John M. Giggie
Young Scholars in American Religion
Rationale for "Religion in America"

Background

In fall 2004, I inherited "Religion in America," an upper-level course which had not been taught in nearly a decade. Originally designed as an advanced seminar on religious social movements, the course was tossed to me with the fuzzy instructions to "do something interesting with it" and not run it as a "traditional introductory course." I was told to expect a smaller class, which at the University of Texas at San Antonio [UTSA] means 60 students.

The University of Texas at San Antonio is a mid-level state school undergoing a dramatic period of growth. Current enrollment is 26, 000; the projected enrollment in 2015 is 40,000, an increase spurred by demographic shifts in Texas' population and the fact the state's two flagship universities are operating at peak capacity already. Traditionally a commuter school, UTSA is now seeking to become a more traditional, residential university and is rapidly building new dorms. Students are quite diverse: half are Hispanic, a quarter Anglo, and the rest a mix of black and Asian. Many are older and nearly all work a part-time job. They vary in ability: I have taught students admitted to Ivy League schools but unable to attend because of financial reasons; and ones that struggled with college-level work because of high schools that failed to prepare them.

Religion is a topic of great interest on campus. Students are often religious themselves, typically Catholic or evangelical Protestant. Class discussions often include students' personal observations and memories of spiritual events, a characteristic that does much to generate enthusiasm among participants. Many students who took "Religion in America" previously enrolled in courses on the history of religious ideas and world religions.

Design

My first order of business was to imagine the parameters of the course.

1.) I debated whether to construct the syllabus along a chronological or thematic axis. I hoped to introduce students to the steady evolution of religion over time, a task facilitated by using a chronological axis of organization, but I also wanted to pursue certain ideas in depth, an ambition fulfilled more easily by adopting a thematic axis. Ultimately I built the course according to four key themes – commercial culture, devotional culture, religion and politics, and gender – which reflected my own professional interests, my sense of areas in which interesting work was being produced, and my search for concise and affordable monographs. In particular, I selected religion and politics because of the presidential and congressional elections during fall 2004.

2.) I had a series of overlapping goals for the course.
   - First, I hoped to present an opportunity for students to expand and refine their ability to craft an analytical essay; and thus I assigned essays, exams

and quizzes (*copies provided*). I also provided some detailed handouts on how to write an analytical essay (*copies provided*).

- Second, I intended to introduce students to seeing the study of religion in different ways, and thus I asked them to visit and report on a religious "site" in San Antonio and also to visit and evaluate a religious website (*copies of these assignments provided*).
- Third, I wanted to develop their skills at interpreting visual culture, and so I regularly built class time around the analysis of a picture, video, or object that embodied central themes or critical tensions.

3.) I also wanted to avoid lecturing, a bit of a challenge in seminar of sixty students, and encourage a high degree of student participation and leadership in class. Underlying this goal was a pedagogical assumption that students often learn best when they learn from each other and feel a stake in how ideas are presented and reviewed.

- To facilitate class discussion and be able to work directly with students on matters of interpretation and analysis, I decided to divide the class into small groups of about six students each. Much of the learning took place in these groups. In their groups, students interpreted documents, answered questions about the readings, visited religious sites, and studied web pages.
- Often I posed a central question at the start of class, asked each group to craft a response, and the required them to offer and defend their answers publicly. These questions were deliberately argumentative or provocative – how can you be "religious" and still drive a BMW, how can Mormons be considered the quintessential religious Americans today in light of their history of persecution, why do many Americans still find Catholicism "strange" and not a bit threatening – and usually got the class off to a rousing start.

<u>What Went Very Well</u>

I found that students were most enthused about learning during exercises that directly involved them.

- Especially successful exercises included: for religion and commercial culture, bringing in and talking about an example of Jesus in the popular marketplace; for devotional culture, bringing in a devotional object of any sort and discussing it; and for religion and politics, bringing in clips (either print or vide) documenting what presidential candidates said about the role of religion in public life and their own lives.
- Class was always lively when I based the theme of the day on the interpretation of visual culture. To show the evolution of holidays, for example, I used many of the images from Leigh Schmidt's book, <u>Consumer Rites</u>, which students also read. Schmidt provides an endless supply of pictures of greeting cards, postcards, paintings, and sketches that visually make the argument of this book and provide a means for many

students to grapple with the questions Schmidt raises. To get at the religious overtones of segregation, I brought in documents from a collection of right-wing Christian propaganda from the Civil Rights movement.

