

“I DON’T WANT TO BE A HISTORIAN! I JUST WANT TO BE A HISTORY TEACHER!”: A WEST TEXAS HISTORICAL METHODS ODYSSEY

Byron E. Pearson, Bruce C. Brasington, and Timothy Bowman
West Texas A&M University

While standing on the front steps of his university’s modest-sized library on a lovely September morning in 2016, a West Texas A&M University (WTAMU) history professor found himself confronted by a bright, talented, and very angry student. In response to his query about her poor performance on several of the initial papers assigned in his department’s junior research methods class, she glared at him and said through clenched teeth:

“I resent you.”

Stunned by her candor, the professor asked, “Why?”

“Because,” she continued, “I hate having to write all of these different kinds of papers for you. I resent you forcing us to learn how to do archival research.”

“I don’t understand,” he replied. “You’re a history major. Surely none of this comes as a surprise to you, does it?”

“You are teaching us to be historians,” the student said. “I don’t want to be a historian! I just want to be a history teacher!”

They set a time for her to come by his office to talk further and went inside. And once again, as he has done hundreds of times during his teaching career, the professor asked himself what he could do to improve his classes in historical methods to give students the best chance to succeed in the difficult history major.

History, at least bad history, is virtually everywhere: from political candidates’ misuse of it and “historical” films churned out by Hollywood, to political, social, and moral positions grounded in competing—and largely unsubstantiated—foundations of “alternative facts.” Is there still a reason to teach

students the techniques of meticulous, time-consuming, archival research, formal grammar rules, and writing skills when most people believe research begins and ends with an internet search, and world leaders respond to global crises in 280-character increments? When students communicate via emojis and cyber-slang, does it matter whether a semicolon or period is properly placed or that the apostrophe has become the *de facto* means to designate plurality at the expense of the oft-neglected possessive? In the following essay, three WTAMU history professors share their twenty-year struggle to build an undergraduate historical methods/capstone course sequence designed to give their history majors the formal writing, research, and analytical skills still required by the historical discipline that will enable them to succeed in an increasingly ahistorical world.

Identifying Needs and Finding Solutions

The history department at West Texas A&M University added the “Senior Seminar” capstone course in 1996. The faculty soon found the seminar problematic for a variety of reasons. The course, which was intended to allow students to demonstrate the skills they had acquired while progressing through the history major, had the unintended consequence, in many cases, of magnifying students’ lack of those skills instead. A faculty consensus soon emerged that some sort of “methods” course was needed. Thus, only two years later—an extraordinarily short time, given the byzantine nature of the curriculum process—the WTAMU history department added the junior-level “Historical Methods” class to its existing curriculum.

Now that Historical Methods was in place, we had to figure out how to teach it. Although the department had agreed that such a course was necessary, there was little consensus about how it should be taught. At that time there were few existing methods courses at other universities that could be emulated. The course took shape from the bottom-up largely in response to what skills

we thought the students needed to succeed. Meaningful student feedback became an indispensable part of this process.

The faculty already knew from experience that many students who major in history lack basic skills in reading, writing, and research. There are many reasons for this, from the standardized tests required by the state to the very uneven instruction students receive prior to coming to the university—the latter exacerbated by the state’s “dual credit” program, where high school students can take English courses that, in theory, are the equivalent of composition courses at the university. Generally, they are not. Thus, while the academy, administrators, and policymakers have chanted the mantra of “critical thinking” over the last two decades, faculty have encountered waves of students who struggled with the fundamentals of writing.

Additionally, although one might expect that the required freshman college English courses would address the issues of basic writing mechanics and grammar, the English department at WTAMU—reflecting recent national trends in that field—has deemphasized teaching these foundational skills in favor of a more creative writing approach. There was little hope that our students would learn the fundamentals of formal writing and research outside of the history department. As we tried to address these deficiencies over several years, the scope of Historical Methods broadened until the sheer amount of content bordered upon the ridiculous.

Fortunately, the students in the spring 2007 methods class made a remarkable, *unanimous* suggestion: that our department split Historical Methods into a sophomore writing and historiography course and retool the existing junior-level class to focus almost exclusively upon research methodology. Students the following fall also overwhelmingly favored implementing this proposal. The majority of the faculty supported the creation of a sophomore-level historical writing class as well. By the fall 2008 semester the department’s current three-course undergraduate methods/

capstone sequence—The Historian's Craft, a sophomore class covering writing and historiography; Junior Research Methods; and Senior Seminar—had become part of the required curriculum for history and history/education certification majors.

Though in theory a sophomore class in historical writing fundamentals sounded promising, once again the devil of developing it was in the details. An exhaustive search of history curricula revealed that no other institution offered such a course in 2008. Organically, and at scheduled "Methods Summits," faculty discussed, debated, and mostly disagreed about what the course should include. Other than a consensus that it could not just be a "junior methods lite" and that it needed to both stand on its own as an entry into the historical discipline and connect to the junior and senior courses, once again the faculty were faced with the task of breaking new curricular ground with very little to guide them.

The Historian's Craft evolved in a manner similar to that of the original Historical Methods class, restricted only by the overarching objectives of focusing upon writing fundamentals and introducing students to the concept of historiography. Faculty who teach it are free to innovate and refine based on their own fields of expertise and experiences in the classroom. Several different approaches emerged; some faculty elected to build the course around a workbook while others created exercises using materials available in the public domain to teach students the basics of how to write the different types of papers unique to the discipline of history. Gradually after much discussion, the faculty reached a consensus that the following "common core" of remedial objectives must be taught in the sophomore Historian's Craft.

