

**A TEACHING NOTE:  
GETTING STARTED IN A COURSE ON HISTORICAL METHOD**

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**All teachers teach method as well as content, whether they intend to or not.**

**Therefore, we should teach method explicitly. If we don't, students are likely to learn passive and sloppy methods and not know the difference between plagiarism and thinking.**

**Exercises are one of the best ways to draw attention to method.**

For 25 years, I have been putting these propositions into effect at the College of Staten Island. They shape all my teaching, from the freshman level to the graduate level, and they dominate one course, "Introduction to Historical Method." This "teaching note" describes the exercises that I use at the start of the course, looking at "What Is a Fact?" and "Point of View."

An exercise is not a paper. Papers focus on results; exercises focus on process. In a paper, one suppresses preliminary thinking and dead ends; in an exercise, one shows them and gets credit for them. Each exercise starts with a question or a task. Students do the task, or devise a way to answer the question, using a certain body of material (or rummaging around the library and the Internet), and simultaneously they watch how they complete the task—this is where method comes in. The methodological dimension asks what we do when we think historically. So each exercise has both content goals and methodological purposes. Exercises use short, informal writing methods—lists, notes, questions, paragraphs, occasionally culminating in a short paper. Equally important, exercises provide raw material for discussions. Students complete the exercises to hand in at class time; then I devote one or two hours of class time to processing each exercise while it is still fresh in mind. Using exercises turns each course into a laboratory about the use of evidence. (This "teaching note" looks at opening exercises—I use this approach throughout the entire course.)

**PROLOGUE: ASKING QUESTIONS**

I rarely assign this as an exercise outside of class. More commonly, I use question-asking to start a semester or a topic. In the Method class, before I hand out the syllabus, I ask, "What could this course be about?" and go around the room; everyone has to answer. Usually students say that our role as historians is to gather information and interpret it. They talk about subjects and kinds of material; I keep bringing the discussion back to our activities. I then offer a compromise—history in a learning environment is about both activities and content. That is my real position. I agree that we cannot talk about "method" abstractly, but must embed it in material. I argue that

every course is about both method and material. In Method, the balance is weighted towards developing one's own method. In most other courses, the balance is weighted towards content—but not exclusively. We have to *do* history, and asking questions is the point of departure.

After handing out the syllabus and skimming over it, teacher-style, I do another version of this exercise, one I learned from Rose Ortiz of CSI's English Department. I fully agree with Ortiz's emphases: Reading is an activity; the first obstacle to overcome is students' passivity and resistance; students have to learn to manufacture interest. The syllabus tells them the author and title of the first book I assign, nothing more. "What could you get out of this book? What questions could you hope to answer using it?" I make them write questions for a few minutes, and then once again go around the room. Some students try to evade, saying that their questions have already been given; others improvise, expanding on things others have said. The latter is a good response—it marks a step toward listening to each other and taking each other seriously. Instead of questions, students often give answers—things they think they know, conclusions or myths from their families or peers or textbooks. I try to get those students to turn their pictures into hypotheses to be tested. We usually end up with a good list of questions on the board, which I make them copy down to use as they read. In the next class, I return to these questions. I ask which questions we are able to answer and which do not pan out. Asking and answering questions aimed at establishing the methodology of learning—open inquiry, experimentation, an activity shared among the students and between the students and me.

### **EXERCISE ONE: WHAT IS A FACT?**

Get the facts, the Rankeans say—facts are building blocks for historians. So we start with a simple inquiry and exercise:

Is it a fact that Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson said "What is good for General Motors is good for the country"? I don't know, because I haven't done the necessary research. Your assignment is to decide whether you can prove it to be a fact, or prove it not to be a fact.

First, do the research. As you research, make a list of all the steps you take, even if they don't yield information. Record each source, what you find in it (i.e., take notes), and any problems you have with accepting the information (i.e., think while you read and hunt). Go as far as you can.

Secondly, write a page or more saying how sure you are that you know the truth and can prove it. What is the relevant evidence? How good is it? Why have you reached your conclusion? Is there any doubt in your mind? What is your criterion for calling a statement a fact—common consent among your sources? Provenance, the source used by a particular author? Internal consistency (i.e., there are no contradictions within the

account of the events within which the statement was recorded)? External consistency (i.e., a particular account doesn't contradict other accounts)? Plausibility? A "smoking gun"? The "ring of truth"?

