

**21H.S01: Food in American History**  
**Research Paper Assignment**

**PART I: Research topic proposal and bibliography**

Due three days after Session 7.

Length: approximately 2-3 pages, plus preliminary bibliography

Required: *At least* 5 secondary sources and 2 primary sources

**PART II: Final Paper**

Due Session 14.

Length: 12-15 pages, *plus* bibliography.

**PART III: Oral Presentation**

Prepare a 10-15 minute oral presentation about your research on the last day of class.

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**Overview:** Your major written assignment for this class is a research paper on some aspect of food in American history, broadly construed but focused on some period **before the year 2000**. Since there are many possibilities for an appropriate topic, **begin thinking and reading about your interests now** to allow plenty of time to choose something that is appealing to you *and* doable in a semester with library resources at MIT, the area, and on the web.

**PART I: Research topic proposal and bibliography of primary & secondary sources**

Your proposal should include:

1. A research topic related to food in American history before the current century.
2. **A question or problem** that you will attempt to answer with historical research & analysis
3. A working answer to your research question, otherwise known as an argument or thesis
4. Methodology: i.e. explain *how and why* you are using the sources in your bibliography
5. Bibliography: at minimum 2 primary sources and 5 secondary sources

**How to choose a topic**

The first challenging aspect of this assignment is choosing an appropriate and manageable topic that is of interest to you. Because finding and then narrowing your topic will be half the battle, I suggest that you begin working on it ASAP, by doing the following things:

Stage 1:

- Brainstorm aspects of food history, broadly construed, about which you are curious.
- Consider topics related to those listed on the course syllabus and readings.
- Keep a list of everything that comes to mind.
- Assess whether there are enough and sufficiently interesting sources for the topic.
- Keep notes on where you look, what you find, and what you learn.

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Stage 2:

- Begin to concentrate on one or two topics that seem the most promising.
- Think about the topic in relation to the subject matter of course material.
- Look at the bibliographies of secondary sources to find other relevant sources.
- Identify the main concepts or keywords related to your topic. Try catalog searches with some keywords to add new ones or abandon dead-end terms.
- Generate a list of research questions. State your topic idea as a question. For example: why and when did the hamburger become a typical American meal? Why did vegetarianism emerge in parallel to the movement to abolish slavery in the United States? What accounts for the gendered differences between the stereotypical amateur (i.e. home) cook versus the professional chef? When and how did commercial fishermen realize that they were overfishing particular species?

Stage 3:

- Finalize your topic and question(s) and begin to focus on the most relevant sources.
- Formulate a tentative answer to your question and state it in the form of a thesis statement.
- Write the research proposal.
- Make a plan for Part II and assess whether you need more sources.

Part I of the writing assignment is intended to motivate you to begin researching ASAP. The research that goes into compiling your preliminary bibliography will be essential preparation for writing your final paper. But you should—and will probably find that you have to—continue to search for, read, and think about primary and secondary sources even after you hand in your bibliography. In other words, you should not worry that you haven't found the perfect complement of sources about your subject or the right research question and an answer to it, by the time your proposal and bibliography are due. The final paper is not due until the last day of class, so you will have four more weeks to add or subtract sources from your working bibliography, modify your research question, reconsider your hypothesis, and formulate a compelling argument.

### **Primary sources versus secondary sources**

*Primary sources* are created by observers or participants during the period that you are studying and constitute the 'raw materials' of history writing. Potential primary sources could include recipes, cookbooks, menus; ephemera (pamphlets, postcards, posters); court cases; USDA, FDA, and other government documents; advertisements, illustrations, photographs, and feature articles in historical newspapers and general interest magazines (e.g. magazines targeted at women); business archives; and much more.

For each primary source, ask:

- who wrote it and to whom? (can we know this? why or why not?)
- when was it written or otherwise produced?
- where or about what place was it written or otherwise produced?
- what are the main features of this source?
- what does it reveal about the characters or historical period under study?
- what are the limits of this source?

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*Secondary sources* in history are analyses or interpretations of the past often written by scholars, journalists, or other experts and usually based on primary sources. Authors of secondary sources always argue a point of view (also known as a thesis). Sidney Mintz's book is an example of a secondary source. Secondary sources can include articles in scholarly journals, chapters in books, or books, as well as, sometimes, documentary films, newspaper articles, and web pages. Secondary sources should help you interpret and analyze your primary sources—whether or not you agree with the author's thesis, you should be able to think about your own thesis as a complement or contrast with theirs. Secondary sources also often have bibliographies, or at least endnotes or footnotes, which can help lead you to further primary and secondary sources.

For each secondary source, ask:

- what is its specific concern? (It may be tangential but still relevant to your project.)
- what is the author's argument?
- what evidence is this argument based upon?
- what are some of the themes, controversies, turning points, big questions, time periods, characters, or anecdotes on which the author concentrates?
- what does the author ignore?
- to what extent is the argument persuasive?
- how might it be used to answer my research question?

### **Finding the Sources**

There are many ways to find sources for historical projects and you should try different methods of searching. As you get deeper into researching your topic, you should keep track of your research process and organize your notes.

#### **1. Encyclopedias, Dictionaries, and Bibliographies.**

Reference works come in two varieties: general, like *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and specialized, like *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. Other reference works you might consider consulting are biographical dictionaries that give you basic information about specific people, like the *American National Biography*, and specialized bibliographies, for example, *Food Bibliography: References to Reports and Other Documents issued by the U.S. General Accounting Office*. Make notes on what you find.

