

**History Department Senior Thesis Seminar, 2018-19  
(HIST 3391- HIST 3392)**

**Instructional Staff, 2018-19**

**THE FIRST CLASS MEETING WILL BE IN DIANA LL103**

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**Course Description:**

The Senior Research Seminar is the capstone experience for all History majors. The objective is for each student to produce a senior thesis on a topic of her choice that is based on archival research.

The final grade for the course—the one recorded in the transcript—is based on the following criteria and weighting:

1. Course performance, including meeting deadlines throughout the year (i.e., handing in specified assignments on the specified date), showing energy and ingenuity in research, contributing to the learning process in section, and serving as a peer editor [together, 40%];

2. The quality of the thesis itself, as determined by the adviser and a second reader [60%].

Each student will receive a separate grade for the senior thesis itself, which will not be recorded in the transcript. An exceptional thesis will receive a grade of A with Distinction. That grade will be limited to a maximum of 20% of the completed theses in any given year, as determined by a sub-committee of the seminar advisers and director.

## SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

(All meetings are on Wed. 4:10-6 p.m.)

### **Week 1 (Sept. 5): ORIENTATION MEETING, Place TBA**

Group meeting of all graduating seniors. Students should come prepared with [the form] listing possible thesis topics. The faculty will divide the students into seminar groups of 6-8 students.

\*Assignment for Week 2: Digital copies of most of the completed theses of the past several years are available on the [Barnard History Department website](#). Choose one sample (or take one chosen by your group adviser) and analyze it (see Appendix A: What Is A Thesis?)

### **Week 2 (Sept. 12): GROUP MEETING, Place TBA**

Discuss the essential elements of a thesis. Pay attention to the choice and use of primary sources in the sample thesis you read.

### **Week 3 (Sept. 19): INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS**

Students will meet individually with their advisers to discuss and refine the topics they wish to pursue.

### **Week 4 (Sept. 26): GROUP MEETING**

Each student should bring to this meeting a short statement of her topic with a preliminary bibliography and present the topic to the group.

Advisers will ask if members of the group wish to form writing partners.

### **Week 5 (Oct. 3): GROUP MEETING - LIBRARY RESEARCH TOOLS**

Students meet as a group with reference librarians from the Barnard Library. By the time this class meets, advisers will have given the librarians a list of topics on which students plan to work. The librarians discuss the bibliographies and reference works available to students and give a brief demonstration of the use of electronic media in research.

### **Week 6 (Oct. 10): GROUP MEETING**

#### **\*\*SUBMISSION OF THESIS PROPOSAL\*\***

Each student should present to her group a one-page statement of her thesis topic and a working bibliography of the primary and secondary sources. The bibliography should be divided into two sections: primary sources and secondary sources (i.e. scholarly articles and books.)

**Week 7 (Oct. 17): INDIVIDUAL MEETING – RESEARCH TECHNIQUES**

Work with adviser who will give feedback on thesis topic and plan for presentation of organizational map next week.

**Week 8 (Oct. 24): GROUP MEETING – PRESENTATION OF TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Each student presents to the group a tentative map of the organization of the thesis: rough number of chapters; sequence of topics etc.

**Week 9 (Oct. 31): INDIVIDUAL MEETING – PLANNING THE FIRST CHAPTER**

Each student meets with her thesis adviser to plot the writing of the first chapter.

**Week 10 (Nov. 7): MEETING AT ADVISER'S DISCRETION: GROUP, INDIVIDUAL, or PAIRED****Week 11 (Nov. 14): NO MEETING – FOCUS ON RESEARCH AND WRITING**

Students begin writing chapter 1 (about 8-12 pages) of their thesis. Leave the Introduction and Conclusion to the last.

**Week 12 [Nov. 19--the Monday before Thanksgiving]:**

**\*\*SUBMISSION OF DRAFT OF THE FIRST CHAPTER WITH WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY\*\***

**Week 13 (Nov. 21): NO MEETING (day before Thanksgiving)****Week 14 (Nov. 28): GROUP MEETING – PLANNING THE NEXT STEPS**

\*Adviser (and writing partner) returns the first draft with feedback. Students will meet as a group to discuss their drafts and to plan ahead for the spring term. At the discretion of the adviser, the group meeting can be followed by individual meetings after the first hour and/or the following week.

