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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History
Spring 2008

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STS.036
Spring 2008
Paper #3

Due date: April 29 (draft)
May 15 (revision)

Length: 10-12 pages (double-spaced, 12-point font)

Value: 40% of your final grade

Choosing a topic

Your final paper for this course will be an original historical research paper on a topic of your own design. You may choose to research one of the course topics in more detail, or you may prefer to strike out on your own and research a topic we have not mentioned in class. In either case, topics should directly engage with the central themes and questions of the course.

You may focus your research on any period from colonial America to the 21st century, but regardless of what time period you are working in, your analysis must be historical. A wise person once told me that history is not a time but an attitude. In other words, you can write a history of very recent events as long as your approach is historical: explaining how and why things have changed over time.

As you begin this project, you will likely have a *topic* or area of general interest in mind (e.g., environmental politics) that you will then refine into a *research question* (e.g., How did postwar suburbanization affect the emergence of environmentalism in the United States?) Don't worry if you don't have a research question right at the outset. If you don't already know a lot about your topic, you will have to do some initial research and reading in order to figure out what your question will be. Once you formulate your question, then you will be able to gather and analyze your sources in a much more focused manner. (And the answer to your research question will end up being the thesis statement for your paper. More on that later.)

Once you have identified a general area of interest, you should try to narrow your topic as much as possible. For example, environmental activism in the late 20th century would be much too big a topic to address in a paper of this length. A more focused and more manageable version of that broad topic might be this: the role of the Walden Woods Project in environmental conservation and education projects in Massachusetts from 1990 to the present. Note that the latter example is focused on a more specific time and place, as well as on a particular institution. A narrow topic will serve you much better in the research and the writing phases since it will allow you to zero in on a focused body of primary sources and then to deal with those sources very specifically in your paper.

How to begin your research

Once you have arrived at a focused topic, you should begin gathering sources. This paper will require you to consult both secondary sources (i.e., books and articles by historians and other scholars that analyze past events) and primary sources (i.e., documents written by historical actors during the time period you are researching). Begin with secondary sources so that you can efficiently figure out what has already been said about your topic and what kinds of questions still remain unanswered. For this assignment it would be impossible for you to read all of the secondary sources relevant to your topic, but if you choose wisely and find 4 or 5 of the best secondary sources out there, you will come away with a very good overview of the current scholarship on your particular topic. How will you know which secondary sources are the ones to read? I can help steer you in the direction of particular historians or particular books that have the most to say on your topic.

The best places to start your search for secondary sources¹:

America: History & Life database (EBSCO)

WorldCat database (OCLC)

Once you have read and taken notes on your secondary sources, you should begin your search for primary sources. Types of primary sources include newspaper and magazine articles, books and essays, advertisements, letters, personal diaries, Congressional reports, legal documents, speeches, songs, maps, photographs, illustrations, and any other text or image created during the period you are researching.

In general, the more primary sources you have, the richer and more vivid and better your paper will be. For the purposes of this assignment, you should have at least 25 primary sources. (Keep in mind that many sources might be only a page or two in length!) Where to look for primary sources will be determined by your particular topic. Here are some databases I highly recommend:

Newspapers

ProQuest Historical Database

America's Historical Newspapers (from Boston Public Library)

Brooklyn Daily Eagle <<http://eagle.brooklynpubliclibrary.org>>

Utah Digital Newspapers <<http://dream.lib.utah.edu/digital/unews>>

Periodicals

Readers Guide Retrospective

¹ Note for OCW users: many of these recommended research sources are provided by MIT Libraries only to the MIT community.

Making of America (Cornell) <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/>>

Making of America (Michigan) <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagr/>>

News, business, legal sources

Lexis-Nexis Academic

Letters, diaries, personal narratives

Alexander Street Database <<http://www.inthefirstperson.com/firp/index.shtml>>

Everything

American Memory Project at the Library of Congress
<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>>

As convenient as the magic of keyword searching may be, there is no substitute for paging through sources in the MIT Libraries, the Boston Public Library, or other local libraries. In the comfort of the libraries you may stumble across a fascinating document on the page before or after the page you were initially interested in, or you may discover important connections between people and places and documents—connections that are invisible to keyword searches.

If you do not already have a system for organizing your research, I highly recommend Zotero (www.zotero.org), which is a free database created by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

Stages in the process

There are many steps leading up to the draft that is due on April 29:

- Statement of topic (and hopefully research question) due March 13
- Preliminary bibliography of at least 4 secondary sources
- (Re)formulation of research question
- Preliminary bibliography of at least 25 primary sources
- Formulation of thesis statement, introductory paragraph(s), and detailed outline

Although there are not formal interim deadlines for these various stages, you should pace yourself accordingly and complete your research no later than mid-April so that you can complete a draft by the end of April and then revise it by mid-May.

I will distribute guidelines for writing a research paper once your research is underway. For now, the important thing is that you choose a topic that genuinely interests you. (If you are having trouble coming up with a topic, please let me know and I can help you brainstorm.)

Without further ado, let the research and the fun begin!