First, faculty members demand that students take responsibility for writing correctly. This means, at the most basic level, correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Second, students must learn to polish their writing style. In this, there is likely the greatest variation among the faculty; however, the consensus is still that, at a minimum, students must learn to rewrite their work.

For most, this is a completely new concept, for they have been used to doing assignments and turning them in with no further thought of editing or refinement. More recently, students have turned increasingly to online services such as Grammarly, which many now see as yet another convenient way to save time and energy. The faculty, through this course, remains committed to challenging students to take personal responsibility for what they have written.

Finally, students must learn to cite sources correctly in *Chicago* style. As with the mechanics, students often push back and question why the minimal amount of technique they have learned does not suffice. “Why do we have to do footnotes and works cited?” is a common complaint. Experience has shown, however, that requiring the students to learn a new form of citation reveals which students are willing and able to learn new things, to think critically, and adapt.

The creation of the sophomore Historian’s Craft class also necessitated the reconfiguration of the existing junior-level course so that it emphasized research methodology and thesis development. As both classes were integrated into the curriculum, it became clear that although they each needed to have a unique focus, they must also connect to each other with respect to certain fundamentals. For example, it would be impossible to teach a meaningful course in writing and historiography without also discussing some basic principles of how to conduct research and interpret primary sources. So, rather than attempt to create and teach courses that stood completely alone, it became apparent that each of these classes would focus upon a particular emphasis while reinforcing the aggregate set of skills indispensable to the practice of history. After a surprising amount of debate—or perhaps it is *not* surprising given that we are historians after all—a faculty consensus emerged that these courses should also be sequential, with the Historian’s Craft as a prerequisite to Junior Research Methods.

By fall 2018, the department had identified the following objectives that must be covered with varying degrees of emphasis in the two methods courses as well as the senior capstone. First, students must learn to work with primary sources. For students accustomed to writing papers based on *Wikipedia* and other online sources, the idea that one must actually find, interpret, and integrate historical evidence into an essay marks a decisive moment in their education. Second, students must learn to find, critically evaluate, and integrate secondary sources into their papers. This objective often meets resistance ranging from questions about why they need to consult anything beyond the internet or a textbook to bafflement and irritation when they find out that historians, looking at the same evidence, do not just simply agree about what it means. Finally, students must learn to develop a thesis based on the evidence of primary sources and the interpretation of secondary works and write a substantial paper. Moving students' work from a mere description of their sources to the type of critical thesis we expect in senior-level work remains the greatest challenge confronting the faculty.

The Historical Methods/Capstone Sequence at West Texas A&M University

With the foregoing as context, the remainder of this essay will discuss the development and structure of our sophomore-, junior-, and senior-level historical methods/capstone courses generally; include an in-depth discussion of a specific assignment for each—and how these exercises relate to the 2016 AHA History Discipline Core (AHA Core); draw some conclusions; and identify ongoing challenges. We hope that history faculty at other colleges and universities who have faced—and continue to face—similar concerns will benefit from our suggestions and experiences.

History 2302: The Historian's Craft (Tim Bowman)

A soundless security-camera system rolled while a warm September sun shone brightly over a parking lot in Hammond, Indiana, as a freight train came speeding down some nearby railroad tracks. Suddenly a relatively nondescript, dark-colored minivan accelerated parallel to the train, increasing in speed as the conglomeration of parked cars thinned out to reveal empty parking spaces. For a brief moment the minivan outpaced the train; suddenly, the driver swerved hard to the left in order to overcorrect for a sharp turn to the right—the driver hoped to beat the train to a railroad crossing. Some trees obscured the driver's vision to his or her right, masking the appearance of a second train coming from the opposite direction on a doubled set of tracks. The two trains crossed the intersection at the same time. The driver floored it, needling in between them, kicking up a cloud of dust from the gravel encircling the intersection of the tracks and the street, obscuring the minivan and leaving anyone observing from behind the safety of the security cameras wondering what had happened to the busy and stressed out driver who had made such a foolish decision.¹

So ends the first day of the aforementioned sophomore methods course, *The Historian's Craft*. The above description is from a YouTube video. My charge to the students is a simple one: write a one-page response paper for the next class meeting, telling me, to the best of their abilities, what happened. The point is to get them to think creatively about doing research: Who was the driver? Why was he or she driving so fast? Why did the driver try to outpace a train? Was anyone injured, or killed? Finally, what larger conclusions can be drawn from this situation?

Students are thus asking fundamental questions from a limited source before realizing that they are actually “doing” history. This first in the sequence of methods courses gives students the “nuts

¹ CaptainAmerica2006, *Mom in Van Tries to Outrun Train. Train Wins*, September 7, 2007, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMvtDNATP04>.

and bolts” of historical practice. I begin by exposing the students to the idea of “history as reconstruction,” reflected in a series of short exercises in a workbook titled *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*.² Students reflect on the notion of history as a conversation among people; as such, this particular course contains a heavy element of in-class group exercises, many of which are drawn from end-of-chapter exercises in *The Methods and Skills of History*.

