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How to Write a Paper for This Class

To write history is to make an argument by telling a story about dead people. You'll be dead one day, too, so please play fair, and remember: never condescend. It's probably bad enough being dead without some smart aleck using your life and times to make a specious claim. Every argument worth making begins with a question. In *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, Alfred Young's question was, "Why, in the 1830s, did people start calling what happened on December 16, 1773, a 'tea party'?" In *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, Bernard Bailyn asked, "What does the Revolution look like from the losers' point of view?" Good questions come in all shapes and sizes. Very roughly, you can sort yours into two piles. One kind is more empirical (what happened?): "Why, on the eve of the American Revolution, did the painter John Singleton Copley decide to leave Boston?" The other is historiographical (what's at stake in the debate among historians about what happened?): "Have historians overstated the role of urban artisans in securing the repeal of the Stamp Act?" The best, most rigorous and most interesting scholarship answers both sorts of question; it's also much more fun to write, and to read.

Your question hasn't been tattooed on your forehead. You can change it. Very likely, no one will even notice. If things are going well, you might decide, once you get into the research, that your question is bad, or even terrible. It might be the wrong question. It might be the right question, but you can't answer it. That's fine; that's excellent, actually: that's what's supposed to happen, so long as you think of a new question, or a chain of questions. A question isn't a fish, a very wise historian once said; it's a fishing license. It says what kind of fish you're looking for, and where you're going to put in your boat. Never go fishing without a license. Once you've got that license, though, sail into the wide water, and cast your line. These instructions concern writing, not research. How To Catch A Fish is a whole other handout.

Reel in the fish. You'll know you're ready to begin analyzing your evidence when you've found sufficient material to answer a question that fits, a question that emerges both from the primary sources and from the scholarship, a question that you can answer in a fifteen- to twenty-page paper, a question that matters to you, and that matters to historians' interpretation of the American Revolution. Another very wise historian once

said, “You only ever know what you have to say when you think of a title.” I have often found that to be true. A title, though, is mainly an answer to your question, so one way to know it’s time to start writing is if a title springs to mind.

Gut the fish. Use a sharp knife, and don’t be squeamish. Historians take the long view: there are other fish; the sea is deep. Take that view, but keep an eye out for detail. Run your fingers over the scales of your fish. What does that feel like? It usually takes a long time to ponder your evidence. Gut that fish carefully, and with method. You might wonder, before you set pen to paper, whether you’re telling a story or making an argument. Re-read the first sentence of this handout. Historians tend to write in both expository and narrative modes. In the writing of history, a story without an argument fades into antiquarianism; an argument without a story risks pedantry. Rarely does any historian choose one mode to the exclusion of another, but how to balance these modes is a crucial choice. To answer that question about Copley, of course, you need to tell a good deal of the story of his life. You might begin, “John Singleton Copley was born in 1737 in a shack perched atop Boston’s longest wharf.” Or, you might want to begin with a claim: “Copley, long understood as a Tory, was loyal to nothing so much as his art.” Because you’re making an argument about the past, about something that happened, it almost inevitably has a natural narrative shape, a beginning, a middle, and an end. But an argument has a beginning, a middle, and an end, too. People lived and died. It’s nice to put them in your paper. But ideas are vital, too. So are institutions, theories, interpretations, and, above all, evidence. Most everything is vital, so long as the way you write about it is sufficiently animated, informed, and judicious.

If you don’t make an outline, you might as well throw your fish back into the water, guts and all. Where does your argument or your story begin, where does it need to go, where has it got to end? What sequence of evidence best supports your claims? How and where will you engage both with what other scholars have written about your subject, and with broader interpretations of this period in American history, or with theories about the past, or historical forces? Fry that fish, and serve it up. Remember that you can also use footnotes to participate in scholarly debates; what sinks to the footnote and what rises to the page is an important decision. If you’re doing your work well, you will have much more material than you can possibly use. Show your reader your evidence, whenever you can—quote from the primary documents—but don’t assume that those quotations explain themselves; offer a close reading. Your reader needs to see not only your evidence but also how you interpret it. Never discard evidence that counters your argument; show that evidence, too, and explain why your argument still stands. Do this with care, and respect. You can be convincing without being a bully. Bullies usually have lousy evidence, and very little to say.

When are you done? When you’ve stated your case, and finished your story. Lots of essays begin but never end; they merely stop. Make sure to end. It’s not over till there’s nothing left but the bones, and the smell of the ocean.