Hand in your list of steps, notes, and page. You might not find a definitive answer; I will reward diligence and an honest, searching assessment of WHETHER you can say that it is a FACT that Charles E. Wilson did say the words attributed to him above. In addition, I will reward ingenuity and following directions. I will mark down for lateness, not just this time but always.

### PROCESSING ACTIVITY FOR EXERCISE ONE

One of my hallmarks is that I ask students to write on the board. This practice speeds up class and makes it less teacher-centered. Many refuse, but after coaxing some students comply. First, I ask students to write one source that they consulted. Usually they have sources that cover the gamut from encyclopedias to textbooks, monographs, and websites; often someone has consulted a parent or a friend. Someone always writes a quotation or a conclusion on the board, not the name of a source. This student wants to rush ahead to the "answer." My purpose is to discuss what works and what does not work. I want them to discover that encyclopedias do not work and that they inevitably encounter dead ends. In every class, some show real ingenuity and have tips to share that prove useful for other assignments.

The next step is to ask them to put their best evidence on the board. In this particular case, the students have different versions of the quote. Some give it as I have, including the (intentional) misquotation. A number of students go to the *New York Times* on microfilm to locate Wilson's words. He made his comment in confirmation hearings; the transcripts were released to the press eight days later. Wilson said, "I cannot conceive of (a conflict of interest) because for years I thought that what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa. The difference did not exist."<sup>1</sup> This usually leads to a lively discussion of whether there is a difference between the two wordings.

"What convinced you?" opens the next round of questioning. I want students to develop their own terms for their criteria for calling a statement a fact, and offer the ones in the third paragraph of instructions as hints. It is plausible that Wilson would have said, "What's good for General Motors is good for the country," but here plausibility lets us down. One can take the *New York Times* account of the hearings as a "smoking gun." I usually introduce the journalistic notion of corroboration by a second independent source, and put great weight on the "source of a source." "Common consent" is hard to obtain in this case, since secondary sources often misquote Wilson. Of course, historians often infer "common consent" if a couple of authors agree; we

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<sup>1</sup>*New York Times*, January 24, 1953, 8.

have to satisfy "reasonable doubt," not "cockamamie doubt." Students now rarely take authors as "authorities," which gratifies me. In any group of students, some learn from this exercise that they have not gone deeply enough, but I give good grades to those who realize that they do not have an answer and could say what was missing. If the students give me an opening, I talk about myths and stereotypes—statements that look like facts but are based on inadequate evidence.

Virtually any "simple fact" can be plugged into this format. I have asked, "When was George Washington really born?" The date one gives depends on the calendar one uses, since England changed from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1759, and of course we use a third calendar (Washington's birthday—now President's Day—is always on a Monday in February). Another very successful version of this exercise asks, "Were there any women prisoners in the Bastille on July 13, 1789?" Students can find primary documents on line, and also make inferences from various secondary accounts.

Doing this exercise over the years convinced me that my definition of "a fact" is operational: A fact is a statement that has survived a process of testing. I employ all of the tests given in the directions.

In the course of this discussion, someone usually says that it all depends on your point of view. That remark challenges the whole meaning of a fact and the goal of objectivity. I do not want to settle these issues; I want to keep them alive as main themes of the course. To advance discussion, I have students move on to Exercise 2.

### **EXERCISE TWO: POINT OF VIEW**

I assert that everyone has a point of view from which to look at reality. (The Rankeans thought that they could get rid of their point of view, but even they admitted that such a thing existed. They called it "bias.") So I ask:

What was Eric Schlosser's point of view as he wrote *Fast Food Nation*? What kinds of people and behavior did he like or dislike? What were his values? What yardsticks did he apply to people?

Your task in this exercise is to construct Schlosser's point of view, using ONLY the introduction and the first five chapters of *Fast Food Nation*. Do NOT do extra research; I will mark down if you do! To categorize his point of view, you may compare his point of view with that of other historians whose work you know. As you write up your answer to this exercise, cite passages that support your points and comment on those passages.

