History 691W/791W: Writing History
University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Spring 2018
Mondays, 2:30-5pm in Herter 342

Instructor: Stephen R. Platt
Office: Herter 636
Email: platt@history.umass.edu
Office hours: W 2:30-4 (please let me know in advance if you’re coming)

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 writing of history. During the semester, students will 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, including leading (or co-leading) the discussion of a reading on at least one occasion, will contribute 20% of your final grade.

Readings: The books for this course should all be readily available at online and brick-and-mortar retailers, with a few copies in local libraries as well. Please let me know if you have any trouble locating them.

Writing Assignments: Students will spend the semester perfecting a longer writing project, with three shorter exercises along the way. The final project can be a book proposal with a sample chapter, or a historical article (either conceived for an academic journal or a mainstream magazine). Students taking the 700-level version of the course should do the article option or something similar. Other projects may be appropriate; please check with the instructor if you have an idea for something different.

The shorter writing exercises will be workshopped in class; please bring copies for everyone. After making revisions based on the in-class feedback, please submit a final version to the instructor one week later.

In April, each student will present a partial draft of his or her final project to the class. Another student in the course will be assigned as his or her discussant/editor, and will be responsible for helping them shape the draft in advance as well as giving comments to lead the class discussion on the day of the presentation. Your service as discussant/editor will contribute 10% of your final grade.

The final project (including your presentation on it) will be worth 40% of the final grade, and the three papers along the way will be worth 10% each.
Academic Honesty: Please read the official UMass policy on academic honesty. 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.

Statement on Disability:

If you have a documented disability that may affect your performance in this class, please speak to me as soon as possible so that I can make appropriate arrangements.

Weekly Schedule:

**January 22:** Introductions: How, Why, When to Write

**January 29:** The Psychology of Writing  

**February 5:** Nonfiction Strategies  

*Assignment:* Paper #1: 2-3 pages setting a scene; to be workshopped in class (bring copies for everyone)

**February 12:** Audience  
Readings: Please bring in two works of popular history you enjoyed reading. Prior to class, look closely at a couple of your favorite passages in each, and see if you can uncover the mechanics of how the author went from raw primary sources to finished product. We will discuss what makes these works effective and how they could be improved.

*Assignment:* Paper #2: 2-3 pages building a character; to be workshopped in class

**February 26:** Writing for a Living (guest: Bruce Watson, Historian and Columnist)  
March 5: Guest: Julio Capó  

March 19: Narrative History  
Reading: Jonathan Spence, The Question of Hu (any edition)  
Assignment: Paper #3: 2-3 pages narrating an event; to be workshopped in class

March 26: Framing a Project: The Practicalities of Structure  
Reading: Susan Rabiner, Thinking Like Your Editor (Norton, 2003)  
Assignment: A brief pitch for your final project (1-2pp.)

April 2: In-class writing workshop

April 9: Presentation of Projects, Round 1

April 17: Writer-in-Residence; activity and readings TBD.  
NB: UMass Monday classes meet on Tuesday this week

April 23: Presentation of Projects, Round 2

April 30: Final meeting: reflection, discussion of final projects, plans for future.  
All final projects due.