- For many students the highlight of the class was to visit a church, synagogue or mosque and report back on the experience to the class. Some went to great lengths to capture the essence of what they say, and brought in videos, cds, and even the leaders of these sites. Students also wrote a short essay describing their experiences, and many produced moving and intensely personal pieces in which they compared their own religious upbringings and beliefs with what they just encountered.
- I permitted students to conduct re-writes of all essay and submit extra-credit, in the form of critical review essays of books pre-approved by me. Students liked having ample opportunity to improve their grades and secure a modest degree of control over their final evaluation.
- Students really liked books by Prothero, Schmidt, Orsi, Flake, and Davidman. I will use these books again.
- Students really appreciated having a handout explaining how to write an essay in my class. Although many have training in formal composition, I found that having a sheet detailing precisely what I am looking for in a piece went a long way toward smoothing over anxieties generated by the work of writing.

<u>What I Will Change.</u>

- Less books. I simply assigned too much reading. Students complained about their eyeballs falling out by the end of the semester. Next time around I will intersperse the use of monographs with essays, be they found on-line or in an anthology.
- More instruction when visiting a religious site. Although students enjoyed visiting a religious site, I need to give them more guidance on what to do there. Specifically, students don't always note how religious life is represented and enacted sensorially – through art, architecture, interior design, seating arrangements, clothing, smell, and sound. Next time I will provide an extensive introduction of what to examine and study, to the extent of offering a type of check-list.
- More instruction when visiting and evaluating a religious web site. Students loved digging around the internet and looking at different sites, but they didn't always pick up how religion is expressed and even experienced electronically. They did parse out how certain types of religious experience translate or are enacted better than others on the web or how the web can change the meaning or spiritual events. As with the visits to the religious sites, I need to offer students more guidelines about what to look for on the web and how to evaluate ways that it facilitates evangelization, community formation, and individual religious experiences.

Religion in America

AMS 4920.001 – Fall 2004

Prof. John M. Giggie

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Office Hours: WF, 9-10.45am, and gladly by appt.

Course Description: This is a course about religion in America. It attempts to define the nature of American religion as it developed over the past two hundred years, since the advance of capitalist industry at the end of the eighteenth century. It analyzes four distinct yet intimately related dimensions to the American religious experience that have been the subject of much of the best scholarship in the field during the last decade. They are: religion and commercial culture, devotional culture, religion and politics, and gender.

By no means are these themes the only ones to pursue in the quest to better understand American religion. Yet these four themes present us with an opportunity to read with an analytic precision and clarity often lost in a general survey of American religion. For the purpose of this class, they form the organizational framework around which the readings will be hung. We will spend 3-4 weeks on each theme and examine it through books, essays, video, film, slides, and internet sites. Our readings will include a mix of primary and secondary documents and class discussions will stress the different interpretative strategies employed by authors.

This class is designed to run on student participation, energy, and direction. Students must come to class superbly prepared to discuss the readings at-hand. For each class, they should be ready with highlighted passages, questions and comments about the texts, and ideas for class inquiry. If I can do anything to help you in these preparations, please do not hesitate to call upon me.

One final note, intended as an invitation. Many of you may be looking for a specific tradition or faith represented in the readings. Although we will investigate a wide range of religions and look at how race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality operate as categories of identity within them, we do not cover every faith group. Some of you may be disappointed that something is missing from the syllabus that you want to pursue in-depth. If this happens to you, please consider speaking with me about the topic. I will be happy to point you to pertinent readings and go over them with you. These additional readings can even become topics for your essays and exams, if you would like.

Required Purchases:
The following books are available for purchase at the university's bookstores. Copies of each are also on reserve at the John Peace Library. I have also placed American history textbooks on reserve should you want to investigate in depth any particular event or idea raised by class readings or discussions.

- Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (1987)
- Baldwin, *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1952)
- Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (1991)

- Flake, *The Politics of American Religion Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (2004)
- Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (1997)
- Orsi, Thank you, *St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (1996)
- Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (2003)
- Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2000)
- Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (1995)
- Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diaporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (1997)

Course Prerequisites: None

Course Goals:

- To broaden students' awareness of the scope and breadth of religion in America.
- To enhance students' ability to read and think critically through essays, in-class writing assignments, student-led discussions and lectures.
- To introduce students to the basics of historical analysis and writing

Course Objectives: By the end of the course, students will be better able to:

- Articulate crucial historical patterns and themes underlying the books devoted to explaining the meaning of religion in America
- Understand the crucial role of religion in the construction of American identity and politics
- Be able to evaluate the context, strength, persuasiveness of historical arguments.