One element of crucial importance in teaching methods is ingraining students with a sense of change over time and narrative flow, which is not only reflected in the actual writing of historical narratives but also can be effectively built into the structure of any history course. As such, what follows from any discussion of history’s fundamental existence as an endeavor of reconstructing the past based on historical evidence is questioning the degree to which the historian is present in any given written work. Students are thus introduced to the dual-sided meaning of the word “historiography.”

Different scholars, naturally, approach teaching historiography based on their own philosophies of studying the past. One way to break this down is by devoting an entire day to the “objectivity question”; a useful way to make this digestible is by assigning the introduction to Peter Novick’s 1988 classic *That Noble Dream*, wherein the author likens the historian’s quest to attain objectivity to “nailing jelly to the wall.” My own discussion of objectivity next follows the lead of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, whose construction of “historical objectivity” fuses the empirical with the postmodern to argue that the term “objectivity” itself requires redefinition.³ Perhaps the best example would be

2 Michael J. Salvouris and Conal Furay, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

3 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

a fictitious YouTube video of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The postmodernist would say that a video is simply a recording that contains no real "capital-T Truth"; we could not know, for example, how cold it was in Gettysburg on that November day in 1863. Nonetheless, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob's approach allows for certain fundamental truths to be taken from the video: Lincoln gave a speech, said certain words, and a crowd watched him on November 19, 1863. Many historians would agree—*some* empirical truths are reflected in historical evidence. Such an approach to studying the past is logical and pragmatic.

Discussions of causality and context follow a week in the library with our history reference librarian, who reviews with the students the basics of utilizing library resources and databases like JSTOR. Causality and context, I find, admittedly, difficult to teach, but the course workbook contains easy-to-understand exercises on these topics. Other important related ideas merit discussion. For example, Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* illustrates the importance of historical contingency.⁴ These ideas paired with in-class discussions about familiar subjects illuminate contextual issues for students by taking examples from what is, to them, an unfamiliar world of studying the past. One example regarding historical context is the Cold War, which naturally explains the diplomatic history of the United States for the second half of the twentieth century.

Of course, even some of the greats can get it wrong. The class next transitions into a different section on historiography, which begins with a discussion of Edmund Morgan's 1942 classic published in the *New England Quarterly*, "The Puritans and Sex." Morgan utilizes various primary sources to demonstrate that the Puritans were not as prudish as many people (allegedly) suppose them to be, a problematic argument given that Morgan situates

⁴ Salevouris and Furay; Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989).

it within no secondary literature on the subject.⁵ Next, we move on to how bodies of literature on any given topic can change over time. A perfect example of how this occurs in my own field, borderlands history—which changes rapidly and begs for historiographical reassessment every few years—can be found in the introduction to *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories*.⁶ Finally, a readable and interesting demonstration of the rigors of historical research as well as a sensitivity to historiography is James Crisp's *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution*, in which the author details *how* he addressed numerous fundamental flaws in nineteenth-century Texas history. Truly, there is no better book to assign to students in the state of Texas that demonstrates the importance of careful research and understanding what other historians have written on a given topic.⁷

One critical element woven into the fabric of the course is an emphasis on writing. Students spend one week doing in-class exercises on the basics of historical writing and another crafting historical narratives. One of the more helpful in-class exercises consists of students correcting a pre-circulated essay submitted by another student (author's anonymity protected, of course), containing numerous basic writing errors. Showing students what a poor essay from one of their peers looks like illustrates the basic challenges that people face in writing. The two weeks devoted specifically to writing culminate with a full day of discussion that focuses upon footnoting and bibliographic citations according to the *Chicago* style.

5 Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *New England Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (December 1942): 591–607.

6 Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill, eds., *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

7 James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The class ends with a variety of activities. First, students meet with me individually about their semester project, an historiographical essay (more details below), preferably on a topic that can be revisited as the framework for a larger research essay in either an upper-division content class, Junior Research Methods, or Senior Seminar. This demonstrates to the students the ultimate importance of mastering any given literature on a topic and how to advance it through original research. The rest of the course, prior to students giving short presentations on their historiographical essays, is devoted to a smattering of topics, including various types of primary-source evidence, interpreting sources, and how to read history books. On a personal level, I feel that it is incumbent upon me as the instructor to spend some time in class discussing with students career possibilities for history majors, including the many potential difficulties that could await them should they pursue a master's degree or a PhD.

Assignment and Application: Why I End This Course with Historiographical Essays

The major assignment for History 2302 is a fifteen- to twenty-page historiographical analysis of a topic of the student's own choosing. The majority of the class is devoted to the aforementioned "nuts and bolts" approach: first assuming that students know nothing about history, teaching them the so-called "basics," and ending the course with them mastering the historical conversation on a particular subject. The historiographical essay is an effective measure of how well they have learned these writing basics and whether they have gained an appreciation of how the "history of history" (i.e., how historians have written about events over time) is as important to our discipline as individual examples of primary source-based research.

Although they are usually intimidated by the assignment, the course is designed to guide them into writing historiography papers. Numerous exercises during the semester are devoted to reading and interpreting books and articles, as well as writing

about them. For example, students spend one week early in the semester with the history reference librarian at WTAMU, which culminates in them selecting a book of their choosing by utilizing the library catalog. I encourage the students to select a topic about which they would like to learn more. For example, students during the spring semester of 2018 selected books on a diverse array of subjects, such as the Vatican's stance (or lack thereof) on the Holocaust during World War II; a transpacific history of baseball; and the historiography of the battle of the Alamo.

