

INTEGRATING BASIC RESEARCH INTO THE U.S. HISTORY SURVEY

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At my institution, like most others, we use the American survey both to refresh our students' knowledge of United States history and to hone their basic research, writing, and analytical skills. Until recently I, like most of my colleagues, used the traditional ten-to-fifteen page research paper to teach and test these skills. The paper worked very well as a way to produce a finished project, but I found it much less useful as a method of teaching students to think about research as a process. To help fill this gap, I developed a series of exercises that have proven effective as stand-alone assignments or when combined with a formal research paper. When I used the research paper alone, fewer than five percent of students indicated that the course helped them develop their research skills. Since I began using exercises such as those described below, roughly thirty percent of students list improved research skills as one of the strengths of the class. From a student's perspective the two main strengths of these assignments are repetition and the focus on research as a process. Students consistently indicate that they learn more from several short assignments than from one major paper. Additionally, students appreciate that these assignments combine group demonstration, individual hands-on experience, and class discussion. From my perspective as a teacher, these assignments are a simple, fast, and effective way to integrate research into the survey in a way that complements content.¹

When developing these exercises, I deliberately focused on electronic resources since they are the most efficient and popular types of research tools available to our students. They are also the only tool the majority of our students use. Despite the fact that most students rely on electronic resources, few have any formal instruction in their use. As a result, their search techniques tend to be haphazard and their results incomplete. Since the Internet became an effective research tool in the mid-1990s, historians too often have abdicated responsibility for introducing students to basic techniques and sources either by claiming some variation of "students today grew up with this and know it better than I do" or by denying the importance of electronic resources. Neither excuse holds up. While some students might be effective researchers, most are not. Insofar as they are successful, most students succeed primarily because the volume of available data is so great that even a poor search will generally locate an adequate amount of information. Since the late 1990s the amount of new information continues to be converted into more accessible forms. In 2002, for

¹For a more complete description of our general education program goals see: <http://www.missouristate.edu/ucollege/General%20Education/FacSenGoals.htm>. Our student evaluations ask only about strengths of the course without specific mention of research or other skills, so I assume the number of students who gain from these assignments is actually significantly higher.

example, the equivalent of about 5.4 billion gigabytes of new information was stored on disk, film, or paper. If all this information were converted to paper, it would equal roughly 37,000 times the entire book holdings of the Library of Congress. This flood of information has fundamentally changed the way historians conduct research. Secondary searches have become far faster and more comprehensive than was possible a decade ago and in most areas primary materials are far more available, and, with full text searching, historians today can search many collections more easily and thoroughly than the original users. In order to be effective researchers, we need to be familiar with these resources. In order to be effective teachers we need to help students develop a few simple principles and techniques they can use to sort and sift this vast sea of information.²

The Assignments

The following exercises are intended for use in a course on the history of the United States since 1877. I created these brief assignments to provide a basic introduction to the most generally useful basic finding aids and sources in U.S. history. Although these assignments can stand alone, they were also designed to meet the requirements of our general education program. As part of their general education, students at Missouri State University receive a brief introduction to the research techniques appropriate to a variety of disciplines. Departments with courses selected for inclusion into our general education program must demonstrate how the course meets the goals of general education and how it fits with similar courses in the program. The changes this required to any individual course were usually minor, but the cumulative impact for the student has been significant.³

Research Assignment One

1. Indicate the total number of books and magazines found on both "Making of America" (MOA—a periodicals database) websites when using the following search

²Anick Jesdanun, "Online Research Worries Many Educators," BizReport.com, <http://www.bizreport.com/news/8468/>. Also published as "Searching for Truth on the Web," the fourth in a five-part series written for the Associated Press on the impact of the Internet on young Americans and published in a number of newspapers. The series is available online at <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6645963/>. For a brief but interesting look at how one Australian university is adjusting to the online world, see Sue Bushell, "Always Online Generation Presents New Challenges," CIO: Australia's Magazine for Information Executives, <http://www.cio.com/qu/index.pho>, March 15, 2005. Peter Lyman and Hal R. Varian, "How Much Information, 2003?" (School of Information Management and Systems, University of California, Berkeley) <http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/>; James A. Dewar, "The Information Age and the Printing Press: Looking Backward to See Ahead," Rand Corporation on-line publication <http://www.rand.org/publications/P/P8014/>.

³<http://www.missouristate.edu/ucollege/General%20Education/FacSenGoals.htm#A>.

terms. You can locate the MOA sites most easily through a Google search. (Note to readers: answers [from early 2005] are in brackets.)

_____ Tomato canneries [0]

_____ Cannery [27]

_____ Canned tomatoes [24]

2. Indicate the number of hits from the American Memory section of the Library of Congress website for the following terms.