**Week 15 (Dec. 5): INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS – DISCUSSION OF DRAFTS (CONT'D)**

Students will meet with advisers to discuss their drafts and to plan ahead for the spring term

Christmas Take-away: Please keep in mind that the second chapter is due *three weeks into the second semester*, and the completed first draft of the thesis is due the first week in March.

**\*\*\*\* WINTER BREAK \*\*\*\***

**SPRING SEMESTER, 2019****Week 1 (Jan. 23): GROUP MEETING**

Report on progress made during Winter break.

**Week 2 (Jan. 30): INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS**

Each student meets with the adviser to plot progress towards draft of the next chapter(s).

**Week 3 (Feb. 6): NO MEETING – WORK ON YOUR DRAFT****Week 4 (Feb. 13): GROUP MEETING****\*\*SUBMISSION OF DRAFT OF CHAPTER 2\*\***

Students submit a draft of the next chapter(s) and present it to the group in class.

**Week 5 (Feb. 20): INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS**

The adviser meets with each student individually to give feedback to draft submitted in Week 4 and to trouble-shoot.

**Week 6 (Feb. 27): NO MEETING - WORK ON YOUR DRAFT****Week 7 (Mar. 6): GROUP MEETING****\*\*SUBMISSION OF FULL DRAFT OF THE BODY OF THE THESIS\*\***

Students bring draft of the full body of the thesis (without Introduction and Conclusion) and present it to the group.

**Week 8 (Mar. 13): BREATHING SPACE**

To be used for group or individual meeting at the discretion of the adviser.

**Week 9 (Mar. 20): SPRING BREAK****Week 10 (Mar. 27): INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS**

[\*Adviser returns draft of full body of thesis with feedback]

Students report progress made during Spring break. At the discretion of the adviser, the group meeting can be followed by individual meetings after the first hour and/or the following week.

Advisers work with students on writing the Introduction [head] and Conclusion [feet] of the thesis.

**Week 11 (Apr. 3): NO MEETING: WORK ON YOUR FINAL DRAFT**

Advisers continue to work with students on writing the Introduction [head] and Conclusion [feet] of the thesis if necessary.

**Week 12 (Apr. 10): GROUP MEETING – PRESENTATION I**

Two to three students present their final version to the group.

**Week 13 (Apr. 17): GROUP MEETING – PRESENTATION II****\*\*SENIOR THESIS DUE\*\***

The rest of the students present their final versions to the group. Each student submits one electronic copy and two print copies of her thesis to her adviser.

**Week 14 (Apr. 24): SENIOR THESIS PARTY**

All faculty and students are invited to celebrate the completion of their work together.  
Time: 4:10-6:00; Room, TBA.

## APPENDIX A: WHAT IS A THESIS?

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING (AND WRITING) A SENIOR THESIS:

1. Topic: A good topic should pose an interesting question that can be answered by available evidence. How well does the thesis do this?
2. Title: A good title is difficult to create. It should excite the reader's interest, while reducing the thesis's core idea to a few words.
3. Statement of Argument / Introduction: The introduction should draw the reader into the topic and make clear where the writer is going. The writer should pose an answerable question and articulate the argument she will construct to answer that question. Does the author accomplish these goals?
4. Discussion of the relevant scholarly literature / Historiography: A good essay is part of a larger conversation among scholars. How well does the author define the scholarly discussion to which she wishes to contribute? Does she make clear what others have said on the subject, what her own position is, and what she is adding to the debate?
5. Primary Sources: Perhaps the main requirement of the senior thesis is that it convey a coherent argument that is centered on and driven by original research in primary sources. How well does the thesis satisfy this requirement?
6. Broader Context: To be successful an essay must provide sufficient context to make clear how the particular issues being explored relate to larger social, cultural, economic, political, or intellectual themes. Authors generally rely on secondary sources to establish this context. How rich is the secondary literature that the author has explored? Has the author provided adequate context? Has she struck the right balance between analysis and context?
7. Analysis of Evidence: On what kinds of evidence does the author rely? Is the evidence used sufficient to satisfy the author's goals? Has the author constructed a convincing argument based on that evidence?
8. Organization: The longer a piece of writing, the more critical the organization. How well organized is this thesis? Do the chapter divisions make sense in terms of the overall argument? Are their smooth transitions between sections?
9. Details: Is the note form (either footnotes or endnotes may be used) proper and consistent? Does the author effectively use notes to convey useful information tangential to the main argument? Are quotations over 35 words indented?