\*\*Also note: Reference works are technically secondary sources and are a sensible place to start for basic data about your subject, but they are not suitable as secondary sources for this assignment. Similarly, Wikipedia might sometimes be an adequate source of information for quick references but it is not suitable as an authoritative source for your paper.\*\*

#### **2. Reference librarians.**

Asking a librarian about resources for your specific topic is almost always the best way to get started.

→ Make sure to take notes about your conversations with any librarians and archivists.

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### **3. Keyword Searching.**

The reason to keep a running list of keywords is so that you can search for them in library catalog. Start with the BARTON Catalog (<http://libraries.mit.edu/>). Conducting a search on Google or Google Scholar with the keywords that you have come up with so far may turn up additional articles, though you shouldn't rely on Google as the most comprehensive guide for finding sources.

### **4. Library Catalog and Subject Headings.**

Find out how sources that you might be interested in have been catalogued. In the MIT libraries and most other public and university libraries, you will find the Library of Congress (LC) Subject Headings system but other libraries and archives sometimes employ different systems. Understanding how a collection is arranged will help you figure out what subjects to search under when you consult the catalog. Again, make a list of relevant keywords and subject headings.

### **5. Finding Aids to Manuscript Collections.**

Repositories for manuscript (unpublished works) and other archival material designated as special collections often produce finding aids, which describe the contents and provenance of a particular collection in greater detail than a catalog record. The most comprehensive finding aids describe each individual item in a collection. Many of these are now available online. For example, see the Schlesinger Library's finding aid for the Alice Bradley Papers: <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch00468>

### **6. Serendipity: Shelf Browsing and Call Number Scanning.**

Books in the MIT Libraries are also arranged by the LC system, so that those on similar subjects tend to be near one another on the shelf. What this means is that you should always look at the books on the shelf near the one that you are actually looking for, because they may be relevant for your project. You can also do this electronically.

### **7. Indexes to Journal Articles.**

Besides books, you'll be interested in finding articles in scholarly journals. Depending on your topic, you will want to check the Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, Web of Science, Social Sciences Index, the Humanities Index, and Lexis-Nexis. You can also go directly to electronic journal databases like JSTOR and Project MUSE. These will help you find recent journal articles. Make notes on the articles that you do find. Check especially the following journals devoted to food studies: *Gastronomica*, *Food, Culture & Society*, *Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Food & History*, *Environmental History*, and *Agricultural History*.

In addition, pay attention to the following major scholarly journals, which frequently publish articles related to food in history: *Journal of American History*, *American Historical Review*, *Journal of the Early Republic*, *The William & Mary Quarterly*, *Past and Present*, *Environmental History*, *Western Historical Quarterly*, *Pacific Historical Review*, and *Technology and Culture* (most of these are available online).

### **8. Citation and Related-Record Searching**

Databases and indexes like JSTOR and the Web of Science allow you to do two further kinds of search. First, if you have an important book or article, they can help you find articles that cite it. Second, they can help you find articles that are similar to it. Take one of

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the articles that you have found and try both citation and related records searches. Another way of doing citation searches is by using the end- or footnotes, bibliography, and index of books and articles which you've already found. As always, keep track of what you discover.

### **7. Digital Collections**

Now that so many primary sources have been digitized and are available at no cost or by subscription through a library, it is likely that you will be able to find court cases, diaries, logbooks, images, and other historical documents on the Internet.

### **8. Special knowledge, experience, skills**

Note also that if you have any skills or experience, such as language proficiencies, a familiarity with food chemistry or manufacturing technology, financial analysis, work experience in the agriculture or food industries, and so on, you might put these abilities to work in this project.

### **Keeping Track of Your Work**

As you search for sources, it is crucial to keep track of your work. Whenever you find out about a potential source, make a note of the following (as relevant):

**Author/ Editor**

**Title**

**Publisher**

**Date**

**Page numbers**

**Call number**

**Library or URL**

**Way that you found out about the source**

**Whether or not you looked at it**

**Content notes (once you've examined the source—what information is in it?)**

Zotero and other citation applications provide an excellent and easy-to-learn way to keep track of this stuff but many historians usefully employ more traditional methods: 3x5 index cards, notebooks, word processing programs, or spreadsheets. Stick with whatever method helps you to stay organized.

Keep all of your notes, because you never know what might prove useful. If you ordered something through interlibrary loan, make a note to remind yourself. You should also make a list of things that you checked that didn't work out. For example, if you looked in a book about your subject but didn't find the author's argument convincing, make a note of that so that you don't repeat unnecessary work.

### **Making a Bibliography**

As you do your research you will likely come across more sources than are germane to your subject. Go through your list of primary and secondary sources and pick out those that seem particularly relevant or interesting. You are not necessarily going to read every word, but you are going to skim through each source and make notes.

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Your bibliography should have **separate lists** for primary and secondary sources and provide **full bibliographic information**.

Historians use the **Chicago Manual of Style** as their citation style. This is the style you will use for your bibliography and footnotes. The MIT Libraries provide an online guide and examples. Go to the link in the Barton catalog:

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.libproxy.mit.edu/home.html>

Proofread before submitting! Your proposal and bibliography should contain no spelling or grammatical errors.

**PART II: Writing the Final Research Paper**

Once you have your research topic and question, you are ready to continue onto the second part of this assignment: finding more material (if necessary), analyzing your material, building an argument, organizing your material to support your argument, and writing the paper.

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21H.S01 Food in American History  
Fall 2014

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