Students next learn about mining footnotes, or, scanning through a secondary source's references in order to generate more sources on a topic. From this point, the students select a small grouping of sources on their subject (about ten to twelve) in order to analyze the scholarly conversation in a short essay that is worth twenty percent of their semester grade. Naturally, ten to twelve books and articles almost never constitute the *entire* discussion on any given subject. Nonetheless, encouraging the students to treat their body of works as such allows them to understand the inner-workings of historiography and scholarly discussions in microcosm without becoming overwhelmed.

Finally, during the last few days of the semester, students give short, ten- to fifteen-minute presentations about their historiographical essays with the understanding that these papers constitute works in progress. Having an oral presentation attached to such an assignment is essential to the process of mastering historiographical discussions. Historiography, by its very nature, is a foreign concept to non-practitioners, many of whom tend to operate under certain assumptions about history, i.e., historians simply "report the facts," or distill information from shards of evidence and present their findings in narrative form. Even after the class discussion about Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, and the completion of in-class exercises regarding the somewhat elusive nature of the aforementioned "capital-T Truth," such misconceptions of historical practice can be so deeply engrained

in students that it is only through practice and discussion with others that students learn to speak what might be termed a new language—that of the historian. History is, at its finest, a discussion, whether that discussion takes place between teachers and students, among peers, or between the historian and her or his sources. Once students come to fully appreciate the conversational nature of good historical practice they are ready to take the next step—doing original research in the archives.

The exercise of writing an historiographical essay fits naturally within the 2016 AHA Core “Competencies” in a multitude of ways. This assignment speaks particularly well to the “Methods” section of the AHA Core, in that it “recognizes history as an interpretive account of the human past;” it “teaches students to interpret complex material;” and it teaches “the practice of ethical historical inquiry” as well as encouraging intellectual engagement with “scholars who have interpreted the past.” These core competencies can be found in “Methods” sections 2a, b, and c.⁸

Writing historiographical essays also speaks to all of the subsections in the “Provisional Nature of Knowledge” section of the AHA Core, given that students are exposed to the reality of history being an interpretive discipline that is made up of multiple, oftentimes contradictory, interpretations of the past. These skills can be found in sections 3a, b, c, and d. Finally, historiographical essays speak directly to the section of the AHA Core regarding “Historical Arguments in Narratives.” In keeping with section 5a, historiographical essays can lead students to “generate substantive, open-ended questions about the past and develop research strategies to answer them.” Indeed, this latter point is the most important reason why I end the course with a historiographical essay and encourage the students to advance the literature they have analyzed through original research in Junior

8 American Historical Association, 2016 History Discipline Core, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core>.

Research Methods and/or Senior Seminar.⁹

History 3301: Junior Research Methods (Byron Pearson)

History 3301 is a course that focuses almost entirely upon teaching students how to do archival research and to write original historical interpretations based upon that research. Rather than spend the majority of the time listening to lectures and talking about research in a traditional classroom setting, the students actually conduct research during class time in various troves of primary documents such as the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum archives, government documents, and a digitized collection to which the WTAMU library subscribes called Archives Unbound. I do not assign any books for Junior Research Methods save for Mary Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, which is a nice, short, entry point into *Chicago*-style citations.¹⁰ The readings for the course consist entirely of the primary sources the students discover as a result of their research into various topics and related secondary interpretations. The course is designed to expose students to archival research as quickly as possible and to encourage them to interpret sources and to formulate arguments based upon them.

A variety of short papers and exercises incrementally builds towards the final research project. I start with having students: (1) evaluate a finding aid for an archival collection; (2) glean historical information from non-documentary sources such as maps and photographs using handouts partially based upon National Archives and Records Administration worksheets¹¹; (3) develop a systematic method of analyzing documentary sources using Rampolla as a guide; and (4) explain how to identify, critique, and eventually develop thesis statements. My goal is to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mary Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing History*, 9th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018).

¹¹ National Archives, "Educator Resources," <https://www.archives.gov/education>.

show them how the building blocks of research, source analysis, and thesis formulation will enable them to write the article-length papers they will be expected to render in their upper-level classes and in Senior Seminar.

Approximately seventy-five percent of the scheduled class periods are spent in the archival spaces and as a result, my teaching has become almost completely individualized. Once the students are busy searching the stacks of government documents or reading old newspapers on microfilm, I can spend a few minutes with them one-on-one during each class period. The dialogue between professor and student in the archival spaces consists largely of me answering individual, unique questions about the assignments the class has in common.

Every moment brings a new query, a new set of problems to be solved. One minute I might find myself showing a student how to do a subject search in the card catalog at the museum (really!), and the next I might be explaining the meaning of the symbols found on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from the 1920s or helping a student figure out how to cite an unusual type of document for which the *Chicago Manual of Style* has no model citation. It becomes literally impossible to prepare for my teaching time in the archives in advance. My fifty years of playing improvisational jazz piano have served me well in these instances. We meet in our assigned classroom every fourth class period or so to: (1) discuss the challenges of research; (2) introduce and apply new research concepts; (3) allow students to offer critiques of whether the exercise just completed was useful or not; and (4) share suggestions that I might incorporate into the course the following semester.