## APPENDIX B: ANNOTATION

### WHEN TO USE NOTES:

Direct quotations from both primary and secondary sources must be identified and credited in a note. (Direct quotations from *secondary* sources should be used very sparingly. Rather than quote directly from secondary texts, it works better in almost every case to frame the point you are taking from a secondary author in your own (concise) words and then to note the source(s) of your paraphrase, giving the author, work, and page you are drawing from in the note, just as you would with a direct quotation.) You must provide notes for ideas and interpretations that you have discovered in reading your sources, as well as for direct quotations and quantitative data. You should not, however, provide sources for facts that are widely known. If you wish to quote a primary source that you have found in a secondary work, you should give credit to the author of the secondary work. [Example: Charles H. Cooley, "Reflections upon the Sociology of Herbert Spencer," *American Journal of Sociology* 26 (1920): 129, as quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* [1944] (New York: Beacon Press, 1955), 33.]

### WHERE TO PLACE THE NUMBER OF A NOTE:

Place note numbers *at the end of the sentence* in which cited material appears. The number should appear slightly above the line in the text and should not be enclosed in parentheses. If your note contains more than one source, list them in the order in which they are cited in the text.

### WHETHER TO PLACE NOTES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE OR AT THE END OF THE THESIS:

If you were to submit your essay for publication, you would be asked to double-space your notes at the end of the text. For the purposes of this thesis, however, you should print your notes in single-spaced form at the bottom of each page.

### PROPER FORMAT FOR NOTE REFERENCES:

The first time you use any source, cite it in full. You need to use a full citation only the first time you cite any work. Every time thereafter, you should use the abbreviated **short title form** (see the section under this heading below).

### FULL BOOK CITATION

Author's full name (first name, initial, last name)

Complete title of the book (either underlined or in italics—whichever you choose, be consistent)

Editor, compiler, or translator, if any

Name of series in which book appears, if any, and volume or number in the series

Edition, if other than the first

Number of volumes

Facts of publication -- city where published, publisher, date of publication

Page number(s) of the particular citation

### EXAMPLES OF FULL CITATIONS FOR BOOKS:

**Author:** The first time an author's name appears it should be written in full. For footnotes,

place the first name first and the last name last. (Only in the Bibliography should you place the last name first.)

If a work has more than three authors, use the first author's name and follow it with "et al.":

1. Judith A. Baer, *Equality Under the Constitutions: Reclaiming the Fourteenth Amendment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 105-130.

All book titles must *either* italicized or underlined (choose one or the other and then be consistent throughout).

**NB:** There must be a **comma** after the author's name, a **comma** between the place and date of publication, a **comma after** the parenthesis containing the publication place and date (but **no** comma before this or any other parenthesis), and a **period** at the conclusion of every note.

**Editors and Translators:** The names of editors and translators appear after the title, unless that person had primary responsibility for preparing the book for publication:

2. Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 69.

3. Thomas W. Copeland, ed., *The Papers of James Madison*, 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 49.

4. Deborah L. Rhode, ed., Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 257-260.

**Edition:** References should generally be to a hardbound edition. If an edition other than the first is used, the number should be given:

5. John W. Hazard, *The Soviet System of Government*, 4th ed. rev. (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1968), 25.

**Reprint:** If you are using a book that has been reprinted, include the original date of publication, as well as the date of reprinting:

6. Gunnar Myrdal, *Population: A Problem for Democracy* [1940] (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1956), 15.

**Multivolume Works:** Works of more than one volume should be identified in notes by the number of volumes in the work and the number of the volume from which a quote has been taken. Some multivolume works have a general title and individual titles for each volume; in that case list the general title and then the particular title to which the note refers. Notes for books that are part of a series should list the title of the book in italics, followed by the title of the series in roman letters:

7. Edward T. James et al. eds., *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1:119.

8. Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, vol. 2, *People and Production*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 237-238.