Course Requirements:

- Successful completion of two essays, each 8-10 pages long.
- Successful completion of two in-class exams and one in-class quiz
- Successful completion of brief response (1-2 pages) to visit to a religious site in San Antonio
- Full and active participation in all group work, including the successful completion of all group work (see "Group Work" and "Group Projects" below)
- Regular (ie, daily) class participation. This means that all students are to come to all classes with assignments in-hand and with the ability to discuss the day's readings.
- Regular attendance. Attendance is mandatory. Repeated unexcused absences will merit referral to the Dean's office.
- There in no final exam in this course, only a final essay.

Due Dates and Times. Dates are indicated on syllabus. No exceptions will be made except under dire circumstances. *The essays must be turned in at the beginning of the class on the day that they are due*; failure to do so will result in a late penalty, which will be assessed at 1/3 of a grade per day of lateness.

Group Work

- I firmly believe that working regularly in small groups (of 4-5 students) is a vital means for learning and succeeding in this class. These groups provide an intimate arena for reviewing and debating issues that arise from lectures, readings, and film cuts shown in class. They also offer valuable sources of insight and preparation for the exams.

- During the first week, we will divide into groups. Students will meet in these groups throughout the semester and – in what will likely be a new experience for most of you – create group projects that will be presented in class.

- To be sure, group work is a bit of challenge in a large class and in an amphitheater with narrow and fixed seating. To make it work, you will need to be flexible – you will need to tolerate the sound of nearby discussions from other groups, to sit on the floor at times, to crane your neck to hear your colleagues, and to be able to adjust when fellow group members are absent.

- Peer Evaluation: At the end of the term, students will be asked to evaluate the individuals in their group and assign them a grade of 100, 85, 75, or 55. Students will be required to differentiate between their peers. In assigning the grades, I will ask you to consider issues of attendance, participation, and collegiality. **One certain thing about peer evaluations: if you do NOT show up regularly for group work and participate actively, you will receive a VERY low score from your colleagues.**

Group Projects:

- Project Number One: Each group will make a presentation about a religious "site" that they will visit out of class and on their own time. The professor must approve of the site in advance. Individual members of the group will write up a brief response (1-2 pages) to the experience. This will form the basis of the group presentation, which will consist of an evaluation of what makes this site 'religious' and what struck the group as intriguing, puzzling, or surprising. Due week seven. [Instructional guides will be passed out in advance.]

- Project Number Two: Each group will make a presentation that compares and contrasts two different religious web-sites, at least one of which must be non-Christian. The professor must approve of the web sites in advance. The objective is to point out how different faiths represent themselves electronically and to reveal the various methods used by religious groups to market and advertise themselves. Due week fifteen. [Instructional guides will be passed out in advance.]

Grading:

- Essays: 35 % [first one is worth 15 %; the second 20 %] Students are permitted to re-write any essay; the re-write grade will be averaged with the grade for the original essay for the new grade.
- Exams: 30% [each is worth 15%]
- Quiz: 5%
- Group Work: 30 % [10% for group project #1; 10% for group project #2; 10% for peer evaluation]

Student Assistance and Extra Credit:

- Before we discuss a book, I will hand out a study sheet designed to help you focus your reading and pick up on the central questions raised by the author.
- Students may elect to do a five-page essay on a book of their choosing that situates it within the context of the class. She/he may do a maximum of two such reviews. The professor must approve of the book in advance. The grade on the review will be averaged in with the grade of one exam.

Civility:

- Questions and discussions are most welcome. The only requirement is that the questioner respect the opinion of others and not monopolize class time.
- Early Departures. I don't mind if students need to leave early to take care a personal commitment. But please notify me before class and sit in the back of the lecture hall. By telling me about your absence I can make sure that you get all the appropriate information concerning any upcoming test or quiz.
- And please: *turn off all cell phones and pagers*.