As I reflect upon how I am developing Junior Research Methods, the parallels to how my first methods class evolved over twenty years ago are unmistakable. The students are showing me the way, as they have been showing me all along. Although I have taken classes to the archives for twenty years, we had never gone until two-thirds of the way through the semester because of the

amount of basic material I believed we needed to cover in the classroom first. However, thanks to a series of remarkable student experiences with the Remnant Trust,¹² a document collection WTAMU fortuitously held from 2010 to 2015, and reacquired in 2017, I determined that in the reconfigured History 3301, students needed their hands on the primary sources quickly—no later than two weeks into the semester if possible. One class, and one student in particular, forced me to reframe twenty years of teaching historical methods as it relates to primary sources. Here is a snapshot of that experience:

“Do you feel the magic?” I asked my class of history majors. The students, worn down by weeks of generating papers for my historical writing class, sat benumbed in the archives of the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum as I prepared to introduce them to my unit on primary source analysis titled “Fun with Rare and Very Expensive Documents.”

Our archivist retrieved some of the better-known Remnant Trust documents and I gave the students a list of texts they might wish to examine. Out came copies of the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Connecticut version of the U.S. Constitution (a 1787 copy, older than the copy under glass at the National Archives), an 1863 handbill that was used to post the text of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the November 1863 program for the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg that included some brief remarks made by President Abraham Lincoln.

“These are not just the artifacts of history,” I reminded them. “These documents *are* history. *These* texts have been out there working.” I explained that people learned of President Lincoln’s transformation of the Civil War from a war for union to a war for liberty from *this* Emancipation Proclamation handbill. The people of Connecticut read, debated, and ultimately ratified *this* copy of

12 For more information about the Remnant Trust, please see their website at <http://www.theremnanttrust.com/wordpress/>.

the U.S. Constitution. *This* 1350 copy of Magna Charta has been used to educate people about the foundations of English law for over 660 years, and *this* 1870 first-printed edition of the Koran helped to open the doors of enlightenment and stimulate religious debate in the East as did *this* 1611 copy of the King James Bible 250 years earlier in the West. I even mentioned that the Remnant Trust's first edition copy of the *Federalist Papers*, with copious margin notes scrawled by generations of lawmakers from the prominent Virginia family that owned it for 150 years, had caused me to covet so intensely that for the only time in my life I briefly considered stealing a historical artifact, a confession that elicited nervous titters of laughter from the students.

Soon the history majors were eagerly poring over the rare texts they held in their hands. I interrupted the happy energy now buzzing about my class and intoned in my most serious professorial voice—"Do you feel the magic? If you don't feel the magic you need to change your major... TODAY!" They nodded as one, and immediately dove back into the documents. I moved from table to table now, answering eager questions about hermeneutics, etymology, Guttenberg, and seventeenth century English script, stumped more oftentimes than not, thankful that my colleague Dr. Brasington, a specialist in medieval Latin and canon law was there to answer questions of this ilk that I could not. After forty-five minutes I had almost worked my way through all twenty students, when I arrived at the table at the very back of the room. And that's when I encountered "Haley."

She was sitting by herself at the end of the table holding a small white leather-bound book and she had not moved for probably fifteen minutes. When I sat down next to her she was crying softly, tears flowing down her cheeks. I saw that she was holding a 400-year-old copy of Niccolo Machiavelli's masterpiece, *The Prince*. I asked her if she needed my help and she shook her head no.

I spoke briefly with another student, and when I turned her

way again she whispered, “Dr. Pearson, I can’t write. I can’t even speak. I don’t know why I am so overwhelmed by this but I can’t do your assignment. All I want to do, all I CAN do right now is to hold this book.”

I smiled at her and asked, “Do you feel the magic?” She said yes, so quietly that I had to lean forward to hear. And I said, “Then just hold the book, Haley. Just hold the book. That is all you need to do today. Come back tomorrow and write my paper.” And then I walked away.

Haley’s class had felt the magic of engaging with primary sources and I wanted every class I taught from that point forward to have the same experience. Allowing students the opportunity to hold and interpret the primary sources *on their own* makes history come alive and inspires mere students of history to become historians. If they are to succeed in their content courses and to be ready for Senior Seminar, they *must* understand the difference.

Assignment and Application: Dr. Pearson’s “Soul Crushing” Thesis-Writing Exercise

In addition to its focus on research methods, History 3301 provides an opportunity to step out from the fundamentals of historiography, writing, and historical thinking taught in History 2302 and conceive of creative assignments to reinforce basic concepts with which students struggle. Many students from a typical standardized testing background do not know how to write argumentative (as opposed to synoptic) thesis statements. I designed the following two-part exercise two years ago to address this issue, and it has proven very effective.

The classroom layout and semester chronology are very important to the success of this assignment. I always have Junior Research Methods meet in a circle so the students quickly become comfortable with each other (and me) because robust discussions are indispensable to most of my assignments. The thesis-writing exercise is scheduled about one third of the way into the semester, after the students have learned how to analyze primary source

documents using the short outline in the Rampolla writing guide discussed above.

Part I of the exercise is designed to address the 2016 AHA Core “Methods” sections 2a, b, and d, and “Skills” section 4b.¹³ The students are assigned a collection of five short articles about the causes of the American Civil War. They write a one-page paper about each of these secondary sources in which they: (1) identify and summarize the thesis; and (2) explain whether the argument is convincing (or not), and why. They must also come prepared to argue their case in class. On the day the papers are due we have a no-holds-barred debate where I actively play the devil’s advocate and encourage them to do the same. Part I teaches students how to find flaws in others’ interpretations, to avoid these weaknesses when crafting their own arguments, and to defend well-written and well-supported theses.