_____ Tomato canneries [3]

_____ Cannery [188]

_____ Canned Tomatoes [119]

3. Locate and print the first page of "The Fruit Canning Industry" by Charles Greene.

4. Locate and print a description of the capture of the schooner *Charter Oak* and confiscation of 2,000 pounds of canned tomatoes on November 5, 1864.

I give the first exercise early, before student expectations about the type and amount of work required in the course have hardened. I normally hand out the assignment during the first week of classes and give students a week to complete it. I ask for questions and comments in all intervening class periods. Classrooms at my institution are equipped with Internet access and projection equipment, so I demonstrate the basic searches using terms different from those in the assignment. The exercise is timed, so students turn it in during one of the class periods when we discuss industrialization, the creation of the national market, and the beginning of a mass consumption society. I developed a twenty-minute lecture on canning as a case study of how industrialization changed rural work patterns, national consumption patterns, and integrated the Ozarks more tightly into the national market. I refer to the canning industry and this assignment several times in the weeks that follow.

On the day students turn in the assignment, I typically spend about ten minutes specifically discussing the research process. I ask students to assume they are interested in researching the origins of the tomato canning industry in the Ozarks. When discussing their search results, I stress that the most obvious terms were too narrow. The information found using "cannery" produces mostly technical information about the organization and operation of canning companies and "canned tomatoes" produces a wide range of articles on the spread of canned foods into American life. Taken together these searches give a far more complete view of the canning industry than any could provide separately.

I originally developed this assignment for a course on historical research and writing in which I had the opportunity to work closely with students in every phase of their research. Prior to this, I had assumed that most students thought broadly about search terms and ran multiple searches using a variety of terms. What I found was that,

although the vast majority understood the importance of searching widely, very few actually did so. This assignment gives students a concrete example of how minor variations in search terms can produce striking differences in the amount and type of information they find.

The vast difference between the number of hits from the American Memory page of the Library of Congress website and Making of America provides a good place to start a discussion of the different types of information found. The American Memory search also highlights the need to be a thoughtful researcher. "Nineteenth Century Periodicals, 1850-1877" is one of the major collections included in American Memory. Given the number of hits (51 total) from MOA, a suspicious researcher would wonder why no hits from the "Nineteenth Century Periodicals" collection show up in a global search of American Memory. In class I demonstrate a full text search of the "Nineteenth Century Periodicals" collection, which returns well over one hundred hits, many of which are directly relevant to a study of the evolution of canning technology, changing American foodways, and various health and safety concerns that precipitated government regulation of the food industry and none of which appear in a supposedly global search of American Memory. The lesson for students is clear: Successful searching requires both mastery of basic techniques and a thoughtful analysis of results.⁴

Questions three and four are designed to ensure that students take the time to learn to retrieve information effectively from MOA. Although these sources allow immediate access to the full text, roughly one-third of students have trouble locating the first page of a source from MOA because the sites offer a number of retrieval options. After students turn in the assignments, I demonstrate how to link through to the proper sources. The first page of "The Fruit Canning Industry" by Charles Greene can be found on page 354 of *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*. This article shows up in a search of "cannery" in the MOA site at the University of Michigan. Researchers can find the information required in question four in two places. The search using "canned tomatoes" in the MOA site located at Cornell points searchers to page 801 of the *Official records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series 1, volume 3*. The same search run through the University of Michigan leads to page 36 of *The Shenandoah; or, the Last Confederate Cruiser* by Cornelius Hunt, her former captain. Together the sources provide different but congruent descriptions of

⁴Making of America (MOA) is one of the largest and most useful on-line collections of books and periodicals published between roughly 1815 and 1925. MOA contains over 5,000 volumes or 1.5 million searchable pages from both well-known magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and more obscure titles such as *Catholic World* and *Manufacturer and Builder*. New materials are added periodically. MOA is an unusual site in that it is split between University of Michigan www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagrpf/ and Cornell University <http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa/>. In theory, both sites are searchable through the Nineteenth Century Periodicals collection of the Library of Congress <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/moahtml/ncphome.html>. In practice, it is best to go directly to each site.

the schooner *Charter Oak* and confiscation of her stores and cargo, including 2,000 pounds of canned tomatoes.⁵

Research Assignment Two

Please complete the following:

1. The total number of articles indexed under the term "automobile" between 1899 and 1904 in the Readers Guide Retrospective (electronic finding aid available through the MSU Library).
2. Locate an article about the Fourth Annual [1904] New York Automobile Show. Copy the first page of the article and attach it to this sheet. Be prepared to discuss what this article tells you about the automobile and life in turn-of-the-century urban America.

