

Gender and the Law in US History

21H.225J Spring 2004

Final Paper Assignment

This paper is designed to give you a chance to research a topic that is of interest to you, in enough depth that you can become an expert on a small corner of historical research and develop your own interpretations based on your analysis of original primary materials. This is a research paper that requires you to base your argument on material not on the class syllabus. You should develop a base broad enough to make substantial historical claims, but not so much that you find yourself writing a book or a Ph.D. dissertation. In **fourteen to sixteen pages**, present your argument and support it with close analysis of documents and in conjunction with at least one other secondary interpretation.

Although broad, this topic is not entirely open-ended. Your paper should give some sense of how your interpretation of the event, theme, or documents relate to existing secondary interpretations or commonly held historical assumptions. You do not need to make that the central focus of your paper, but simply telling “what happened” will not be enough for this assignment. We will discuss this in greater depth along the way.

This is not the kind of paper that you can write in one night or even in one weekend, and the requirements for the paper are set up to prevent you from trying to do that. By **Monday April 12**, you should email me with some thoughts about possible topics. (Some of you have already done this.) At this point, it’s best to be general and broad, and to keep more than one option open, in case primary and secondary source material is not available. Along the way, we will have discussions in class about research, writing, and conceptualization to get you to start thinking about your topic if you haven’t already done so. During this time you should be doing your background research. Leave time for dead ends.

By **Friday April 30**, you should hand in or email me a brief description of your paper that describes the primary source material that you will use, the secondary historical sources you’ve considered, and the questions that you think your paper will address. You don’t have to have a thesis statement, an opening paragraph, or an outline, but you might find it useful to draft something to give me (and you!) a sense of where you are headed. I will look at it to consider whether the source material you’ve found can help you address those questions and vice versa, and to give you more suggestions about research possibilities. **This is required**, and counts for 5% of your final grade. I will respond to them by email. By **Friday May 7**, you should hand in or email me a bibliography. It does not have to be in final form, but it should be complete enough so that I can tell where you are headed. You can also submit outlines or opening paragraphs at this point and I will try to help you as you are writing.

The final paper is due on paper in class on **Wednesday May 12**. I encourage you to share your draft with a peer editor or a writing center staff member as you wrap it up.

Tracking Down Materials

There are a number of collections of primary sources in American history from which you could put together a list of sources. The *Annals of America* series and the *Major Problems in ...* series are particularly good. MIT has a remarkably good collection of magazines and newspapers of the twentieth century, some on microfilm, some in the basement of Hayden Library, and others in the RetroSpective Collection. Use reference works like *Poole's Index* (for the 19th century) or the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (after 1900 or so). Court opinions and laws are widely available on www.findlaw.com, although older cases are not always as easily accessible. If you are focusing on a specific person, it would be worth your time to look him/her up in something like *American National Biography*, *Who's Who*, or *Notable American Women*. The *Blackwell Companion to American Thought* is useful for intellectual and cultural trends. Those working in literary sources should consult the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* for the authors they are considering. Other works like Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, or Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* can give a multicultural perspective. A good starting place for any research is *The Reader's Companion to American History*, edited by Eric Foner and John Garraty. I can suggest additional background readings too.

Finding Secondary Literature on the Topic

Some sources can be found by looking through general histories of your topic; others can be tracked down through guides to scholarly literature. You will probably find Google generally unhelpful for this stage of the project. If I were writing on the US Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), I might look in some general books on the history of the Civil Rights movement to see what they say about the case—even before I looked at any of the many books that have been written solely about *Brown*. I would also look for articles on Jstor (www.jstor.org), which provides full-text. An article or chapter or two is probably enough to get you started at the beginning.

Reference Librarians. These folks are very helpful, particularly with such issues as identifying on-line sources, working with microfilm and microfiche, or navigating various article indexes. You can meet the reference librarian at the desk (during hours when it is staffed), or even email with them during regular hours, but it may be a better idea to set up an appointment in advance.

Extensions. You have plenty of time to plan for the paper; extensions should not be necessary except in case of emergency. I have set the paper deadline at the end of the classes to give you time during the exam period. Please remember that computer-related crises are not valid reasons for an extension; leave yourself a cushion of time in case something breaks or will not print.

Citation: Be careful to cite sources of information and ideas that you use in your paper, both primary and secondary. Be particularly thorough with materials that you are working with on the web. You may use any of the standard methods of citation (footnotes, endnotes, parenthetical references, etc.), as long as you are complete and consistent. The MIT Libraries website has links to online editions of all the major style guides. Be sure to leave enough time to prepare your citations in the proper format.

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21H.225J / WGS.161J Gender and Law in US History
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