

HIST 607: Writing History

Syllabus, Fall Term 2016

Concept

This is a seminar about the writing of history. Here “writing” means both the craft of writing history and reflection upon the distinctive nature of historical writing. Neither concerns *primarily* the fundamentals of good writing: composition, grammar, and the like. It is assumed that you will have already acquired these skills. Rather, the subject of this course concerns the writing of history proper, and all that is involved in such writing. One might think of “all that is involved” as extending along two different spectra. One is the spectrum of quality, ranging from excellent to poor -- excellent history (in terms of writing) to poor history (in terms of writing). The other is the spectrum of genre, namely, what kind of history one chooses to write and what choices one makes regarding the style of writing that kind of history. Both spectra will be taken into account in this course, the first as a matter of your performance -- your progress towards excellence, towards improvement of your history writing skills-- the second as a deliberate choice of writing strategy, from among well-tested alternatives, for your particular historical subject, including the voice you bring to bear in your treatment of that subject.

In order to pursue these general goals, the seminar will explore, systematically, major features (or “components”) of the craft of writing history. Each of these will be addressed through explicit discussion of certain main features of the craft and through close examination of some “best practice” examples. These latter are intended to be instructive with respect to the particular writing feature/component under consideration rather than models. While each feature is derived from and pertains to multiple kinds of writing – the writing of fiction, for example – the focus in this seminar will be on the relevance and application to the specific task of writing history. Our discussion of craft in this sense will have both a technical/pragmatic aspect, in which writing technique is a central element, and a conceptual aspect, through which one seeks to understand what one is up to and what is at stake in the pursuit of excellence.

Parallel to our exploration of the craft of writing history, the seminar will address a variety of issues pertaining to the relationship between writing history and the nature of the historical enterprise. The intent here is to foster a reflective approach to the writing of history, one that achieves not only good writing but also writing that deliberately conveys the reality that history claims to represent or construct. Writing history in these terms is more than about doing a “good job” in addressing a particular topic, developing a useful and persuasive argument, and writing well. It is also about the specific mode of communicating the knowledge of reality that history, as a discipline, claims to offer *distinctively*, within the universe of knowledge pursuits. This objective is itself contested and subject to varying interpretations. As a consequence developing a reflective understanding of the writing of history in this seminar is, at best, tentative, suggestive, and in no way comprehensive. The seminar nonetheless seeks to identify some of the different approaches to the relationship between writing history and “doing history,” if only to expand awareness of some issues involved.

For each individual participant in the seminar, this will be a largely hands-on endeavor, and this in several ways. First and foremost, the craft of historical writing will be engaged in terms of each participant’s research topic and source materials, which should have been gathered and initially

assimilated prior to the course. This engagement will follow the same schedule as the discussion of each component of the craft, and will take place with respect to the component in focus. Readings pertaining to the latter are intended to facilitate this engagement. Engagement will take the form of specific writing exercises, using as source materials each participant's research. These exercises are not intended primarily as steps in the drafting of the final paper for the course, but as applications of specific features of the craft, "learning by doing" with respect to each such feature. Seminar participants are encouraged to be exploratory in undertaking these exercises with respect to their own approach to writing. This means moving out of one's comfort zone, pursuing a feature of the craft that one has not undertaken before, or doing so with a deliberate and concentrated attention that one has rarely invested in such writing.

Second, the results of this writing will be shared among all participants, on a rotating basis. In this way discussion of the feature of the craft under consideration will benefit from participants' own applications of the feature to their respective research projects. Third, history writing will be examined through close analysis of readings from three excellent book-length examples of such writing, and from some journal articles. These readings will not be considered for the interpretations, arguments, or sources for which they would be valued in their respective fields, but rather for the manner in which these works are constructed and elaborated from particular kinds of sources and in particular styles. Doing so will engage seminar participants, individually in writing (separate from that engaging their own topics and research), and collectively through seminar discussion, in identifying and assessing, in each of works, the full range of qualities invested in the design of the work and the presentation of material. Such consideration will extend from the level of vision and overall construction to that of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