This assignment is designed to teach students how to use Readers Guide Retrospective. This is an electronic version of the familiar *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* covering the years 1890 to 1982. The first question requires students to master a basic search; the second requires them to find an article using the microfilm collections of our campus library. Students can locate an article on the 1904 New York auto show two ways using Readers Guide Retrospective. The most effective is a general keyword searching using broad terms such as "automobile" and "New York" with the date limited to 1904. This yields one result. A student might also page through 374 entries generated by question one. Because entries can be arranged chronologically this method is not as tedious as it might seem at first glance. Readers Guide Retrospective is very simple to use, but, because most students only use electronic databases and are unfamiliar with finding aids, I find it important to emphasize Readers Guide Retrospective is not a full-text resource. When I give out the exercise, I carefully explain that Readers Guide Retrospective provides the information necessary to locate a source but not the source itself. About twenty percent of students report difficulty finding the article requested in question two within our library. When I have multiple classes working on this assignment, I assign each a different article; otherwise students might have problems getting access to microfilm.⁶

⁵Charles S. Greene, "The Fruit Canning Industry," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, 18 (October 1891), 358-364. United States Naval War Records Office, *Official records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I - Volume 3: *The Operation of the Cruisers April 1, 1864-December 30, 1865* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), 801. Cornelius Hunt, *The Shenandoah; or, the Last Confederate Cruiser* (New York: G.W. Carlton, 1867), 36.

⁶Readers Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982, <http://www.hwwilson.com/Databases/rdgretro.htm> is an index of over three million articles from over 350 magazines. "Fourth Annual New York Automobile Show,"

(continued...)

This assignment works well when discussing American life at the turn of the twentieth century. The number of articles on the automobile generally surprises students, as do the large number of manufacturers and nations represented at the New York auto show and the range of designs and power plants used in the cars. Unlike the other exercises, which I assign so that they are due when we are discussing the topic, I give this assignment out while discussing progressivism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. I tell students they can expect to find hundreds of articles about the automobile and I use this as an entry point into a brief discussion of ideas about progress and technology. I return the assignment the day we discuss the impact of the automobile on post-World War I America. This helps drive home the point that Henry Ford did not invent the automobile but he did make it a mass consumer item.

Research Assignment Three

There is a myth that the average American was unaware of the deteriorating global situation during the 1930s. You doubt this and wish to research the matter further. In the library locate two examples of significant press coverage of an event of international concern between 1932 and December 6, 1941. Copy the articles and write a 200-word summary of their contents.

The best way to locate articles from the 1930s is to use either the Readers Guide Retrospective or the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*. The Readers Guide Retrospective is available online through the Missouri State Library site and the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* is located in the reference section of the Library. After you locate a list of possible titles, check SWAN for holdings and locations. (Note to readers: SWAN is the on-line catalog at Missouri State University.)

By the third exercise students are ready to move on to a self-directed search. They understand the difference between a finding aid and a database; they have generally mastered basic search techniques and should remember to think carefully about search terms. In the instructions that accompany this exercise, I encourage students to scan the reading for the coming week for a specific event they wish to learn more about, such as Japan's attack on the *Panay* or the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. If a student's interests are more general, say on shifting public attitudes toward Germany, I recommend a broad keyword search. For example, a keyword search using "Germany" and "United States" between the years 1932 and 1941 will return 194 entries, most of which appear to be relevant examples of American attitudes toward Germany. This assignment typically lends itself to a brief but productive discussion of different search techniques and terms since a few students invariably pick the same

⁶(...continued)

Scientific American, 90 (January 30, 1904), 74-75+.

topic yet select different sources, which in turn leads to different understandings of events. This provides a natural lead-in to discussion of foreign affairs during the 1930s. This assignment in particular shows students how difficult it can be to draw meaningful conclusions from incomplete, inconsistent, and conflicting sources. Most students conclude that the average American was probably more uncertain how to interpret international events than she was unaware of their occurrence.

Research Assignment Four

Imagine you have been assigned a major research paper on the school integration crisis in Little Rock that occurred in 1957-58. Conduct a complete literature search using ABC-CLIO's *America: History and Life*.