Scholastic Dishonesty and Cheating:

- Don't even think of it. Scholastic dishonesty and cheating of any form is a serious violation of academic integrity university policy. Any student who cheats will receive an automatic "F" for the assignment and be referred the Dean's office for the disciplinary action.
- What is cheating in this class? The best answer is the official one, as provided by the UTSA catalogue. "Scholastic dishonest includes, but is not limited to: cheating on a test or other class work; plagiarism (the appropriation of another's work and the unauthorized incorporation of it in one' own written work offered for credit); and collusion (the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing college work offered for credit)." For more detailed information about the official UTSA policy on scholastic dishonesty, see Section 203 "**Scholastic Dishonesty**" in Student Code of Conduct—there is a link to this document on UTSA homepage under "Administration" http://www.utsa.edu/infoguide/appendiceb.cfm).

Student Services:

- Students with disabilities are urged to contact the Office of Student Services, MS 2.03.18, tel. 458-4157, on the 1604 Campus, to secure help with registration, equipment, and general in-class assistance.
- Students seeking extra help with reading comprehension or writing are urged to contact the Tomas Rivera Center for Student Success, University Center 1.01.02, tel. 458-4694, on the 1604 Campus.
- The **History Department Office** is located in HSS 4.04.06 and is open M-F, 0800-1700. Ms. Sherrie McDonald, Mr. Paulo Villareal, and Ms. Stacy Townsend, Administrative Assistants, and Dr. John F. Reynold, Chair, are available at 458-4033/4333 or at history@utsa.edu and will be happy to tell you more about the programs and to answer your questions. See our Department Website at: http://colfa.utsa.edu/colfa/HIST/home.HTM
- Ms. Sylvia Mansour (smansour@utsa.edu; 458-4900) at the COLFA Advising Center is the **undergraduate student advisor**, and she can assist you in selecting courses and planning your course of study.

E-Mail Communication with the Professor:

Please feel free to email me with any questions or comments that you may have about the class. But please do not expect an immediate response. I do my best to return all emails within 48 hours of receiving them, but I am not always successful. Additionally, I only respond only during business hours, M-F, 8.00 am to 5.00 pm. If you need to have a question answered immediately and cannot get in contact with me at my office, please contact the history department office.

COURSE SYLLABUS

I. Religion and Commercial Culture

Week One: Seeing Religion in Commercial Culture
8/25, Introduction to course; John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630)
8/27 Formation of Groups; Religion and Money: The Case of the Other Madonna

Week Two: Selling Jesus
8/30 Prothero, 3-123
9/01 Prothero, 124-228
9/03 Prothero, 229-304

Week Three: Religion and the Growth of Capitalism
9/06 [Labor Day Holiday – no class],
9/08

- Lambert, "Frank Lambert, "'Pedlar In Divinity': George Whitfield and the Great Awakening," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, No. 3. (Dec., 1990), pp. 812-837. [Note: you can download this free from JSTOR, which is an electronic resource site offered by our library. Go to the UTSA library webpage, click to resources, and find JSTOR. Then plug in the author and the article will pop up.
- John Giggie, "Preachers and Peddlers of God: Ex-Slaves and the Selling of African-American Religion in the American South," in Susan Strasser, ed., *Commodifying Everything: Relationships of the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 169-190. [nb: this will be handed out in class]

9/10 Schmidt, 3-32, 38-104 [introduction and material on Valentine's Day]

Week Four: Making Holidays and Holy Days
9/13 Schmidt, 105-175 [on Christmas]
9/15 Schmidt, 192-234 [on Easter]
9.17 – **IN-CLASS EXAM ONE**

II. Devotional Culture

Week Five: Women and St. Jude
9/20 Orsi, 1-69
9/22 Orsi, 70-142
9/24 Orsi, 143-212

Week Six: Diasporic Religion
9/27 Tweed, 3-82
9/29 Tweed, 83-115
10/1 Tweed, 116-142

Week Seven: Religious Space
10/4 Group Reports on Site Visits; **ESSAY # 1 DUE**
10/6 Group Reports on Site Visits
10/8 Group Reports on Site Visits

III. Religion and Politics

Week Eight: Mormonism and American Politics
10/11 Flake, 1-81
10/13 Flake, 82-179
10/15 **IN-CLASS QUIZ**

Week Nine: Fundamentalism and Contemporary American Politics
10/18 Harding, 3-82
10/20 Harding, 83-182
10/22 Harding, 182-269

Week Ten: Religion, Race and the Civil Right Movement
10/25 Marsh, 3-81
10/27 Marsh, 82-151
10/29 Marsh, 152-204

