taken history coursework at other institutions results in uneven levels of familiarity with footnotes and bibliographies.

12. Other instructors have likewise found great benefit in this kind of collaborative work. See Christopher Corley, "From Mentoring to Collaborating: Fostering Undergraduate Research in History," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 3 (May 2013): 397-414; Morais, "Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom," 55-58; Belanger, "Bridging the Understanding Gap," 49-53; Wood, "Hooked on Inquiry," 549-567; Toner, "Teaching Students to Be Historians," 38-42.

13. Kory Stamper, *Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017). "Elizabeth Johnson Harris Memoir," David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University Libraries, <<https://repository.duke.edu/dc/harriselizabethjohnson>>; "Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive," Massachusetts Historical Society, <<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/>>.

14. Schocker, "A Case for Using Images to Teach Women's History," 421-450; Wood, "Hooked on Inquiry," 549-567; Joseph Coohill, "Images and the History Lecture: Teaching the History Channel Generation," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 4 (August 2006): 455-465. Scholarly literature in the field of secondary education has also addressed the challenges and benefits associated with using visual imagery when teaching history. See William Gaudelli, "Interpreting Democratic Images: Secondary Students' Reading of Visual Texts," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 111-130; Walter Werner, "Reading Visual Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 401-428.

15. "The Case of the Moved Body," Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie-the-case-of-the-moved-body/>>.

16. Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

17. Michael Sturma, "Teaching American History With Feature Film," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 1 (July 2001): 65-75; Ron Briley, "From the Editor: Teaching Film and History," *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 3-4; Daniel A. Nathan, "The Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> on Film: Teaching 'Glory,'" *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 38-42; Martha J. Feldmann, "Totalitarianism Without Pain: Teaching Communism and Fascism With Film," *The History Teacher* 29, no. 1 (November 1995): 51-61.

18. Keith A. Erikson, "Putting History Teaching 'In Its Place,'" *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1067-1078.

19. Robert D. Ilisevich, "Oral History in Undergraduate Research," *The History Teacher* 6, no. 1 (November 1972): 47-50; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 273-276; "Conducting an Oral History Interview," York Region School District Board Museum and Archives, October 21, 2014, video, 8:09, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVv\\_QAFhm1A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVv_QAFhm1A)>.

## Appendix A: Intellectual Autobiography

**Purpose:** Answering the following questions will help you better understand how your identity shapes your approach to the historian's craft. It will also aid you as you carefully select a research topic. This is critically important for succeeding in this class, since much of your reading and written work will center upon the topic you choose. Choosing a topic early in the semester and sticking with it throughout the term will save you a lot of work. I encourage you to write out answers to as many of the questions as you can, but you are not required to answer questions you feel uncomfortable answering. You will need to share *something* about yourself with the rest of the class, so be prepared.

### Part 1: Who are you?

1. List the basics. What is your age? How do you identify in terms of your gender/sex?
2. What is your racial and ethnic background?
3. How rich/poor is your family? Describe the occupations/careers of your family of origin.
4. What is your area/region of origin (rural/urban, northeast, southwest, etc.)?
5. What are your political beliefs?
6. What are some of your hobbies/interests?

Part 2: What kind of a historian do you wish to be? Which topics interest you?

1. What kinds of history books have you enjoyed reading?
  
2. Which areas of the world have interested you most? Africa? Asia? Middle East? Australia? North America? South America? Europe?
  
3. Which time period(s) have interested you most?
  
4. What topics/issues have interested you most? Politics? Economics? Gender? Racial/Ethnic? Military? Religion? Biographies? Revolutions? Slavery?
  
5. What kinds of history classes have you already taken? What kinds of research papers have you already written?
  
6. Are you already familiar with an archive or set of primary sources? Do you have an “in” with a librarian, archivist, or other gatekeeper that might be helpful? Explain.
  
7. What aspects of your personal history/life puzzle you the most? Have you always wondered why you loved or hated high school? Has your religious background frustrated/puzzled you? Is there something about your family’s history that remains a mystery?

8. What issues make you angry? This is sometimes a clue regarding your deep-seated interests.
  
9. If you knew you would be successful, what kind of history exhibit would you design? What type of history film would you produce?
  
10. What do you want from this class? Are you simply interested in earning an “A”? Are you hoping to explore a topic you’ve been curious about?
  
11. List three historical topics that interest you at this moment. For each, be sure to include a geographical reference (name of a country or continent), a reference to time (1600s, 1800s, etc.), and a reference to an issue or issues (such as gender, race, religion, etc.).

## Appendix B: Citation Exercise

**Instructions:** For each “problem,” list the page number(s) in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Turabian’s Guide* that explain/provide the answer.

You need to create a footnote so that you can cite:

1. a book that has one author
2. a journal article with two authors
3. a dissertation with one author
4. an oral interview you conducted
5. an unpublished government document
6. an essay from an edited collection of essays
7. an unpublished manuscript found in the Saint Cloud State University Archives
8. a newspaper article
9. a book with an anonymous author listed
10. a book for which the place of publication is unknown

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions and list the page number(s) on which you found your answer:

11. Describe the proper way to use semi-colons when listing items in a series in a sentence.
12. Describe how to format a long quotation (more than 4 lines long).
13. Describe how to format a quotation from a poem.
14. Describe how to cite a film.
15. Describe how to refer to decades, centuries, and eras in a history paper.
16. Describe (in general terms) how to format a bibliography.