Part II is a bit unconventional. It is designed to address the 2016 AHA Core “Skills” sections 4a and c, and “Arguments” section 5b.¹⁴ The WTAMU library subscribes to Archives Unbound, an amazing array of digitized, fully-searchable primary sources. One of the collections is a 14,195-page set of FBI documents related to the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. The students must use ten FBI documents *to write a completely biased pro-FBI argument* to rebut two pro-AIM articles and a pro-AIM PBS documentary titled *The Spirit of Crazy Horse*.

These five-page papers also require them to: (1) analyze their admittedly biased primary sources; (2) identify and assess the theses of three very biased pro-AIM secondary sources; and (3) write their own arguments based upon the only evidence I will allow them to use. I also ask them to address important questions such as “Was AIM a civil rights organization or a terrorist group?” in their papers. The students really struggle because they must go against everything they have been taught about avoiding bias in

13 AHA Core.

14 Ibid.

addition to arguing a position many of them find abhorrent. But it is in this “evidence of the struggle,” as I call it, that the real learning occurs.

The classroom discussions that result from this exercise are compelling because they force the students to step out of themselves. For example, in fall 2017, one of my students who culturally identifies as American Indian, resolutely defended the FBI's position to the astonishment of the Anglo American students in the class—thereby demolishing the idea of treating people-groups as monolithic in thought—a serendipitous consequence of the assignment. Other students have commented that they found the assignment “soul crushing” as they were forced to consider the historical events of 1973 from what they believed was a “racist point of view.” A student in spring 2018 told the class flat-out she could not do the assignment as herself and so she created an alternative identity and wrote it as someone else. Of course, I rewarded her for completing the assignment while figuring out a way to avoid personal responsibility for it.

Despite their discomfort, students have commented positively about this exercise for four semesters and they have consistently identified several positive learning outcomes. First, by restricting the sources and telling the students what position they must take, the assignment forces them to think of the art of historical interpretation as argument rather than synopsis. Second, they like that the exercise requires them to combine several skills by: (1) applying the thesis identification/analysis learned in Part I to Part II; and (2) grounding their own interpretations in that brief historiography of the topic. Finally, they learn to be intellectually honest since they must craft their arguments from the admittedly incomplete evidence they have. They have also indicated that the assignment illustrates how important it is to conduct comprehensive research as it leaves them wanting to find more sources so they can rectify their biased theses.

Every semester I have required this difficult exercise, I have

asked my students to tell me whether I should assign it in future methods classes. The students have overwhelmingly shared that the assignment is the most effective thesis-writing exercise they have ever completed because it shows them how to write argumentative theses and recognize the biases in their work for other classes. My former students who take Senior Seminar often thank me for teaching them how to write argumentative theses in History 3301. Sometimes, as this assignment demonstrates, inserting a little discomfort into the classroom can be a very effective teaching strategy.

History 4301: Senior Seminar (Bruce Brasington)

Capstone courses in history became popular during the 1990s. While many reasons undoubtedly could be given for their widespread acceptance, the nascent “assessment” movement embraced by administrators and politicians played a particularly important role in convincing departments to introduce the capstone. West Texas A&M, however, may well have been an outlier here. Rather than a response to the pressure of assessment, the decision to create the Senior Seminar in History course in 1996 was more a function of a generational divide in the department. Senior members of the department, the youngest having been tenured more than two decades earlier, did not oppose the seminar, although once it became part of the curriculum, none of them contributed to its formation or volunteered to teach it. It was, instead, faculty hired after 1989 who felt that a seminar was vitally necessary, both to increase the rigor of the major and enable—perhaps better put, compel—the students to take a wider view of history than what had been offered in their earlier courses, which were overwhelmingly in American history.

From the outset, all faculty followed several tacit rules. First, the seminar was not to be “owned” by anyone. This differed from other departments at the university, for example English and Modern Languages, where the same senior professor taught the

capstone for many years. There was also no “template” as to how to teach the seminar. However, from the first offering, a seminar on the Crusades, we have generally agreed that broad topics accessible to a variety of students’ interests would work best and that the seminar should require weekly readings, discussions, essays, and, above all, a major assignment. Most have required the last item to be a lengthy research paper based on primary and secondary sources; a few have allowed students preparing for secondary teaching to develop and present detailed lesson plans either with a shortened research paper or even as a substitute.

As with any course, the curriculum of Senior Seminar has changed over time. Faculty have come and gone; “assessment” has gained a foothold through required “embedded” assignments measured, in theory, numerically. However, the most important change has been in the students themselves. For most of its two-decade history, the seminar included not only history and history education majors (the latter far outnumbering the former) but also students pursuing a “social studies composite” degree. In theory, this major made them “more marketable” by allowing them to take a wider variety of social studies courses. These students, however, were among the weakest in the seminar; not only did they often have poor reading and writing skills but they also lacked sufficient historical knowledge of any period or subject to cope with the demands of the course. The decision to no longer require these students to take Senior Seminar was difficult. Faculty recognized that it would greatly reduce the number of students taking the course, thus jeopardizing the seminar “making.” This concern has also proven to be true. While evidence is anecdotal, it is also likely that this contributed to some students abandoning the history certification altogether in order to pursue the “social studies” option, which they perceived as easier. At the same time, we remain convinced that the decision was correct.