9. James Losh, *The Diaries and Correspondence of James Losh*, ed. Edward Hughes, 2 vols., Publications of the Surtees Society, vols. 171, 172 (Durham, England: Andrews & Co. for the Society, 1962-63), 2:200-212.

### **FULL CITATION FORM FOR ALL ARTICLES:**

(To be used **only** the first time a work is cited. Every time thereafter, use the **Short Title** citation form as outlined below.

Author's Full Name (first name, initial, last name)  
 Title of the Article (in quotation marks)  
 Name of the periodical (either underlined or in italics)  
 Number of the volume or issue  
 Date of the volume or of the issue (year in parenthesis)  
 Page number(s) of the particular citation

### **EXAMPLES OF FULL CITATIONS FOR ARTICLES**

#### **Article in a Scholarly Journal:**

9. Mary Louise Roberts, "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920's France," American Historical Review, 98 (1993): 657.

**NB:** First name first; **comma** after the author's name; **comma** after the title of the article (should be placed inside the quotation marks); the name of the periodical must be placed **either** in Italics or underlined (choose one but be consistent); **comma** after the name of the periodical; **comma** (or semicolon) after the date of the periodical in parenthesis; **period** at the conclusion of the footnote.

#### **Chapter in a Book:**

10. Patricia O'Brien, "Michel Foucault's History of Culture," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 25.

#### **Article in a Magazine:**

11. Lucy Eisenberg, "Scientists vs. Animal Lovers: The Conflict That Never Ends," *Harper's*, November 1966, 101-10.

#### **Citing a Newspaper:**

12. *New York Times*, 11 August 1965, p. B3.

#### **Citing a Government Publication:**

13. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 9 October 1987, pp. 14011-12.

**Citing a Court Case:**

(Complex citation. Please follow carefully the form you have found in the secondary works you have consulted.)

**Citing a Book Review:**

15. Ronald M. Radano, review of The Creation of Jazz by Burton W. Puretti, Reviews in American History, 21 (December 1993): 671.

**Citing a Well Known Reference Book:**

16. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Prayers for the Dead."

**Citing Dissertations:**

17. Anna Louise Bates, "Protective Custody: A Feminist Interpretation of Anthony Comstock's Life and Laws" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991), 34.

**Unpublished Papers:**

18. Poshek Fu, "Struggle to Entertain: The Ideological Ambivalence of the Wartime Shanghai Film Industry, 1942-1945" (paper delivered at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, California, January 8, 1994), 15.

**FULL CITATION FOR UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS:**

Title of document, if any, and date  
Folio number (or box number)  
Name of collection  
Depository and city where it is located

**EXAMPLES:**

17. Lawrence E. Skelly to Joseph L. Hetzel, 6 March 1947, American Civil Liberties Union Papers, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

18. Diary of Lewis Tappan, 23 February 1836, Tappan Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

19. Joan Hayes, "Abortion Law: A Case History," January 1970, Box 3, National Abortion Rights Action League Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

20. Thurgood Marshall, interview with Ed Edwin, February-June 1977, Washington, D.C., Columbia Oral History Program, Columbia University, New York, NY.

**\*SHORT TITLE CITATIONS\*:**

After the first reference to a particular source of whatever kind, **all** subsequent references should be shortened.

The shortened reference to a **book** should include only:  
 Last name of the author  
 Shortened title of the book (underlined or in italics)  
 Page number of the reference.

Example:

For the first citation of any book use the

**Book, Full Title:**

Judith A. Baer, *Equality Under the Constitution: Reclaiming the Fourteenth Amendment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 105-130.

For all succeeding citations use the

**Book, Short Title:**

Baer, *Equality Under the Constitution*, 105-130.

Example 2:

**Book, Full Title:**

Deborah L. Rhode, ed., Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 257-260.

**Book, Short Title:**

Rhode, ed., Theoretical Perspectives, 257-60.

**SHORT TITLE CITATIONS FOR ALL ARTICLES:**

The shortened reference to an article should include only:

Last name of the author,  
 Short title of the article,  
 Page numbers of the reference.

Example:

**Article, Full Title Citation:**

Mary Louise Roberts, "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920's France," American Historical Review, 98 (June 1993): 657.

