“But, besides these cold, formal, and empty words of the chisel that inscribes, the voice that speaks, and the pen that writes, for the public eye and for distant time – and which inevitably lose much of their truth and freedom by the fatal consciousness of so doing – there were traditions about the ancestor, and private diurnal gossip about the Judge, remarkably accordant in their testimony. It is often instructive to take the woman’s, the private and domestic, view of a public man; nor can anything be more curious than the vast discrepancy between portraits intended for engraving and the pencil sketches that pass from hand to hand behind the original’s back.”

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables

“Biography lends to death a new terror.”

- Oscar Wilde

Course Description:

In this research and readings seminar, we will examine and practice the art of biography. In our discussion of the readings we will explore how biography relates to history and discuss its strengths and pitfalls. We will do so by reading samples of different biographical genres. The common readings are also meant to spark and/or inform the research interests which you will pursue in the course. For your research paper, the only limitation is the form (it has to be in a genre of biography) and availability of sources. I encourage you to research any person or persons in any time and place for which you can find interesting questions and sufficient source material.

Required Readings:


Assignment and Grading Breakdown (for due dates see class and readings schedule):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book Review #1</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book Review #2</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prospectus</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prospectus critiques</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper drafts</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft critiques</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final research paper</td>
<td>40%</td>
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Class Participation
This part of your grade is based on your contribution to our class meetings, particularly the discussions of the assigned books and articles. This will be an important part of making this class work. We will discuss the core issues involved in the readings rather than the details, so you should read for argument rather than detail. You should bring the books to class with you. I will grade your participation in each discussion. What you say will matter at least as much as how much you talk.

Book Reviews
You will write reviews (each between 2-3 pages) of both books assigned in the common readings. Good reviews will accurately summarize the argument (as opposed to the subject or contents) of the book. More importantly, they will critique that argument, on grounds of logic, use of evidence, and so forth. Summarizing and then simply asserting “this book was persuasive” will not fly – you need to show why the argument was or was not persuasive. Also note: going on about how many sources the author used will not do. The number of sources is not what makes an argument convincing; it is the type of sources and how the author uses them. I have an example of an “A” book review from a past student available for those who are interested. A really good review for this class would also reflect briefly on the book’s effectiveness as a genre of biography, and thus connect the critique to the theme of the class.

Prospectus
The prospectus consists of a brief (3-4 page) description of your research subject, the larger questions he/she/they will allow you to engage, and how you plan to use the sources you have for this subject. Those larger questions should include but do not have to be limited to the relevant historiography. The prospectus will also include a preliminary bibliography (not included in the page count), broken down into primary and secondary sources. The clarity of the plan and the significance of the subject(s) – within the scholarly literature and otherwise – will make or break the prospectus.

Research paper drafts
On a day specified below, you will turn in a draft of your final research paper for comments from me and your peers. These are meant to be drafts, so my grading will not focus on whether they have reached perfection. But experience has taught me that turning in a weak, rough draft is painful for me and your peers and not as useful to you. The better and more advanced the draft, the better our comments on it can be. Therefore I have attached a nominal percentage of your grade to these drafts to give you more incentive here.

Critiques
The benefits of outside critiques are one of the reasons we meet in a class rather than individually. Therefore, your willingness to provide oral and written commentaries on your fellow students’ work will be rewarded by a significant part of your overall grade.
You will meet in smaller groups to discuss your peers’ preliminary work. You will read each fellow group member’s prospectus and penultimate draft, then meet to offer feedback on them. Your peers will help evaluate the usefulness of your critiques.

You will be required to offer only oral feedback on the prospectus, although making written comments may also be helpful to the author of the prospectus. You will be required to offer only oral feedback on the prospectus and paper draft, although making written comments may also be helpful to the author.

Final Research Paper
This 18-25 page paper will give you the opportunity to bring the skills and knowledge you have gained to bear on an original piece of scholarship. You should aim to make this paper a work of publishable quality. The 18-25 page limit applies to texts and notes, but not bibliography.

Turning in all the written assignments on time is important: the late penalty for each is one half-grade per class day late. Papers turned in any time after the start of class on the due date will be considered one day late. So if a paper is due on a Monday, from the beginning of class that day until Wednesday any paper turned in will be considered one date late, and so forth. And turning them in means giving me a hard copy – emailing me a paper is not turning it in.

Staying within the page limits is also important. In meeting them, you must use normal sized fonts and normal (1-inch) margins, and you are to double-space.

You have all signed the honor code, and I am not accusing anyone of cheating in advance, of course. But sad experience has made the following disclaimer necessary: while I do not care whether you use footnotes or endnotes, I do require that you cite your source every time you use words or ideas that are not your own. When in doubt, cite your sources – err on the side of too many citations rather than too few. If you have any questions about plagiarism and associated offenses, and even if you don’t, I recommend you review the definitions and examples provided at: http://www.byu.edu/honorcode. If I detect academic dishonesty on any written assignment, the offender will face a range of penalties at my discretion ranging from failing the assignment to failing the course.

