Writing History beyond the Academy

Professor Miller  
Herter 704  
545-4256  
mmiller@history.umass.edu

Spring 2016  
Mondays, 2:30-5:00

DESCRIPTION

How does historical perspective shape life beyond the Academy? The insights historians wrest from archival and museum collections routinely find expression in scholarly journals and monographs, but how might historians also share their knowledge in venues that attract other readerships?

This course – informed by emerging national conversations about History Communication in which this department is deeply engaged (see James Grossman and Jason Steinhauer, “Historians and Public Culture: Widening the Circle of Advocacy,” November 2014 “Perspectives”) -- aims to acquaint students with the wide array of genres open to history communication. In this seminar, students will experiment with the tools for writing history beyond the academy, from outlets aimed at general readers to those seeking to apply historical knowledge in policymaking and/or managerial settings. We will survey a range of places historians write, from the 140-character tweet to op-eds, blog posts grey literature for government agencies, graphic novels and long-form and narrative nonfiction. We will cover the structure of various types of historical writing, the audiences writing must attract, and the common writing errors that weaken prose. We are fortunate to have a number of guest speakers – including Slate.com’s history writer Rebecca Onion -- who will talk about their own approaches to the craft of writing. During the semester, students will practice the craft of writing as they spend time with successful writers, develop their own writing projects, and practice their peer review skills as they engage the projects of classmates.

COURSE MEETINGS: Regular attendance at class meetings should go without saying. The quality of your participation in weekly class discussions will contribute significantly to your final grade, as will the weekly writings, though the most important graded work will be the semester-length project.

READINGS: You may acquire the books assigned in this course any way you wish. I encourage you to patronize local booksellers, and know that in most cases used copies can be had cheaply online. Article-length readings for this course will be available electronically, or will be distributed in class.

Beth Luey, Expanding the American Mind: Books and the Popularization of Knowledge (Amherst: UMass Press, 2010).

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

Short Writing:
Social Media: Please join and explore Twitter. I’m @MarlaatUMass. Please follow @UMassHistory, @UMassPH, & the several other faculty and students on Twitter as well.
Anatomy of a magazine article
Blog post for Past@Present. 600-1000 words, 2 images.

Seminar-length project: Students will spend the semester perfecting a longer writing project—ideally one that draws on your ongoing research interests, applied to a setting beyond the academy. The final project might be a book proposal, an article for a popular magazine, a series of blog posts, a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and so forth. Other projects may be appropriate; please check with me before proceeding to work on them.

POLICIES:

Academic Honesty: Here is the Graduate School Interim Statement on Academic Honesty:
It is expected that all graduate students will abide by the Graduate Student Honor Code and the Academic Honesty Policy (available at the Graduate Dean’s Office, the Academic Honesty Office (Ombuds Office) or online at http://www.umass.edu/gradschool/handbook/univ_policies_regulations_a.htm). Sanctions for acts of dishonesty range from receiving a grade of F on the paper/exam/assignment or in the course, loss of funding, being placed on probation or suspension for a period of time, or being dismissed from the University. All students have the right of appeal through the Academic Honesty Board.

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. 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:
UMass Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file
with Disability Services (DS), Learning Disabilities Support Services (LDSS), or Psychological Disabilities Services (PDS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

**Schedule**

**Mon Jan 25:** Introduction: How, why, when to write  
**Reading:** Beth Luey, *Expanding the American Mind: Books and the Popularization of Knowledge*

**Assignment:** For our first meeting, please bring in two works of history written for non-academic audiences that you enjoyed reading. They should each reflect different genres (e.g., narrative non-fiction, historical fiction, newspaper editorial, blog post, magazine article, etc.). Prior to class, select a couple of your favorite passages in each, and see if you can uncover the mechanics of how the author went from raw materials to first draft to finished product. We will discuss what makes these works effective and how they could be improved.

**Mon Feb 1:** Why Twitter Matters  
**GUEST:** Mark B. Schlemmer, “ITweetMuseums”

Mark Schlemmer joined the collections department of the New-York Historical Society in March of 2015. Prior to that, he was a registrar at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for over six and a half years. He launched and manages the non-affiliated, independent Twitter initiative @ITweetMuseums, which encourages and supports museum professionals to tweet relevant content for professional development, networking and museum engagement.

2:30-3:45: Seminar  
4:00-5:00 Public Lecture

**Readings:** Please review the account @ITweetMuseums to get familiar with the initiative. Also check out Mark’s Storify account -- [https://storify.com/itweetmuseums](https://storify.com/itweetmuseums) -- where all of the tweet-ups, chats and didactic materials get collected and processed into practical resources (this material, btw, has been accessed around 10,000 times as of this writing, and various museums utilize the resources to help train their staff as well).

Read also Liz Covart, “How to Twitter,”  
http://www.elizabethcovart.com/2013/04/05/how-to-twitter/
Mon Feb 8: Writing Short
Reading: Clark, *How to Write Short: Word Craft for Fast Times*


Patrick Dunleavy, “Shorter, better, faster, free: Blogging changes the nature of academic research, not just how it is communicated,” [http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/12/28/shorter-better-faster-free/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/12/28/shorter-better-faster-free/)

Review these Blogs:
- History@Work: [http://publichistorycommons.org/](http://publichistorycommons.org/)
- History on Wheels: [http://historyonwheels.blogspot.com/](http://historyonwheels.blogspot.com/)
- History at the Table: [http://historyatthetable.blogspot.com/](http://historyatthetable.blogspot.com/)

Assignment: At some point in the semester, turn in a blog post for Past@Present on any topic appropriate for that venue. It need not be due this week, since we will post them over the next few weeks.