**Article, Short Title Citation:**

Roberts, "Samson and Delilah," 657.

A shortened reference to a manuscript source should include only the title and name of the collection.

**APPENDIX C: BIBLIOGRAPHY**

FORM: At the end of your thesis you should provide a list of all the books and other references you have used. You may find it convenient to divide your bibliography into categories, such as Manuscripts, Interviews, Books, and Articles. Within each category

works should be arranged alphabetically, by the author's last name.

SOME TYPICAL BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ENTRIES: The basic information given in a bibliographic entry parallels that given in a footnote, but note the differences in format. Note, for instance, that lines after the first are indented.

**Books by a Single Author:**

Cafe, William H. *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

**Books by Two or More Authors** (Note that each name appears in inverse order, and that semi-colon is used with three or more names):

Adler, J.H., et al. *The Pattern of U.S. Import Trade since 1923*. New York: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 1952.

**More than One Work by the Same Author:**

Mead, Margaret. *Blackberry Winter: My Early Years*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth*. New York: Morrow, 1928.

**Editor or Translator Named in Addition to Author:**

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

**Multivolume Work:**

Hall, G. Stanley. *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Education*. 2 vols. New York: Appleton, 1904.

**Association as "Author":**

American Historical Association. *Directory of American Historians*. Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1994.

**Edition other than the First:**

Crews, Frederick, and Sandra Schor. *The Borzoi Handbook for Writers*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1989.

**When Paperback Reprint Is Used:**

May, Henry. *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*. [1959]. Reprint, New York: Quadrangle, 1964.

**Volume in a Series:**

Lloyd, T.O. *Empire to Welfare State: English History, 1906-1985*. 3rd. edition. *The Short Oxford History of the Modern World*. Edited by J.M. Roberts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY FORMAT FOR ALL ARTICLES:****Article in a Scholarly Journal:**

Tonomura, Hitomi. "Black Hair and Red Trousers: Gendering the Flesh in Medieval Japan." *American Historical Review* 99 (February 1994): 129-154.

**Article in a Popular Magazine:**

Hamilton, Ian. "Spender's Lives." *The New Yorker*, 28 February 1994, pp. 72-84.

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**Manuscript Material:**

William J. Brennan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Unpublished Paper:**

Ditz, Toby. "Secrecy and Candor in the Mercantile Writing of Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia." Paper read at the Eighty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, 14-17 April 1994, in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Interviews:**

Appel, Cheri. Interview with Ellen Chesler, 1 February 1989, New York, NY. Sophia Smith Collection. Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

**APPENDIX D: SHAPING A SENIOR THESIS TOPIC--SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

Most of the time, topics (questions) are made, not born. You begin with a fuzzy notion of something that interests you and seems worth investigating, and you proceed from there. But how? How do you get from broad and incoherent to defined and doable?

Follow your curiosity. Conceiving your topic in the form of a question often helps. Work continually to **focus** your question. You can never provide the whole answer to any large historical question—nor should you try to. Think of yourself as making a **finite, limited, yet trustworthy contribution** to the larger history of your subject.

Once you have your topic, begin to recognize its parts and to break it down into manageable pieces. Visualize how it can be divided into chapters and what the headings of the chapters might be. It is almost always easier to work on a topic part by part than to

attack the whole directly.

Your question needs to be one that can be asked and answered historically. What this means, of course, is that it has to involve the "past" in some form or other. The practice of history in the last few decades has expanded to include a large number of new subjects and areas previously excluded, so that almost any aspect of human experience is now fair game. It helps, for all sorts of reasons, if you locate your subject in a period that has, in some sense, "closed," so that what you're writing about is not completely open-ended and lacking in form. In fact, "form" and "shape" are aspects that you should be considering when constructing your topic.

Historians are generally less concerned with discovering universal truths and constructing seamless systems than they are with investigating disjunctions: pieces that don't seem to fit; evidence that raises questions; beliefs and actions that have a certain strangeness to them and thereby indicate shifts in social, political, and cultural life over time.

