

Writing History

Spring 2007
Wednesdays 12:20-2:50

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An actual book review posted on Amazon.com of a highly influential and important history book explains that a student is “being forced” to read the book for a class. It goes on to say that the book “is insightful and the arguments are compelling,” then adds a warning: “[T]his book is academic and painfully boring. If given a choice between hammering my balls flat or rereading this book, I would be forced to make a difficult decision indeed.” At the other end of the reviewing spectrum, academics can be equally uncharitable to those who aim for popularity. The professor who reviewed a popular history of late nineteenth-century America by a well-regarded historian scathingly dismissed the book because the author had not cited an obscure bibliography of articles on Polish-American history. How can scholars negotiate the territory between these two extremes, writing accurate history that attracts a wide range of readers?

In this class, students will experiment with the tools for writing history for a popular audience. We will cover the structure of various types of historical writing, the sorts of research that support a convincing argument, the audiences writing must attract, and the common writing errors that weaken prose. We are fortunate to have a number of guest speakers who will talk about their own approaches to the craft of writing: Boston Globe writer Charles Sennott, Oxford editor Susan Ferber, literary agent Dan O’Connell, and our own master of the craft Leo Richards (to coincide with the release of his new book from Knopf). During the semester, students practice the craft of writing as they spend time with successful writers, develop their own writing projects, and comment on the projects of classmates.

Course meetings: Regular attendance at class meetings is expected. Participation in class discussions will contribute 30% of your final grade.

Readings: The readings for this course are available at Amherst books, on-line, or will be distributed in class.

Projects: Students will spend the semester perfecting a writing project. This project can be a book proposal, a historical article for a popular magazine, a current affairs article for a popular magazine, a grant proposal, a documentary, or a book review for a national newspaper. Other projects may be appropriate; please check them with the instructors before proceeding to work on them.

Beginning in April, each student will present a project draft to the class. Another classmate will be assigned as the primary commentator/editor for that week’s project as we discuss the drafts in class. Every student will comment on the draft in writing and return it to their classmate at the next session. Commenting/editing on the week you are the editor-in-chief will contribute 20% of your final grade.

The final product will be worth 50% of the final grade.

Academic Honesty: Please read the official UMass policy on academic honesty as well as:

http://writingprogram.hfa.umass.edu/student_resources/plagiarism_policy.asp

Plagiarism is a serious offense that will result in a failing grade for this course and may lead to your expulsion from the university. If you are having trouble in this class let me know. We can address the problem together. DO NOT CHEAT. Whatever difficulties you are having will be much easier to fix than the problems that will arise from a charge of plagiarism.

Statement on Disability:

If you have a documented disability that may affect your performance in this class, please speak to one of the instructors so that we can make appropriate arrangements. Please notify us within the first three weeks of the semester.

January 31: Introduction: The Psychology of Writing and Editing

Reading: Stephen King, On Writing

February 7: How do we conduct historical research?

Richard Marius, A Short Guide to Writing About History

February 14: Framing a Project: The Practicalities of Structure: (book reviews, dissertations, grant proposals, magazine articles, and so on).

Readings: Heather Cox Richardson, "Adding a Page to the History of Revolutionary-Era America: A Thought-Provoking Look at a Wealthy Outsider from Virginia," review of Andrew Levy's Robert Carter: The Founding Father Who Freed His Slaves, Chicago Tribune, May 22, 2005 (handout)

UMass Office of Grant and Contract Administration:

<http://www.umass.edu/research/ogca/proceeds/dev.htm>

Grantwriting in Minnesota has a useful template for grant proposals:

<http://www.mcf.org/mcf/grant/writing.htm>

Please browse at www.americanheritage.com

Assignment: Bring to class a 2-page statement of your proposed topic.

February 21: Audience:

Readings: Please bring in your favorite work of popular history. It can be from any genre. We will discuss what makes these pieces effective and how they could be improved.

Assignment: Bring to class a bibliography for your project.

February 28: Guest writer Charles Sennott

Charles M. Sennott, The Long War—A Reporter's Notebook (an interactive website)

Charles M. Sennott, "The Imperial Imperative: The United States is the richest and strongest nation in the world. But can it succeed in Iraq, where so many other empires have failed?" Boston Globe Magazine, February 8, 2004

Charles M. Sennott, The Body and the Blood (please pay special attention to the structure of this book)

March 7: History as Literature

Reading: Jonathan Spence, The Question of Hu

Assignment: Bring to class an outline/structure for your project.

March 14: Selling it

GUEST: Dan O'Connell, Literary Agent, The Strothman Agency

Reading: Susan Rabiner, Thinking Like Your Editor

Week of March 21—SPRING BREAK

March 28: Writing for a broad audience

GUEST: Leo Richards, UMass-Amherst Department of History

Reading: Leonard Richards, The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War
(To be released Feb. 13, 2007 by Knopf; please pre-order from your favorite bookstore)

April 4: Discussion of Projects 1

April 11: Secrets of Editing: Place, Space, and Generosity

GUEST: Susan Ferber, Oxford University Press

April 18: Discussion of Projects, Round 2

April 25: History dept. colloquium: "Bridging the Nineteenth-Century Pacific"
Class meets at 3:30pm in Herter 601

Instead of our normal meeting time, class today will coincide with the History department's colloquium series, where your instructors will be discussing the problems and possibilities of their current project to write a transnational history of China and the United States in the nineteenth century.

May 2: Discussion of Projects, Round 3

May 9: Final meeting: reflection, discussion of final projects, plans for future