As for my own teaching, there have been several “pivot points” over the last decade. Early on, I structured Senior Seminar around

very broad themes that also covered a considerable expanse of time, for example “Crime and Punishment in England from the Later Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century.” Such choices reflected my desire, as a medievalist, to include at least a little of my own period. While the seminars went well enough, I gradually realized that I had to take a more focused approach to a topic and also recognize that most students had a stronger background in more recent history. However enthusiastic I might be about the medieval component—and more than a few students were interested as well—the subject was simply too broad and remote for the majority.

In recent years, I have offered seminars broadly considering the cultural and social history of the West from 1870 to 1914. I have also chosen topics that draw upon the resources available at our university. A recent seminar on “microhistory” enabled students to take advantage of the unique resources of the Panhandle Plains Museum. For example, a student did a very interesting history of a small town in New Mexico based entirely on a close reading of vintage postcards. While small, the museum’s collection of paintings from the Gilded Age has enabled several students to write interesting papers on fashion and gender. I have thus learned the same lesson with Senior Seminar as my colleagues have learned from teaching the sophomore Historian’s Craft and Junior Research Methods: The course must engage students through immersion in primary sources. No matter how interesting, diverse, and accessible digital resources may be, there is no substitute for the raw, physical material found in libraries, archives, and collections.

Another “pivot point” concerns how the students present their work. There was a particular incident that prompted this change, for early on I had simply followed the pattern of my own undergraduate and graduate seminars: a single, formal presentation at the end of the semester. One day a couple of years ago, midway through the semester, a student asked to speak with

me after seminar. She was one of the very best students, and thus I was surprised to learn that she was worried about her paper. She got to the point: “I’m having problems because I’m not finding what I am looking for.” I explained to her that, rather than a problem, this was a very good thing indeed. First of all, she was looking for evidence to *support* her thesis. Even more important, she was *questioning* her thesis. Rather than trying to fit evidence to an argument, she was recognizing that the thesis needed changing. I assured her that she had now given me even greater confidence in her promise as a scholar, for she had demonstrated both her intellectual honesty and a desire to actually improve her work, as opposed to merely “getting it done.”

That conversation profoundly changed how I teach Senior Seminar. Her willingness to share her “problem” with me has led me to require weekly, brief presentations from the students. I explain that I do not want presentations that “tell me what I want to hear.” On the contrary, I want to hear about failure as much as success as they research and write. I want students to get past the culture of perfection in which so many have been trained, a way of teaching that has reduced learning to finding the single, “right” answer which, inevitably, has created the fear of “getting it wrong” in front of peers and professors. I contribute as well, by discussing my weekly frustration in my own research. Experience has shown that, after weeks of discussing both the progress and the setbacks in their research, the students are, by semester’s end, far more comfortable in critiquing themselves and one another in a supportive way.

Assignment and Application: “Dr. Brasington, What’s a Riot?”

As noted earlier in this essay, the senior capstone became part of the history curriculum before the creation of the two required methods courses. As the sophomore and junior methods courses were added, and the process of integration begun, faculty were committed to the senior-level class being about the process of historical creation to which the students had been introduced in

previous methods and content courses. Experience shows that this works best when the seminar is structured around a comparative theme no earlier than the nineteenth century, as the majority of our courses treat the world since 1800.

I have always developed a new topic for each seminar. I want to be fresh so I can challenge both myself and my students anew. I also learned that polling students the semester prior to offering the seminar has been a very good idea. Most recently, per the AHA Core “Provisional,” and “Complexity,” sections 3a, c, and d, I offered “Western European Urban Life: 1880–1914: London, Vienna, Paris, Berlin,” whose primary assignment was a research paper—minimum length of 8,000 words—based on both primary and secondary sources, prefaced by a historiographical essay. I allowed students to venture outside of Europe, provided that at least one of the cities chosen for their research was European. I also encouraged the use of non-textual sources, something the AHA Core “Decode” section 4a also recommends.¹⁵

One student took this very much to heart, and compared and contrasted the photography of crime scenes, above all murders, in Paris and New York. She investigated what these photographs revealed about social and cultural history, in particular their “intentional” and “unintentional” messages. The varying techniques employed by French and American photographers highlighted the images’ “intentionality.” The American crime photographers confined their work to the *crime scene*, thus focusing on the victim in a very confined context. The French, on the other hand, understood the *context* of crime far more broadly. From the work of the French photographer Bertillon, the student noticed how the French photographs began first with the street, then the front of the house, and inside, through hallways and passageways if necessary, to the crime scene itself. To her, these photographs created a social narrative not found in the American pictures. She also then discussed the “unintentional”

¹⁵ Ibid.

social and cultural information gleaned from the background of the pictures, for example food items and cans in pantries, and the types of furniture and furnishings. This comparative approach touched upon several of the AHA Core Competencies including “Knowledge” sections 1b and c, “Methods” sections 2a and b, and “Create” section 5a.

In addition to the major research paper, I also gave embedded assignments throughout the semester. These connected with weekly readings, both primary and secondary. Each assignment required a short, 300- to 500-word paper and class presentation. For example, students were required to pick a neighborhood from the famous “Booth Poverty Maps,” a series of maps of London from the late nineteenth century that plotted social and economic conditions, along with the prevalence of crime, in a color-coded scheme.¹⁶ At the same time, students had to read journal articles on English society and culture in the period that focused, for example, on racial and gender stereotypes. Along with analysis of the neighborhood, the student also had to transcribe, to the best of his or her ability, and integrate the written report by the investigator and police officer, which the website also provides.