Week Eleven: African-American Identity and Religion
11/1 Race, Religion and Film: Eyes on the Prize
11/3 Picturing Faith and Segregation: Little Rock documents [provided by instructor]
11/5 Baldwin, 9-91

Week Twelve – African-American Holiness
11/8 Baldwin, 92-150
11/10 Baldwin, 151-221
11/12 **IN-CLASS EXAM 2**

IV. Gender

Week Thirteen – Women and Conservative Christianity
11/15 Ammerman, 1-71
11/17 Ammerman, 72-146
11/19 Ammerman, 147-212

Week Fourteen – Women and Conservative Judaism
11/22 Davidman, 1-173
11/24 Davidman, 174-206
11/26 [Thanksgiving Holiday – no class]

Week Fifteen – Religion and the Web
11/29 Group Presentations on Religious Web Sites
12/1 Group Presentations on Religious Web Sites
12/3 Group Presentations on Religious Web Sites; **ESSAY # 2 DUE**

Religion in America
Prof. John M. Giggie

Worship Service Report

As you all know by now, a big part of this class is looking at religion outside of the classroom, whether it be in the mall or on the web. One of your assignments is to visit a worship service at a church, synagogue, mosque, or religious site of your choosing and *describe your experience.*

This assignment will have three distinct components and will involve your entire group.

First, as a group you must decide what you want to visit. The service may take place in San Antonio or anywhere else in North America. Ideally, the service you visit should represent one of the traditions studied in this class: Jewish, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant group (Lutheran, Episcopal, Evangelical Christian, Fundamentalist, or any of the black denominations). If you have any question about the appropriateness of the religious group you have chosen, or you want to visit a group not studied in class, please check with me first. Once you have selected what you want to visit, please tell me. We will have a sign up in class during the fifth week of the semester, after the first exam.

Some basic ground rules for your visit: Not everyone has to visit the selected site at the same time, but try to observe a similar service. Virtually all houses of worship welcome visitors. It is polite to make a small donation if a collection is taken; $1 should be enough. Do not feel obliged to take communion or actively engage in any other acts of worship unless you feel comfortable in doing so. If you have questions as to whether communion or other rituals are open to non-members, ask the clergy person or call the office beforehand. Become as involved with meeting the clergy and congregation as you care to. Most clergy and members welcome visitors and will be happy to answer questions.

Second, each person must complete a 3-4 page essay detailing their observations and impressions.

- Begin by identifying the name and location of the building in which worship is conducted, the denomination to which it belongs, a description of the building and its location, and the date of your visit.
- This should be followed by a brief description of the service you attended, noting things like the size and demographic makeup of the congregation, the arrangements and furnishings of the interior of the house of worship, the music, the elements of the service, the length, subject, and manner of delivery of the sermon, the people conducting the service, whether this was an ordinary weekly service or a special holiday or other occasion, whether (if Christian) there was communion, what it consisted of and how it was administered. (Basically, God is in the details when it comes to this assignment.)

- Include a concluding paragraph summarizing and evaluating what you have reported. *This will be the most important part of the essay, as you reveal your own impressions and feelings about what you saw.*
- Format: typed, double-spaced, proofread. Keep the tone objective and descriptive; you may include personal reactions at the end, but avoid strong value judgments. Bring to bear anything you may have learned in class that is relevant to describing and understanding what you have seen.
- Please spell "altar" and "aisle" correctly.
- The paper is due on the date of your group presentation.

Third, as a group you must make a presentation to the class about your trip.

- This presentation must include some kind of visual or aural component – you can't stand up and just talk about what you saw. Ideally the presentation should be in PowerPoint. Many religious sites have web sites and offer visitors the chance to buy paraphernalia or receive some for free. These items may become part of your presentation.
- The goal of the presentation is to offer your classmates a sense of what happened during the service, what sights, smell, sounds and tastes constituted the religious experience. You should feel free to share feelings of curiosity or wonder, but please refrain from offering anything that might be considered disparaging.
- The entire group should be involved in creating the presentation, though one member or several may be in charge of actually delivering it to the class. This project should not require too much time meeting as a group outside of class. Once everyone in the group has visited, generally a consensus of what to present is quickly formed.
- If you have any questions, please come and speak with me.

Prof. John M. Giggie
American Religion, Fall 2004
Final Group Project

The final group project will be a comparison of two different religious web sites, one of which must be non-Christian. This project will include a brief written report and a presentation to the class of your research findings.