Class and Readings Schedule (which can change at any time – stay posted):

** Week 1: **
Aug. 29  Introduction
Aug. 31 and Sept. 2  NO CLASS – individual meetings with yours truly

** Week 2: **
Sept. 5  NO CLASS – Labor Day holiday
Sept. 7  Learning to Fish: Visit with Librarian – meet in 2233 HBLL
Sept. 9  Discussion of Pinsker, Lincoln’s Sanctuary

** Book Review #1 DUE 9/9 **
Week 3:
Sept. 12  NO CLASS – individual meetings with yours truly
Sept. 14  Tour of Special Collections – meet there
Sept. 16  NO CLASS

Week 4:
Sept. 19  Discussion of Hatcher, Black Death
** Book Review #2 DUE 9/19 **

Sept. 21 and 23 NO CLASS – work on prospectus

Week 5:
Sept. 26  Can you handle the truth? Feedback on our writing
Sept. 28  Group 1 Prospectus DUE – brief meeting to hand in, distribute
Sept. 30  Groups 2 and 3 Prospectus DUE – brief meeting to hand in, distribute

Week 6:
Oct. 3   Group 1 Prospectus Critiques
Oct. 5   Group 2 Prospectus Critiques
Oct. 7   Group 3 Prospectus Critiques

Weeks 7-13:
Oct. 10 – Nov. 18 NO CLASS – individual research and writing, meetings with yours truly
Nov. 21   All Research Paper Drafts DUE – brief meeting to hand in, distribute
Nov. 22-25 NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

Week 14:
Nov. 28  Group 1 Drafts Critiques
Nov. 30  Group 2 Drafts Critiques
Dec. 2   Group 3 Drafts Critiques

Week 15:
Dec. 5   NO CLASS – revisions time
Dec. 7   FINAL DRAFTS DUE
HELPFUL WRITING HINTS

Clarity and felicity of expression are things that I, your gentle reader, value highly. I know “this is not an English course, blah, blah,” but still, let me stress this point. Writing skills are among those I hope you all will hone in this course, so I hope you’ll take these tips to heart. The FHSS Writing Lab (1051 JFSB, open M-F 9-3) can often also help with these and other matters, and you could benefit from showing them a draft before you turn it in. Be assured there is no stigma attached to getting help on writing – we all need help, or we’d be living large off our book sales profits. To this end, here are some specific suggestions:

1) Strive for simplicity in your writing. Short, direct sentences and phrases are much better than high-falutin’ fancy-pants oratory, even in an academic paper. Trying to be fancier than necessary will almost always earn you an “AWK” (for awkward). Most problems can be avoided by being simple and direct.
2) Remember that the point of language is to communicate, not to obscure, meaning. Read back over what you’ve written to make sure you are saying what you think you are saying. Don’t assume a spell check can catch everything – it just doesn’t work that way. You may feel like a fruitcake when you do it, but if you read a paper out loud you can often catch some of the most egregious or nonsensical errors.
3) You should also enlist someone else to proofread and read for meaning, to make sure you are not leaving unsaid what needs to be said. I would also be delighted to read over drafts, outlines, etc., to help in this and other regards. (I will not read and comment on papers sent to me within two working days before a paper is due, however.)
4) Having someone else read your paper will also help you clarify points that you think are self-evident because you are closer to the subject. Keep in mind that you should assume your audience knows next to nothing about the subject.
5) Be sure your paper is a coherent essay with an introduction, body, and conclusion. You should present your argument clearly and then support it with relevant evidence. Be sure, as you construct and then read back over the essay, that one point leads logically to another, you transition between points well, etc. Logical presentation and flow will really help you present your points clearly (if you don’t, why bother?).
6) Strive for coherence within as well as between paragraphs. Remember the basics: each paragraph should have ONE (1) main idea, introduced well by a topic sentence. Topic sentences can also help in transitions between paragraphs / main ideas. The inventor of the paragraph sought to bless all our lives; honor his / her legacy in your writing.
Here are some very common problems that I trust you will look out for to keep me, your grader, friendly to your cause:

1) **The passive voice:** Avoid this like the plague. The passive voice is when the subject of your sentence has something “done to” it/him/her. A classic example of the passive voice is used in government, because it obscures the actor: “Mistakes were made.” The active voice is much better and clearer: “The CIA [or whoever] made mistakes.”

2) **Noun-verb disagreement:** When the noun is plural or the verb refers to more than one noun, the verb should be plural. Same with singular. And throughout the *whole sentence.*

3) **Incomplete / run-on sentences:** Having a natural voice in writing doesn’t *always* mean you write like you talk. Each sentence should have a noun and a verb. (For good examples of incomplete sentences, see the second and third sentences just above in #2.) Perhaps a more common problem is the run-on sentence, which can often be avoided simply by keeping your sentences simple and direct.

4) **Tense inconsistency:** Oh, the whiplash I’ve gotten over the years reading sentences or paragraphs that switch from the past to the present tense and then back again! The easiest way to avoid this in a history paper is to write in the past tense for past events. But whatever tense you choose to describe past events, *pick a tense and stick with it!*

5) **Apostrophe and quotation mark confusion:** Caused by confusing possessives with plurals. The plural does not require an apostrophe, while the possessive does. The same goes for plural possessives. Keep these things straight. So for instance, you are taking Matt Mason’s course, but are not Masons yourselves. But if you go over to the Masons’ house, . . . you get the picture, I hope. Related problems come when people aren’t clear on how we use quotation marks in the United States. Get clear on this.

6) **Overuse / underuse of the comma:** I thought this was basic stuff before I started grading student papers. Be sure you know the rules on when to use and not use a comma.

In short, English can be a nutty language, and it takes some work to keep it from being an instrument of torture for your reader. So while this is far from an exhaustive writing guide, from a purely selfish perspective I hope it will keep you from repeating some of the mistakes that have put me on the rack in times past.