While this assignment connected in multiple ways to the AHA Core,¹⁷ it was particularly congruent with the “Competencies” sections 2b, 3c, and 4a requiring the student to consider a wide variety of historical sources. In the sophomore and junior courses, students had already become familiar with historical maps; this prepared them for the Booth maps of London. For example, the junior class requires students to interpret and discuss the social and economic information presented on Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Amarillo archived in the museum. Dating from the early twentieth century, they are roughly contemporaneous with the Booth maps.

Many students struggled when critically comparing what

¹⁶ <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/map/14/-0.1174/51.5064/100/0>.

¹⁷ AHA Core.

they learned from the maps and reports with arguments made by modern scholars.¹⁸ Taking a critical stance proved the greatest challenge, the discomfort Dr. Pearson mentioned in his thesis-writing assignment. An exasperated student, whose question I chose to head this section, likely spoke for the majority of the seminar. The Booth map assignment had inspired this student to investigate the posh West End of London. His reading of both modern scholarship and contemporary primary sources had led him to accounts of working-class protests in the 1880s. Whether it was the *Illustrated London News* from the 1880s or a historian writing a century later, the many different ways an event was described as a riot bothered him. In his case, however, he came to terms with the discomfort, and began to distrust the reification of an event. He discerned instead that it was better to think of riots as individual events—each taking place in a particular moment in time, each the result of specific social, economic, and cultural circumstances—before attempting to find some sort of overarching category into which they all had to fit.

Perhaps this is the most important lesson learned from the Senior Seminar. It matters not whether one is the professor or the student: Historical research and creation are process, not product. The syllabus and AHA Core do not exist for their own sake. They serve better, I believe, as signposts, not objectives. The ambiguities, contradictions, even silences of the sources, whether visual or written, cannot be avoided. To keep asking questions of them is what makes a historian, whether student or teacher.

Conclusion

We now return to our angry student who wanted to be “just” a history teacher. The scheduled discussions between student and professor did take place. By the end of the fall 2016 semester she

18 For example, one of the assigned essays was Nils Roemer, “London and the East End as Spectacles of Urban Tourism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 3 (2009): 416–434.

had become one of the most driven undergraduate researchers we have ever taught. Her passion for research was ignited when, while mining the collections in the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum archives, she discovered a journal written by the wife of a prominent Texas Panhandle rancher, an Englishman who died aboard the *Titanic*, a topic in which she had been interested since childhood. In the blink of an eye, she became a historian, and, although she does not know it yet, a better history teacher because of it. All it took was for someone to create an opportunity for her to get her hands on the sources and to show her how to analyze and write about them. Her own love of history and innate curiosity did the rest.

We live in a world where most people believe that convenient, instantaneous access to information is the same thing as knowing. Our three-course sequence subverts that comfortable assumption. They are neither convenient nor “quick”; nor do they pursue mere information. Instead, their slow, difficult journeys through the “cultural debris,” to quote Russell Kirk,¹⁹ of dusty, forgotten volumes of government documents, diaries, letters, and faded photographs, invite the students to wonder. From that wonder may even come amazement. Once amazed, as in the case of the young woman above, they will embrace and apply both the skills and ideas we teach in historical methods and the senior capstone. Instead of wanting to become mere history teachers, they will want to become historians.

From a faculty perspective, developing and teaching these ever-changing courses is an ongoing exercise in experiential learning. These courses are the heart of our major; however, they are also required. Thus, student apathy and even hostility is common, at least at the outset. Faculty enthusiasm is indispensable to success;

¹⁹ Russell Kirk, “Cultural Debris: A Mordant Last Word,” in *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 160–163.

one must teach like his or her hair is on fire to capture and hold students' attention. How else can one teach the intricacies of creating proper *Chicago* citations or communicate to students the importance of writing with precision? One can never become too comfortable when delivering these courses because *any* degree of complacency, *any* lack of enthusiasm on the part of the faculty member, even for only one class period, can result in the loss of the entire class for the semester due teaching that is stale, or worse—irrelevant. In order to convince the students that these courses—and the principles we teach in them—matter, they have to matter to us, perhaps even more so than the classes we teach in our respective areas of expertise.

Thus, despite our ongoing revisions to these courses, certain challenges remain: How do we smooth out the carryover from one class to the next? How do we (or can we) break through to students who simply do not have the ability to improve their writing? How do we account for the fact that some students can get deeply into the sophomore course (or, perhaps even pass it) without really understanding something as simple as what a thesis statement is? How do we persuade administrators to care more about these courses, which are (truly) the heart of our major? Finally, how do we convince budding historians to understand the most important thing—that having a personal standard of excellence is what separates the good historians from the mediocre ones? Can that even be taught?

The struggle, of course, will always continue. Teaching our students how to write formally and to think like historians in a world where history is constantly derided as a “pointless profession” and standardized testing has won the day sometimes seems a Sisyphean task. Nonetheless, it is the reliance upon student feedback and the *continued* conversations among the faculty who believe that these three courses are indispensable to our students' success that will ultimately benefit them in the long run. In many respects, history is more about asking the right questions than it is about providing the right answers. Much the same can be said about teaching.