The project is motivated by a recognition that the internet represents one of the newest and most powerful means a religious group possesses to fundraise, correspond with members and recruit new ones. The 'net is fairly inexpensive to use, allows for direct email campaigns, and presents new ways of creating religious communities through chat rooms, prayer sites, memorial pages, pictorial displays of sacred images or figures, and text displays of lectures or sermons.

- Your task is to identify the two religious web sites and then compare and contrast them. You will make a group presentation that answers three broad questions and lasts no more than five minutes (this will be enforced).
- You will also file a written report (one for the group as a whole) that puts your findings in print. This report should be about two–three pages, typed, double-spaced.

The three questions are:

1.) *How does each website attempt to create a religious message or community? Pay attention to the various features of each site, including the use of image (still and moving), sound, interactivity, and connectivity (or how the viewer communicates with the site).*

2.) *What are the key differences between the Christian and non-Christian website.*

3.) *Which is the more appealing or "successful" as a medium communicating religious meaning.*

The due dates:

Monday, 22 November 2004 – identify websites and be able to tell me about them
Monday, 29 November 2004 – be prepared to present in class on the websites.

How to Write an Analytical Essay

Prof. John M. Giggie
Department of History

Ask students what they dread most about history classes and most will moan about writing essays. The task of putting pen to paper and producing multiple essays during a semester is a hard one, requiring a good deal of diligence, insight, time, and revision. Yet learning to write an analytical essay, of the type most common in history classes and humanities courses broadly conceived, is among the most valuable lessons any student can learn. Whatever your career, mastering the art and science of composing an analytical essay will be a valuable part of your education. This handout offers ways of improving your ability to think critically and write logically.

- Understand that an analytical essay is not some kind of polished, stream-of-consciousness feel good piece. Save that for your diary or a writing activity in a composition course. An analytical essay is an exercise in making a case, being persuasive, convincing the reader of your *main point* or *argument*. Other types of essays or weak analytical ones fail to announce an argument or prove it; they drift from point to point and leave the reader confused as to the overall intent and point.

- Realize that facts do not speak for themselves. You can't line up facts like beads in a row and expect an argument to be complete. You must embed the facts in an interpretative framework.

- See that the argument in an analytical essay is easy to identify, logical, coherent, and supported by evidence. The evidence is presented in way such that argument is being substantiated.

The big question in writing an analytical essay is always the same: how do you "make the argument" or arrange the evidence to prove the main point. How do you go about doing it. What follows are my tried and true steps. Follow them and you will enhance your chances of creating an essay that you can be proud of.

1.) *Don't write the introduction or conclusion first*. This you save to the end (or nearly the end). Too often students (and professors!) labor over the construction of a perfect introduction. But this is work in vain as you have little idea of what the introduction will look like until much of the essay is organized. Feel free to knock out a sentence or two, but don't spend more than ten minutes on either section.

2.) *Instead, you must first know the evidence*. You must do the assigned readings, locate documents, and understand the documents. As you study them, ideas will emerge about the argument.

3.) *Compose a rough outline*. Jot down three or four ideas about the argument. Make sure that your documents can support them. No doubt these ideas will change, but this is how you start.

4.) *Create a system of organizing your thoughts*. Take manila folders or create e-files on your computer and give them names: intro, conclusion, point one (list it), point two, etc. Now go over your evidence. Sort it according to what supports what point and put it in the corresponding folder. (For you folks who like to have a neat desk, office, closet or kitchen this type of work will be rather pleasant.) When you are done, you should have folders full of quotes, summaries, and insights.

5.) *Start to write about each point*. Go from folder to folder. Identify the strongest evidence for the point. Ideally, you want 3 bits of evidence for each point, though this number might go up or down depending on how long the paper will be. Here you will discard some evidence, discover new major points, and discard others. Don't despair: this rearranging is a natural part of the process. Organize your evidence from weakest to strongest. When you are done you will have the body of your essay completed.

6.) *Draft the introduction and conclusion*. No doubt during your earlier drafting sessions ideas about the introduction or conclusion popped to mind and, ideally, you shoved them into their respective folders. It is now time to drag them out and write about them. You will already have a rough sense of what the essay is about. The introduction should announce the argument and tell of the sources used to prove it. The conclusion should summarize the argument and, if possible, make a link or leap between it and the present day.