- _____ 1. Total number of relevant articles you located using ABC-CLIO. [32]
_____ 2. Total number of relevant books you located using ABC-CLIO. [14]
_____ 3. Total number of relevant dissertations you located using ABC-CLIO. [4]

America: History and Life, published by ABC-CLIO, is the most comprehensive search tool for secondary sources on any topic in North American history published since the mid-1950s. Few students are aware of its existence and fewer still have had any instruction in its use. The on-line version is, in my opinion, the single most useful research tools currently available to American historians. This is the only assignment not linked in some way to primary source materials and as a result it is the least well integrated into the content of the course. I use this assignment to introduce students to historiography. We discuss issues such as point of view: The 32 articles found in this search discuss the events at Little Rock from the perspective of students and parents of both races, from the perspective of school administrators and politicians, as a media event, and in the context of memory and remembrance. Comparing and contrasting the article summaries gives students a fuller sense of the variety of perspectives possible when approaching a subject. It also leads naturally into a discussion of sources. When I combine these assignments with a formal paper, as I do in Honors classes, I give the ABC-CLIO exercise early in the semester in order to help students make their secondary search more effective.⁷

Research Assignment Five

Locate two different newspapers from the week of your birth. Use them to supply the following information:

Date of Birth: _____

⁷ABC-CLIO *America: History and Life and Historical Abstracts*, <http://serials.abc-clio.com/>.

Major international news item: _____
Major local news: _____
Weather: _____
Movie option: _____
Television option: _____
Cost of mid-range automobile (include make/model): _____
Cost of major appliance (include type): _____
One surprising item from the news: _____

By this time most students are comfortable using the various finding aids, navigating the library stacks, and operating the microfilm readers. The point of the final assignment is to shift the focus back to the source and remind students how much information they can glean about everyday life from newspapers. This exercise is generally the most popular of the research assignments. Students searching their local papers sometimes find their birth announcement, occasionally listing it as a "major local news" item. I typically ask students to compare and contrast the view of life in the mid-1980s as depicted in our discussion of the newspapers with the view of the period found in the text.

Some Advice for Teachers

Assignments such as these are simple to construct. I vary the particulars based on my current research interests. I have developed the format and procedure through five semesters of trial and error. Based on that experience, I offer the following advice for anyone interested in creating similar assignments.

1. Consult with colleagues in the library as you design your research exercises and provide them with copies when you assign them to students.

Shortly after I began experimenting with these assignments, one of my colleagues in reference politely informed me that it would be helpful to everyone involved if I would inform them when I planned to give research exercises to roughly 100 students, many of whom show up a day or two before the assignment is due. He was right—student success and satisfaction rose significantly when the reference staff began to receive copies of the exercises. Our reference staff has been extremely helpful in alerting me when our library gets access to new finding aids, such as Readers Guide Retrospective, and in helping me develop more effective search techniques.

2. Keep the assignments simple.

For example, three of the five assignments are identical for all students in a class. This makes it far easier to sort out and explain why a search was not as complete as it could have been. There is often a significant difference in the number of hits students are able to locate, but because everyone, including myself, has done the same search, it is fairly easy to discover how the process went astray for any individual student and explain how to correct the problem. Originally I allowed students to select their own

searches with the thought that I could check their results quickly. Unfortunately this was only true for those who had done searches correctly. I quickly discovered there are many ways to do an incomplete search and it is often neither easy nor quick to discover and correct the error.

3. Keep current with online finding aids and databases.

The Internet has become much less ephemeral in the last five years. Commercial search engines such as Google have made it far easier to locate resources, and electronic versions of traditional finding aids such as *Readers Guide Retrospective* and *America: History and Life* now allow for simpler and far more powerful searches than were possible a few years ago. Access to collections has begun to coalesce around a relatively small number of major websites such as those created by the Library of Congress or the National Archives. As a result, guides to Internet research are no longer universally outdated by the time they are published. The best single guide to online resources related to the research and teaching of U.S. history currently available is *History Matters: A Student Guide to U.S. History Online*. This well organized book is a distillation of the best of History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, the pioneering website created by the Center for History and New Media and the American Social History Project. This slim volume contains descriptions of 250 of the most useful sites for both research and teaching. It is extremely well organized and indexed and although it is designed as a research and reference tool for students, teachers will find it extremely helpful as well.⁸

4. Integrate the assignments into your class content.

When I began using this type of assignment two years ago, student reaction was mixed. Partly I had overestimated the average student's familiarity with basic search techniques; partly the exercises were not as clear and straightforward as they should have been. Mostly, however, I was not as effective at integrating these assignments into the course and explaining how these exercises help build the basic skills needed to develop a richer, more complete understanding of the past. Initially many students saw these assignments as "busy work" with no practical point. I found that by incorporating them into the content of the class, and by asking students to take the information they have discovered and either go beyond the text or explain how these types of sources shaped the text, I was able to turn these assignments into "real work."⁹

⁸Alan Gevinson, Kelly Schrum, Roy Rosenzweig, *History Matters: A Student Guide to U.S. History Online* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005). "History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web," <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>.

⁹For a good discussion of the importance of "real work" and the research paper, see David C. Hsiung, "Real Work, Not busy Work, Part II: The Primary Source Paper," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 29 (Spring 2004), 36-40.