### **PROCESSING ACTIVITY FOR EXERCISE TWO**

I begin by having students put their best piece of evidence on the board. We process them, looking for value-laden words, words that express approval and disapproval. One particularly telling passage reads, "The fast food chains feed off the sprawl of Colorado Springs, accelerate it, and help set its visual tone. They build large

signs to attract motorists and look on cars the way predators view herds of prey."<sup>2</sup> The word "predators" jumps out at us. Is "sprawl" a neutral word, or is it also value-laden? Can we really separate the author from his words? Moving along, by combining this passage with other ones, we can refine our descriptions of Schlosser's point of view. Is he simply anti-business, or is he impressed by the innovations made by Carl Karcher (the founder of Carl's Jr.) and Ray Kroc (of McDonald's)? Does he treat franchise owners differently than corporation heads? Other revealing passages deal with labor law violations and with the experiences of a seventeen-year-old girl working at a McDonald's.

One especially thorny problem is whether we can distinguish between Schlosser's main idea and point of view. I am delighted when this problem arises, because having a main idea is a key part of other assignments that follow in the course. I argue that his personal likes and values lay behind the main idea but that they are not the main idea. Schlosser's main idea is that we are a fast food nation, not that he doesn't like fast food. He describes the whole system of food production and the ways it has changed under the pressure of fast food.

We have at our disposal the instruction that Lord Acton sent to contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History* in the early twentieth century: "nothing shall reveal the country, the religion, or the party to which the writers belong."<sup>3</sup> Acton's maxim gave us categories for weighing point of view: Is Schlosser's point of view notably "American"? Is it "un-American" to be anxious about the impact of fast food on children? Does he temper his criticisms because fast food is so central an institution in our culture? As usual, this exercise leads to asking how the major sociological variables—class, gender, race—enter into someone's point of view. Most groups of students do not think that Schlosser's gender or race has much effect on the book; his class has more effect.

Once we have described Schlosser's point of view, the question inevitably arises: What should we do about our point of view? Acton's maxim, cited above, embodies an instruction to amputate one's point of view. This strategy can lead to old-fashioned textbooks that assert that there is a single story, or to saying that there are different perspectives on a subject but trying to favor none of them. Professional journalists, such as Schlosser, try to do this. The benefits of this strategy are fidelity to sources and a quest for objectivity. However, many students believe that the exercise shows that it couldn't work. One cannot get rid of one's point of view. Furthermore, there is a large drawback to trying to get rid of one's point of view: Schlosser proposes reforms to our system of food production, which inevitably make him a partisan. The opposing strategy, I argue, is to admit one's point of view. That includes making one's point of

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<sup>2</sup>Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 65.

<sup>3</sup>Lord Acton, "Letter to the Contributors to *The Cambridge Modern History*," quoted in Fritz Stern, editor, *The Varieties of History* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956), 248.

view a tool; modifying it when it doesn't allow me to see a problem or a group of people; in general, taking responsibility for it. Many historians and social scientists put their point of view into a preface or introduction. I call this the "backdoor route to objectivity." I think that we can actually be more objective this way than by following Acton's strategy. You, like my students, don't have to agree. (Self-indulgent journalism shows the pitfalls of this strategy if objectivity isn't kept as the goal.)

What should we do about our point of view in the classroom? Even though I make my point of view visible in what I write, I do not state my point of view directly in my classes. I do not want to turn off students who do not share my politics. Of course, we are all narcissists, and students are curious about us—too curious. "Good" students have learned how to say what they think the professor wants to hear; I think we should disrupt that habit. I do not want to produce clones. So I will disclose my point of view on a specific subject only when it especially determines what I have to say, and I will answer specific questions. The operational part of my point of view is my bundle of standard questions and certain moral values derived from my concepts of respect, democracy, and freedom that I share when asked.

Another thing you might not agree with is my injunction not to do research on the author's point of view. In this exercise, I want students to infer for themselves and not "find" an answer—part of my war against passivity. Once students learn to analyze texts critically for themselves, they are ready for exercises using book reviews and reviewing the literature. Those come later in the Method course.