Historical argument is different from the political and courtroom argumentation we see so much of in our culture. Our job is not to construct an air-tight brief or to discount and devalue evidence that does not fit. Our job is more difficult: to capture the richness and complexity of the past while at the same time working to isolate and clarify particular aspects of a particular historical subject. Once we have isolated and clarified, we are in a position to suggest how the pieces originally fit together or worked together in their historical context. Good history proposes and tests hypotheses--it makes a case for the answers it provides--but it doesn't presuppose that there is only one "right" answer, or only one way to read the pieces, or only one way to reconstruct the way they worked together in the past.

It is likely that the full outline of your topic will emerge only after you have had a chance to familiarize yourself with the primary and secondary sources. The more you do this, the more you are likely to see what areas require further examination and explication. This recognition, in turn, helps you to sharpen and focus the questions you are asking. You start out with a question, a problem, an issue, on a subject that you're interested in, and then proceed to refine it by working dialectically. You approach your sources, the sources as it were talk back to you, and the process continues until you sense that you have arrived at a question that is working for you and leading you into interesting territory.

Some general considerations of a practical nature need to be taken into account from the outset. If you are planning to use primary sources (and all of us will for this project), ask yourself whether they are locally available and accessible (and in a language you can read). What about the secondary literature? Is it available and accessible? And, of course, how much do you know about the subject? Is it something you're going to have to learn from the ground up? If so, do you have the time to learn enough of the basics before you proceed to the more sophisticated aspects of the topic? Or is it something you already know about in some detail (perhaps something you've studied in an introductory course or a seminar) and can approach from a position of less than total ignorance?

The best history papers always give the reader a general idea about the body of sources available on the particular question as well as the sources actually consulted. This can be done either in a series of notes as each particular source is introduced, or in a general historiographical discussion within the text itself, or both. A section on historiography might consider the following: What are the particular questions raised by this body of sources? Which sources are most trustworthy; which have to be approached with caution and why; through what lens(es) should the modern reader look at them, and why? It is

good to begin thinking about these historiographical questions right from the start of your project.

At some point (and it is better if this happens sooner rather than later), you will come to the realization that you cannot afford to reinvent the wheel. You don't have all the time in the world, and you need to find an efficient and economical way of getting at your subject. **Don't spend your time and energy simply recapitulating the information you have gotten through reading secondary sources.** Rather, look for openings, questions, points that have not been considered to your satisfaction, problems that have been raised by the information you have found in the primary and secondary sources. Often your reader will need *some* broad, preliminary information in order to understand where you are coming from and where you are heading. Providing contextual information may be necessary at various points in your paper. **But get to the meat of your topic and your interpretation as soon as and whenever possible.**

We understand your desire to tell the "whole story" of whatever aspect of history you choose to discuss. **But resist this temptation.** It is necessary for you to learn the general history of your subject in order to do your work, but it is not your task to recapitulate this information. You've got to **choose one limited aspect of the story on which to focus--** one focused area in which to make a real contribution to the subject through your **particular reading** of available primary sources. **The most successful papers work from the particular to the general.** Think of yourself as a **contributor** to a much larger project. You are responsible for illuminating your piece of the puzzle and for getting it right so that others coming after you can use it.

You will not be able to exhaust your subject if it's a good one. Selection is the key: pick a topic that is defined enough so that you can say something about it in detail (the history of women in the 19th century, or the history of the city in the 13th century, are good examples of bad topics in this sense). Consider your topic in relation to the length of the paper you are going to write, and don't worry if the topic you end up with is not quite what you had in mind when you began.

The questions you ask may not be resolved in any ultimate sense; your conclusions may be fairly tentative. Historians must often use language that can seem maddeningly evasive-- "on the whole," "nevertheless," "for the most part," and so on. That is not to say that you should avoid taking positions but rather that all positions are provisional, and it is appropriate to recognize this and be fairly upfront about it.

If you have done things correctly, you will find that not all your research can be used. Do not regard this as a mistake; it is a normal part of the process. Trying to stuff everything you've found into a paper can lead to real problems.

It should be apparent by now that the rules in this game are not hard and fast (every third word seems to be a qualifier). Many of the considerations outlined here are practical rather than theoretical. You have enormous latitude within which to maneuver--perhaps in your minds too much latitude. Remember that this is a process. Persevere and you will see your topic gradually take shape around your interests, your sources, and your understanding.