7.) *Before you call it quits and turn in the essay, proof read*. Especially look at topic sentences that start each paragraph. I always read my essays by going from the first sentence of each paragraph to the first sentence of the next; this exercise tells me if the essays flows in style and logic.

You are done now. Hopefully the essay is something that you like. Always remember that professors will read rough drafts, so long as you give them ample time before the deadline. Try and take advantage of this opportunity. Good luck!

Basic Elements to Historical Writing

Prof. John M. Giggie

Ask ten scholars what constitutes good writing and hear twelve opinions. Frustrating? Yes. But while different ideas circulate about good writing, consensus exists on its common elements. Exemplary writing, regardless of topic or audience, exhibits similar elements of style, composition, and argument.

What follows is my understanding of the basic elements to historical writing. I expect you to incorporate them into your own written work. You should find them useful in every piece of scholarly prose produce in the future. In conjunction with my previous handout on how to organize your essays, this one will help you with the task of actually creating sentences and paragraphs.

Realize that good writing does not come easily. No one sits down and cranks out polished prose. Writing well is not a gift given to some but not others. Instead, it develops slowly over a lifetime of learning and customarily involves re-analyzing and re-drafting multiple times. Anyone can become a stellar writer, so long as one understands and practices writing as an on-going process of re-viewing the ideas under consideration.

The best (and least expensive) reference book on good writing is an oldie but goodie: Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*. Written over a half-century ago, it offers the most succinct catalogue of the components to good writing. Do purchase a copy (it runs about six dollars) for your bookcase.

1.) Passive Voice. This might be the most common problem in writing. Use active verbs and not passive whenever possible to maximize clarity and expressiveness.

> Bad: "George W. Bush was elected president for a second term in 2004."
> Rewrite: "George W. Bush assumed the presidency for a second term in 2004" or "Americans elected George W. Bush to a second term as president in 2004."

Avoid "was" -- unless it stands alone in a sentence.

> Bad: "It was raining."
> Rewrite: "It was a rainy night."

Occasionally, it is permissible to use the passive voice, usually when you want to stress the received and not the doer of an action. Thus:

> Joseph Smith was persecuted for preaching about the existence of a non-Christian God.

2.) Wordiness. Less is more. Kill off sentences, phrases, or words that do not explain your points. Search out wordiness while proofreading your work; it is then that excess becomes most visible.

3.) Vagueness. Make each sentence mean something specific, especially in your introduction when you state your argument.

> Bad: "The Civil War profoundly changes southern society." This sentence tells the reader nothing; it suffocates under the weight of its own vagueness.

Rewrite: "The Civil War conclusively ended slavery in American and began a new era in the South when former slaves finally enjoyed the freedom to work, marry, read, worship, and sue.

4.) Tenses. Keep it constant. Avoid sudden shifts from past to present to conditional. Generally, historians write in the past tense.

5.) Split infinitives. Keep the word "to" and the verb it affects together at all costs. Avoid inserting an adverb between them.

Bad: "to quickly run" or "to smartly think."
Rewrite: "to run quickly" or "to think smartly."

6.) Contractions: Avoid them. Spell them out.

Bad: can't
Rewrite: cannot

7.) Ineffective Organizational Cues: Eliminate throat-clearing mechanisms that purport to clarify your prose but accomplish only the opposite. Thus weed out phrases like "as previously mentioned" or "as will soon be seen."

8.) Proper use of Who/Which/ That. Note that *who* refers to persons, *which* to things, and *that* to both.

9.) Two-word Adjectives. African-American religion; nineteenth-century warfare.

10.) Commas. Perhaps the most overused and misused of all forms of punctuation, the comma needs special attention. Use commas with care, preferring to omit rather to add them. A few special topics.

10-A) Preceding direct quotations.

The professor mentioned, "Don't forget to turn in your papers."
The professor continued, "Do put your name on everything that you turn in."

10-B) Use commas to surround all dates and all city-state combinations.

On July 4, 1776, the Colonists rightly claimed independence.
He left Boston, Massachusetts, in 1987.

11.) Odds and Ends

- Never use "impact" as a verb; replace it with affect or influence
- Use "between when the reference is to only two; use "among" when the reference is for more than two.
- "farther" refers to distance; "further" means additional
- "Less" refers to amounts; "fewer" to numbers.

  Bad: He has less nickels than she does.
  Rewrite: he has fewer nickels than she does.