Approach

Seminar Sessions

In each session we will examine and analyze closely assigned sections from the book-length historical work under consideration, with focus on the component/components of the craft of writing history being addressed in that session. Then we will discuss and critique constructively the writing exercises submitted for the session completed by two or more participants. The purpose of this discussion is the elucidation, for all participants, of principles and techniques at work with respect to the writing component under consideration. Each participant should expect to prepare and submit (at the end of each session) two pieces of writing. **One**, the most important, is the **writing exercise** specified for the session, using one's own research material. Ideally this should be primarily source material that will be used for the thesis or MA research paper. Specific instructions pertaining to the writing exercise will be provided in the session prior to the one for which the exercise is done. This should be well-crafted and presented in a format expected of a finished paper. It will be evaluated and graded by the instructor, who will provide detailed critique and comment. The writing exercises of all participants will be posted on **Canvas** prior to the session for which the exercises are due; posting should be done by the Friday prior to the session. The exercises of the two or more participants designated for group discussion will be read closely by all seminar participants prior to the session. The **second piece of writing**, the **reflection piece**, is a reflection on the reading from the sample histories, addressing one or more features of the component of the craft of writing history under consideration for the session and as exemplified in the reading. Unlike the writing exercise, this need not be a finished piece and may be presented in any format (outline, notes, expository text, etc.), including that of a diary entry. It will be

given only to the instructor (in paper copy), not distributed to other seminar participants. This reflection piece is intended to facilitate discussion of the writing component/components exemplified in the assigned selection from the historical work. It will not be graded, though the instructor will take note of especially thoughtful and well-illustrated reflections.

Besides the assigned readings from the book-length historical work, the sessions of certain weeks will include an article pertaining to the enterprise of “doing history” as a distinctive form of writing. Together these articles are intended to provide statements of various genres of historical writing: history as narrative, history as science, history as “thick description,” and so forth. These articles will be discussed in the sessions for which they are assigned, as time permits. They may also be referenced in the reflection piece for that session.

Writing Activities: Details

This seminar is writing intensive. Each week, each participant will generate two pieces of writing, as outlined above: the **writing exercise** and the **reflection piece**. Both pieces will be used as “input” in the seminar session of the relevant week, in different ways. The **writing exercise** on the featured component of the craft of writing history will be “formal,” in the sense of being written as nearly as possible as a finished product. The two or more writing exercises that will be examined and discussed collectively in each seminar session will be determined ahead of the session and should be read by all participants prior to the session. Even though only some participants’ writing will be discussed, every participant should post one’s writing exercise on **Canvas**. All participants should provide, in addition, a printed paper copy to the instructor at the end of the session. The other writing activity is the **reflection piece** on the assigned reading for the session. This will focus on the reading from the sample histories, though you may also reference readings addressing conceptual and theoretical issues pertaining to the writing of history. Unlike the writing exercise, the reflection piece can be done in whatever format you choose, without concern about formal exposition or a finished product. This will be the occasion to identify, in the readings from the sample histories, good examples of the application or practice of the features of the craft of writing that are addressed each week. The reflection piece should be submitted to the instructor, in paper copy, at the end of the session. All participants are expected to complete both pieces of writing. The writing activity (writing exercise, reflection piece) assignment for each session will be posted on **Canvas** as well as distributed in paper copy one week prior to the session to which it pertains.

In addition to these weekly writing activities, a major paper will be written as the final project for the seminar. This will be based on each participant’s own research material and on any topic that makes extensive use of such material. While ideally this paper would contribute in some way towards progress on your thesis, dissertation, or master’s paper, it need not be a chapter or paper for one of these projects. For instance, you may discover, in the course of this seminar, a topic that uses your research material and that takes an approach to writing history that captures your interest, yet may not appear in that form in your thesis, dissertation, or master’s paper. Regardless of the approach you take to this assignment, the result should be a finished product that represents your best effort at writing history and, ideally, also reflects improvement or enhancement of your ability to do so, acquired in the course of this seminar. Plan on writing a paper in the range of 20-30 pages (double-spaced, 12 point font). Regardless of the subsequent use of the paper following the seminar, write the paper as a possible chapter in a book designed to be read by an educated audience not limited to historians.

