

## REAL WORK, NOT BUSY WORK, PART II: THE PRIMARY SOURCE PAPER

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The first part of this essay, "Real Work, Not Busy Work: The Place Paper," appeared in the fall 2003 issue of *Teaching History* (92–96). Here in Part II, "The Primary Source Paper," I explore ways in which research papers can become "real work" rather than "busy work."

### The Primary Source Paper

"Real work" has relevance to people's lives, or the lives they imagine themselves leading. Some history majors envision themselves as professional historians upon graduation, so assignments that train them to do what historians do in those future jobs will be seen as "real work." Yet many of our students, even in upper-level classes, will not become professional historians. When the skills acquired in "doing" history—i.e., finding information, weighing evidence, examining interpretations critically, and communicating effectively to nonspecialists—can be made relevant to other jobs, then assignments that sharpen those skills will also be seen as "real work." Still other students have no clear idea what they want to do. These individuals, feeling a bit lost and adrift, often respond well to activities that help them feel empowered. My Primary Source Paper assignment provides one way to address each of these sets of students.

We all know well the usual "research paper" assignment: The student must review the secondary literature, analyze primary sources, and formulate an argument on a specific topic or question. Many quite justifiably call this "real work" because professional historians follow these steps. I take a slightly different approach. My students begin by reading their assigned textbook or monograph carefully, then find a primary source the author did not use, and finally consider how the author's interpretations would be affected had s/he used that source. Would the argument be reinforced, revised, or refuted? The next step provides the twist that makes this assignment different: Students actually send their papers to the author, framed along the lines of "If you were to write a new edition of your book, you might consider this source because ...." And the authors reply with substantive comments, much to the students' surprise and delight ("I can't believe he actually read my paper! He said I was right!").

The Primary Source Paper constitutes "real work" not just because students do what historians do or because they can follow their individual tastes and select something from the full spectrum of primary sources that suits their interests (poems, photographs, music, paintings, letters, diaries, oral history interviews, architecture, and more). Students get a different kind of "real work" experience by sending their papers to the author. They become more sensitive writers when their audience includes someone from outside the class. Perhaps most importantly, this assignment establishes a dialogue between the students and a professional historian. Ideas first tried out in

class among one's peers are reworked and then placed before an expert in the field. We professional historians understand this process—we write a draft, show it to peers and colleagues for advice, then revise, and eventually send it to the referees who decide about publication or funding—but students often stumble in this unfamiliar territory. Engaging in this dialogue serves a larger purpose as well. Students have their doubts at first, but then are amazed that they have something substantive to say to the “Big Name Professor” who wrote the book they read.

The success of this assignment depends upon finding the right “Big Name Professor.” I had to begin with a book that fit my pedagogical needs—something appropriate for the topic, readable, well-organized, based on solid scholarship, and having a clear thesis. Then I had to see if the author would be willing to comment on the students' papers and, more importantly, see if the author was temperamentally suited to the task. A dismissive or condescending reply to the students might quash any desires they might have to become professional historians or to engage in any other forms of dialogue. A superficial reply could make students believe they had wasted their efforts. Overly effusive or empty praise could mislead students about the rigor demanded by serious scholarship. I thank my stars that I have found two model authors: John Opie, author of *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States*,<sup>1</sup> and Robert Middlekauff, author of *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789*.<sup>2</sup>

I contacted these authors well in advance of the first day of class. They agreed to participate in this assignment primarily because, as committed teachers, they believed the students would benefit from such interaction. I also made the argument that, as authors, they would benefit as well. Wouldn't they get a kick out of hearing from their readers and from knowing that a group of people took their work seriously? Few of us who write professionally ever get this opportunity. I also argued that the students' papers could be of genuine help, and indeed Robert Middlekauff has told me he is working on a second edition and has taken some of the students' comments to heart. Finally, I made it clear that the authors need not “grade” the papers, but simply respond to them. John Opie read about thirty papers, grouped them into categories, and wrote two or three sentences of critical yet supportive commentary about each paper. Robert Middlekauff responded with grace and intelligence, and wrote anywhere from one-half to one full double-spaced page for each of the twenty or so essays he read.

Students responded enthusiastically to the Primary Source Paper. One said the assignment was “especially useful because it allowed us to present our thoughts to

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<sup>1</sup>John Opie, *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998)—for my survey course “North American Environmental History.”

<sup>2</sup>Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982)—for my upper-level course “The American Revolution.”

another historian to see his viewpoint." Another said that "writing to Middlekauff was a good idea because it was neat to get a letter back from him, and it made class more interactive." According to a third, "the chance to write to Middlekauff himself [was] awesome." "I especially liked the primary source paper," wrote an education major. "I am aspiring to be a teacher and this would be something I would like to integrate into my class." Finally, I knew I reached my goals when another student wrote: "I really enjoyed the Middlekauff assignment and enjoyed the feedback that he sent us. It was really nice to know that even though we are college students a professor can learn from us too." The students became empowered; they realized "lowly" undergraduates can make suggestions, be taken seriously, and contribute to the author's thinking. Furthermore, they realized their efforts could have a lasting effect. Writing usually done simply for a grade in one class now had the chance to affect a textbook or monograph that would be read by untold numbers of students in classrooms around the country. Many students had never before realized the power of their pen to accomplish "real work."

I have also adapted the Primary Source Paper assignment for use with non-academic books. When I teach the first half of the introductory U.S. survey course, the first non-textbook reading is a mass-market historical mystery. In the past I had used primary sources such as the writings of Captain John Smith at Jamestown or of Puritans in New England, but most students found the language so alien that they quickly lost their way. Mass-market historical mysteries, however, give students a more accessible and, to many, a more engaging way of entering the world of seventeenth-century America. And once immersed in this way, students are able to grapple better with primary sources and accomplish the "real work" that historians do.

