

Weekly Writing Assignment #1: Identifying and Understanding Arguments

-- Due in Section, week of 9/13-9/15 --

As explained in the guide to this week's readings, good secondary sources do not simply reconstruct a chronology of past events. While this is a precondition to good history, it rarely is good history on its own. Instead, good historians use their sources (whether primary texts, skeletal remains, or anything else that is useful) to make arguments about how and why historical events unfolded as they did. Just as physicists argue that moving electrons generate electromagnetic fields, historians try and argue that X, Y, or Z caused the event being studied (e.g. slavery caused the US civil war; the American Revolution about economic freedom, not political freedom; FEMA responded adequately in New Orleans).

Because historical events are always complex, there are very few cases where the causes are simple and clear-cut (few historians would except my above examples as adequate explanations). As a result, historians have much more wiggle room for argument and disagreement than is often true in scientific research. There are many examples where conflicting interpretations have been produced by careful, diligent historical analysis, each supported with credible sources. While this can be frustrating, especially for people accustomed to finding the right answer on a problem set, it is a fact of life in the humanities and social sciences. In this course, you will hopefully become skilled consumers and producers of historical arguments. One of the goals of the weekly writing assignments is to teach you to read, interpret, and evaluate historical arguments. The three papers will focus on the task of producing good historical arguments.

So, for this week... Crosby makes a series of specific claims about why the Spanish and other European groups were able to conquer American populations with seeming ease. His work in this chapter, and his other writings, formalized the concept of virgin soil epidemics. In my article, I argue that advocates of virgin soil theories overstate their case and overlook other crucial factors.

In this week's writing assignment, describe / predict / imagine how Crosby would respond to my essay. Would he agree with me? Would he disagree? What particular parts might he support or condemn? Are their specific weaknesses in my argument that he might attack?

As stated in the introduction to the writing assignments, there is not a right or wrong answer (unless any of you have ESP and can read Crosby's mind). Instead, we are checking whether you can decipher and understand the

arguments and perspectives of two historians well enough to be able to predict how one would respond to the other.