Grades

The weekly writing activities (writing exercise, reflection piece) along with participation in the seminar will be evaluated together to constitute slightly more than half of grade for the course. The final paper for the course will constitute the remainder. Each week's writing exercise will receive two separate grades, one assessing performance on the writing assignment (how well the writing component specified in the assignment is executed), the other the quality of the writing. These grades are intended to be indicative, that is, to serve as a useful guide towards making progress in writing history over the course of the term. The grades on each exercise will be rigorous, ranging from A to C, in comparison with grades graduate students are accustomed to receive in their courses. The former should be interpreted in light of the feedback they are intended to provide to each participant with respect to the exercise at hand and to encourage improvement in subsequent exercises. Such improvement will be rewarded in the final grade for the course.

Contact Information

Instructor: George Sheridan
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Office Hours:

- Open hours (no appointment needed): Thursday, 1:30 – 2:45 pm
- By appointment (afternoons preferred)

The **Canvas** site will be used extensively throughout the term for postings of material and assignments as well as for sharing writing exercises

Weekly Sessions and Readings

Core texts with abbreviations:

- Stephen J. Pyne, *Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Nonfiction* [Pyne]
- Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* [Jacoby]
- David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* [Blackbourn]
- Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* [Davis]

Other abbreviations:

- Canvas [C]
- Online article [JStor]

September 26

Topic: Description of the Course, Discussion of Initial Readings and Writing Exercises

Readings:

- **Pyne**, "Packing Prose" (pp. 1-4) + Chapters 1-5 (pp. 7-51)
- James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 255-274 [JStor]

Writing Activity

- Voice

October 3

Topic: Voice and Vision

Readings:

- **Jacoby**, Introduction + Part I (pp. 1-180)
- **Pyne**, Chapters 5 & 6 (pp. 37-60)
- William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narratives," *Journal of American History*, vol. 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1347-1376 [JStor]

Writing Activity

- Voice and Vision
- Reflection on *Shadows at Dawn*, Part I

October 10

Topic: Design and Plot

Readings:

- **Jacoby**, finish reading
- **Pyne**, Chapters 7-9, 11 (pp. 61-104, 114-123)

Writing Activity

- Design, Plot, Narrative
- Reflection on *Shadows at Dawn*, entire work

October 17

Topic: Structure and Argument

Readings:

- **Blackbourn**, Introduction + Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-187)
- J. H. Hexter, "The Rhetoric of History," in *Doing History* [C]

Writing Activity:

- Structure and Argument
- Reflection on *The Conquest of Nature*, through ch. 3

October 24

Topic: Drama, Description, Setting, Character

Readings:

- **Blackbourn**, finish reading
- **Pyne**, Chapters 10, 13, 14 (pp. 105-113, 153-190)
- Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985) [C]

Writing Activity:

- Setting and Character
- Reflection on *The Conquest of Nature*, entire work, or on thick description

October 31

Topic: Writing I: Language and Approach

Readings:

- **Davis**, entire work
- **Pyne**, Chapters 12, 15-16 (pp. 127-152, 191-217)

Writing Activity

- Point of View
- Reflection on *The Return of Martin Guerre*

November 7

Topic: Writing II: Revision, Various Matters

Readings:

- **Pyne**, Chapters 18-22 (pp. 218 – end of book)

Writing Activity

- Pages from the initial draft of your course paper

November 14

Topic: Writing Academic Articles

Readings:

- Sean L. Field, "Agnes of Harcourt, Felipa of Porcelet, and Margaret of Oingt: Women Writing about Women at the End of the Thirteenth Century," *Church History*. Vol 76, no. 2 (June 2007): 298-329. [JStor]
- Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 124-151. [C]

Writing Activity

- Reflection on distinctive features of writing academic articles, with examples from the two assigned article readings

November 21

Topic: Images, Tables and Graphs, Maps

Readings:

- Richard Howells and Robert W. Matson, eds., *Using Visual Evidence*, selections [C]
- Jeremy Black, *Maps and History*, selections [C]
- James R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914*, pp. 95-128 [C]

Writing Activity

- Explication of an image, map, table, or graph that could be used for your research project

November 28

Topic: Class Discussion of Course Papers

December 8: Final Course Paper Due

Submit your final course paper to Prof. Sheridan both as printed paper copy (slip under his office door) **and** electronically in pdf or Word doc format