I have recently used Robert J. Begiebing's *The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin*,<sup>3</sup> a story based on an actual unsolved murder in New Hampshire in 1648, and Stephen Lewis's *The Sea Hath Spoken*,<sup>4</sup> the third book in a series featuring a sharp-eyed midwife and her friend, a Pequot Indian sachem, in Massachusetts at about the same time. In this version of the Primary Source Paper, students investigate the author's accuracy regarding any element of the book's historical context by researching primary sources and the scholarly secondary literature. For example, students with an interest in legal matters have searched Massachusetts court records for the frequency of adultery cases or for the punishments meted out against Quakers. In order to benefit the authors, the students must suggest ways in which subsequent mysteries might incorporate their research (both authors have continued to publish stories set in the colonial period).

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<sup>3</sup>Robert J. Begiebing, *The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin* (Chapel Hill: Alogonquin Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Lewis, *The Sea Hath Spoken* (New York: Berkeley Prime Crime, 2001).

This variation of the assignment also succeeded, even though the students' interaction with the authors differed from the experience described above. Because I had a total of seventy students in two sections of the survey course, the authors could not respond to each student individually. Each wrote long letters to the class as a whole, identifying patterns in the students' research and analyses. Several students argued that Stephen Lewis's main character, the midwife Catherine Williams, held a degree of status, wealth, and power that was unrepresentative of seventeenth-century New England. Stephen Lewis agreed to a point, but also noted that he modeled his character on Anne Hutchinson, who did indeed wield considerable influence during the 1630s and who was thought to be a midwife. Lewis also pointed out that "the usual assertions about the powerlessness of women in the seventeenth century need to be nuanced by the recognition that actual lives usually do not fit neatly into the generalizations."

Robert Begiebing echoed this point when students noted that a "witch" in his story not only escaped persecution, but also seemed to be well regarded. "I included a few things in the novel that are exceptions to the general historical trends of things but for which I did find 'eccentric' evidence," he explained, "evidence that is sound but exceptional and 'proves the rule.'" The "witch" had indeed existed, and "historical evidence often points both ways, and general rules are seldom exclusive authorities when you focus on the very particular—on one time (a few months or years), and one place (a town or parish) and one person (one old widow). And when you are constructing a novel you have to make choices that serve the tale; often you go with the general rule, sometimes with the exception (founded on evidence and believably motivated through characterization) to make the story work." Such comments on "exceptions" and "proving the rule" led to fruitful class discussions. How many exceptions can one have before the historian must rewrite "the rule"? These mysteries helped my students see how historians and novelists construct the past—an especially useful lesson for budding historians—and the mysteries provided the students a "feel" for colonial New England that will probably remain with them long after they have forgotten the textbook and my lectures.

The Primary Source Paper has changed the way I think about my work. I admit to being one of those teachers who dreaded reading all of those blue books after midterms. I disliked grading so much that I would put it off, which only made it worse when students legitimately asked, "So when are you returning the tests?" Now, I look forward to reading the Primary Source Papers because they introduce me to sources I might not have seen otherwise, sources useful in my own research and in my preparations for the next year's class. The grading, rather than being a chore, has become more of a boon. Of course, I do not dive into these essays the way I eagerly reach for the latest Harry Potter book, but I think I can refine the assignments so that they can become even more useful and engaging. To do so will require a lot of "real work," but it will be worth it.

## APPENDIX

**The Primary Source Paper** (for "The American Revolution")

Our understanding of the past depends on primary sources, those items created during the time period under consideration. The historian's task involves finding relevant and interesting sources (not always an easy job!), understanding the context as explained by other scholars, coming up with one's own interpretation of how the source fits into the context, and engaging in a dialogue with peers and/or the experts about the topic. With this in mind, please follow these steps:

1. *Select a source that was created around the time of the War for Independence.* You need not select a "famous" person or the typical written/printed document. What about works of art or music? Or some physical object that was created at the time? Or an example of a landscape transformed by humans? Be creative and choose something that interests you.
2. *Each student must choose a different source* and not duplicate those selected by students in classes from previous years. I will approve your selections on a first-come, first-served basis and will provide an updated list of the sources chosen.
3. *Choose a manageable source.* Don't pick something so big that you will never get through it, but be sure to select something substantial enough that it will give you plenty of raw materials to analyze. For example, a single diary entry is too meager, while five years of entries is probably too much.
4. *Begin by identifying the source.* In your 5–7 page paper, spend the first 1–2 pages introducing the source: What is it, who created it, for what purpose, who is the audience for the source, and why is the source worth considering for this assignment?
5. *In the body of your paper, explain to the author how he might use the source in a second edition of his book.* Where exactly (give a page number) would you suggest he discuss this source? How would this source affect his interpretation of the larger context of the American Revolution and the War for Independence? For example, would the source reinforce, modify, or refute what he has said? If your source is a piece of music or a physical object, you might want to suggest how a CD-ROM or website containing this source could accompany the book. Remember the author has already written a big book; if you suggest that he add your source, what do you suggest he eliminate, and why? As for your writing style, you can choose to use your personal voice and write directly to the author, or you can use the more typical "student paper" style.
6. *Please include with your paper a photocopy or printout of your source,* or the main part of your source if it is big.
7. *Turn in two complete copies.* I will send one to the author and grade the other. Remember that for every three spelling and/or basic grammatical errors, your grade may drop by as much as one full letter.