## Appendix C: Archive Exercise

For this exercise, you will need to visit a local archive, locate a manuscript source, take notes from that source, and prepare a written report. You will also need to submit photocopies of a page from your manuscript source to the rest of the class. You may NOT use materials found on the Internet.

### Instructions:

1. Select a historical topic that interests you AND would work for this exercise. It would be to your advantage to link this exercise to your broader research interests, but that may not be possible or convenient. Try to develop a hypothesis for this exercise that you can test through your research.
2. Locate and visit at least one archive library. Remember, it is usually wise to contact the archive before arriving. A list of possible institutions you can visit is provided below:
  - a. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota  
[www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org)
  - b. Immigration History Research Center, Elmer Andersen Building, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis  
[www.ihrc.umn.edu](http://www.ihrc.umn.edu)
  - c. Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, St. John's University, Minnesota  
[www.hmml.org/about/](http://www.hmml.org/about/)
  - d. Saint Benedict's Monastery Archives, St. Joseph, Minnesota  
[www.sbm.osb.org](http://www.sbm.osb.org)
  - e. St. Cloud State University Archives and Special Collections  
[www.stcloudstate.edu/library/archives/](http://www.stcloudstate.edu/library/archives/)
  - f. Stearns History Museum, St. Cloud, Minnesota  
[www.stearns-museum.org](http://www.stearns-museum.org)
3. Complete the necessary procedures (pay admission cost, complete your registration, go on a tour, etc.) before beginning your research.
4. Locate at least one manuscript source and record valuable information from it. Use care with delicate sources and obey all of the rules given by library staff.

5. Have the library staff create one photocopy of a page from a source (this usually costs about 25-50 cents). The staff may not photocopy some sources, so work with them to get a photocopy of something. Copies of microfilmed sources are acceptable.
6. In a short report (about 2 typed pages, double-spaced) address the following questions:
  - a. What kind of information did you obtain during your visit to the archive?
  - b. How might you use this information in a research project? In what ways did the data confirm or challenge your hypothesis?
  - c. What kind of challenges did you encounter as you conducted research?
7. Bring 10 photocopies of your manuscript source to class. If you want to save money, you will want to make these somewhere other than the archive itself, since photocopying costs at archives are normally high.

## Appendix D: Oral Interview Exercise

For this exercise, you will conduct an oral interview and produce a brief report describing the experience. You will also submit a list of questions, notes, and/or a digital recording of your interview.

### Instructions:

1. Select a historical topic that interests you AND would work for this exercise. It would be to your advantage to link this exercise to your broader research interests, but that may not be possible (especially if you are researching areas such as medieval history or colonial U.S. history). Also try to develop a hypothesis for this exercise that you can test through your interview.
2. Locate and contact at least one willing interviewee.
3. Establish a date, time, and location for at least one interview.
4. Prepare the necessary materials/clearances for your interview(s).
5. Conduct your interview(s).
6. In a short report (2-3 typed pages, double-spaced) address the following questions:
  - a. What kind of information did you obtain during your interview?
  - b. How might you use this information in a research project? In what ways did the data confirm or challenge your hypothesis?
  - c. What went well for you during this process?
  - d. In what ways could you improve your interviewing skills?
7. Attach a list of your prepared questions and at least one of the following items: a typed transcript of your interview, a digital recording/CD of your interview, and/or a copy of whatever handwritten notes you took.

## Appendix E: Literature Review

### Instructions:

1. Read several scholarly books/articles (7-12 total sources) that relate to your historical topic.
2. Take notes as you read. Pay particular attention to recording the authors' main conclusions, methodology, and sources. Read the footnotes/endnotes carefully.
3. Write a substantial paper (6-9 pages) that summarizes and analyzes the works of scholarship you have read. At this stage, you should be primarily concerned with content and methodological issues and less concerned with stylistic issues.

### Tips:

1. Try to read *recent* scholarly works, if possible. This is not an iron-clad rule, but something published before 1970 will, in most instances, be somewhat outdated.
2. Try to read *important* scholarly works. Check the bibliography or "recommended reading" sections of textbooks to figure out which works are important in the field.
3. Look for different *schools of thought*. Try to find areas of agreement and/or disagreement among scholars regarding your topic. Sometimes these can be subtle, while at other times they can be obvious and/or passionate. Avoid reading multiple texts that reach identical findings.
4. Try to organize your paper into subtopics and categories. For example, if studying religion, you can look at how scholars have studied religion in terms of gender, race, class, politics, region, or ethnicity.
5. Look for areas of strength and weakness in all of your texts. Critically consider your own opinions regarding this topic. Who do you agree with? Who do you disagree with? Which methodologies and sources are best suited for studying your topic?

6. Try to think of ways in which future historians could approach this topic creatively. Which questions remain unanswered? What new approaches could historians use?
7. Be sure that your paper has a main argument of its own. Your main argument should reflect your overall evaluation of the scholarly literature in regards to your topic. Often, in papers such as this, the thesis will read something like: “Although numerous scholars have addressed [*insert topic*], the issues of [*insert issues/subtopics*] have yet to receive adequate attention.” Or, you could argue that scholars have neglected certain methodologies or sources: “Numerous scholars have used [*insert type of documents or sources*] when studying [*insert topic*], but they have not yet consulted [*insert type of documents or sources*].”

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