**NOTE:** TUES Feb 16 [after President’s Day]: Magazine articles
Reading: Articles by Jill Lepore on the *New Yorker* website [select two]
*Common-Place* ([http://www.common-place.org/](http://www.common-place.org/); browse)

Assignment: Work to develop an anatomy of the successful short article. Map out (that is, outline) at least 3 of these short pieces of writing (3 Lepore pieces or 3 articles from *Common-Place* or *AH*). What can you discern about their structure? How long is the Intro and what does it do? The Conclusion? What do you perceive about information delivered? What do you observe about style, tone and argument?

Mon Feb 22: Writing for Wikipedia (and other online venues)
Reading: Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty, *Writing History in the Digital Age.*
[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12230987.0001.001/1:6/--writing-history-in-the-digital-age?q=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12230987.0001.001/1:6/--writing-history-in-the-digital-age?q=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1)

You may skim parts of this work, but pay particular attention to
Robert S. Wolff, “*The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,*” and
Adrea Lawrence, “*Learning How to Write Analog and Digital History.*”
Lori Byrd Phillips and Dominic McDevitt-Parks, “Historians in Wikipedia: Building an Open, Collaborative History” Perspectives 2012, 


NOTE: In this class period we will discuss writing history online, with particular attention to historians who write for Wikipedia. Please register as an editor on Wikipedia before class begins. If possible, bring a laptop; we’ll do some looking and editing together. Let me know if you need me to bring one of the department’s laptops for your use in class.

Feb 29: GUEST: Writer in Residence Rebecca Onion
Reading TBA

Slate.com’s history writer -- covering new research, history in archives, museums, classrooms and on the Web -- Rebecca Onion runs The Vault, the Slate blog that posts historical objects, images and documents. Her book, Innocent Experiments: Childhood and the Culture of Public Science in the United States, will be published in 2016 by the University of North Carolina Press. Here is a link to her website: http://www.rebeccaonion.com/about-2/

**MARCH 4 th, REQUIRED CLASS EVENT: FRIDAY EVENING, details TBA**

As part of a national summit on the future of History Communication hosted by the UMass Public History Program, and in collaboration with the annual conference of the Graduate History Association, the department is offering on this date an event, “History Communication for the 21st Century.” Speakers will include Jason Steinhauer (Library of Congress’ Kluge Center), Jim Grossman (Executive Director of the American Historical Association), Lonnie Bunch (founding director, National Museum of African American History and Culture), Shola Lynch (Curator for Film, Moving Image and Recorded Sound, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), and others. All students in this course should attend. Amherst Room, UMass Campus Center, 7:00 p.m.
March 7: Writing in Service of Activism
GUEST: Jamia Wilson, Executive Director, Women Action in the Media

As Executive Director of Women, Action, & the Media, TED Prize Storyteller, and former Vice President of Programs at The Women’s Media Center, Wilson has been a powerful force in social justice movements for nearly a decade. Her work and words have appeared in and on outlets such as New York Magazine, The Today Show, and The Washington Post.

March 21: Guest: M.V. Lee Badgett, UMass Public Engagement Project
Reading: The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World

M. V. Lee Badgett, Ph.D. is a professor of economics and the director of the Center for Public Policy and Administration at the UMass Amherst. She studies family policy issues and labor market discrimination based on sexual orientation, race, and gender, as well as the connections between LGBT rights and economic development. Prof. Badgett’s public engagement work includes co-authoring policy reports, testifying as an expert witness in Congress and in litigation, consulting with regulatory bodies, briefing policymakers, writing op-ed pieces, appearing on television and radio shows, speaking with journalists, and advising businesses. In 2010, she was an expert witness in the Perry v. Schwarzenegger trial on the constitutionality of Proposition 8. She is finishing a book for NYU Press on how to use research to change the world.

March 28: Writing long
Reading: Tracy Kidder & Richard Todd, Good Prose The Art of Nonfiction

Please bring to class two examples of book-length trade publications that strike you as both solid scholarship and engaging narrative. What can we learn from authors most able to translate the insights of traditional scholarship to general readers?

April 4: Writing for the National Park Service
Guest: Christine Arato, Chief Historian, Northeast Region

Reading: TBA. Arato will share some examples of the best work she’s seen in NPS scholarship.

April 11: Graphic Non-fiction
Reading: Ari Kelman and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War
Lauren Redniss, Radioactive: Marie & Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout
Jonathan Fetter-Vorm Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb
April 18: HOLIDAY (President’s Day):
We meet Wed April 20: Presentations of Works in Progress

April 25: Writing History for Performance
Guests: Enchanted Circle Theater (http://www.enchantedcircletheater.com/)
Red Sky Ensemble (http://www.boziwickwilliamsproject.com/)
TBA