

Hi everyone.

You'll find on the next pages my *draft* syllabus for History 700 in the spring.

If you are planning to take the course, please:

--email me your intentions right now. [judithb@usc.edu](mailto:judithb@usc.edu) I'd like to know with whom you are working (advisor only) and what you are planning for your dissertation.

--purchase the course books wherever you like (I have not placed orders at the USC bookstore).

--read the AHA pamphlet for our first class on January 11<sup>th</sup>.

Cheers,  
JMB

P.S. Embedded deep in the syllabus is a tidbit of high relevance for some of you: I've scheduled two weeks off in March?april for those who will be taking written examinations or be otherwise distracted. Please plan to make maximum use of this interlude.

## HISTORY 700 HISTORICAL EXPLANATION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Spring 2010  
TTH 111: Mondays, 2-4:50

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This course has a simple purpose: to help you produce a dissertation prospectus that you will present to your committee at the end of the semester.

A prospectus is a detailed plan for a long journey of conceptualization, research, and writing that will lead to your first major, independent contribution to historical knowledge. If your path follows the one I took, this journey will dominate the next decade of your life, as you move from prospectus to the archives, from your research to your dissertation, from the dissertation to articles and book. This journey will call on (and call forth) all your analytical, imaginative and literary skills, not to mention faith, discipline, and endurance. It will also be ineffably satisfying. You will probably find that nothing in the past has quite prepared you for this challenge and that few people outside the academy will understand it. In this sense, you are on your own, in ways that can be both exhilarating and daunting.

Yet no one makes this journey alone. Historical writing is fundamentally collaborative. We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors; we are in constant dialogue with our peers; and we write for audiences of colleagues and students.<sup>1</sup> In preparing your prospectus, you'll draw particularly on three specific sorts of support.

- First, as you have surely discovered, your fellow students are a valuable source of insight and support. In this course, you will help each other launch your projects.
- Second, I will read your drafts, offer advice, and encourage you. But, since I am a European medievalist and most of you are not, my advice will be more structural, practical, and stylistic than substantive.
- Third, your advisor and members of your dissertation committee are the experts to whom you will turn for substantive advice about archives, resources, and the feasibility of your project. Throughout the semester, *you must keep in close touch* with your advisor and committee; if you encounter difficulties, let me know, but otherwise I'll assume that your project is being regularly enriched by this external-to-the-course advice. I will ask your advisor to evaluate your prospectus at the end of the semester.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This syllabus is an example; it borrows freely from one once used at UNC-CH.

<sup>2</sup> For the record, this is a credit/no credit course. In thinking about your work in the course, I will pay attention to three matters: (a) your advisor's assessment of the prospectus, (b) my assessment of the same, and (c) your cooperative engagement with the projects of your colleagues.

Writing a dissertation prospectus may not strike you as an opportunity for honing your literary style. Yet a prospectus that succeeds in persuading others of the worth of a project depends on the same ingredients that make for “good writing” generally. For that reason, we will focus throughout the semester on the craft of historical writing, as well as on the practicalities of launching a research project. As we do so, we will think about such matters as the interplay between analysis and narrative structure; the creation of characters that readers believe in and care about; the development of a personal voice; the importance of a reliable narrator (whose truth claims readers will be inclined to accept); the question of audience; the role of the imagination; and the relationship between self and subject. We will also, as necessary, think about such mundane matters as grammar, style, and organization.

As if this were not enough, I’d like you to keep in mind that you will eventually use your dissertation prospectus as the basis for grant proposals. History 700 is not a course on grant-writing, but I hope to introduce you to the peculiar art of writing grant proposals--an art that asks you to address non-specialists as well as specialists, to be imaginative yet practical, and to combine hucksterism and humility. Most grants are judged by eclectic committees most of whose members will know little about your topic. As a grant-writer, you must deftly tell them all they need to know while, at the same time, signaling your expertise to the known-to-you specialists who will write your letters of recommendation and the unknown-to-you specialists who may serve on the fellowship committee. This is not a useless skill; you’ll use the same skill to write articles or books that will impress the few dozen people deeply familiar with your subject while nevertheless also delighting the broader audiences of historians, students, and even (gasp) general readers whom you might want to attract to your work.

A dissertation prospectus is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It is always a work-in-progress. Don’t be surprised or disappointed if your doctoral committee is enthusiastic about your project and yet suggests fundamental changes in your approach. And don’t be surprised if you eventually cast much of the prospectus aside, as you dive more deeply into the primary sources and begin to write. This semester you are producing preliminary guidelines that pose questions, suggest sources, and construct strategies. In the long term, these questions, sources, and strategies will, of course, change, but without this first stab, there would be no “long term.”

Please purchase these books:

- AHA’s new pamphlet *From Concept to Completion* (2009), available directly from the AHA.
- Wayne C. Booth, et al, eds., *The Craft of Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2008).
- William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1999).

You might want to purchase these too:

- Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1998), pp. 240-263.
- Anne Lamont, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994).

## THE PROSPECTUS

*A dissertation prospectus of approximately 20 pages will be due on Thursday, April 22.*

This list covers the major categories of a prospectus, but feel free to blend, compress, or omit sections to fit your needs and your committee's preferences. For example, you may want separate sections on method and theory, or you might decide to merge your discussion of methods and sources.

**1. Title.** A descriptive title that succinctly, accurately, and pleasingly describes the topic and the period covered. Don't underestimate the importance of your title.

**2. Abstract.** A short paragraph summarizing the proposal.

**3. Topic, Questions, and Rationale.** What you are writing about? (This is your topic.) What is not known about it? (This is your question.) Why do you want to know this unknown? (This is your rationale.) To put this another way: I am writing about (my topic), because I am trying to show you who/how/why (my question *and* my hypothesis about what I think the answers may be), in order to persuade you to think differently about issues of large import (my rationale).

**4. Historiography.** This usually entails (a) an overview of the secondary literature on the *general subject* within which your topic falls (this may include relevant research in historical fields other than your own and in disciplines other than history), and (b) the historiography of your *specific topic*. This section should be clear about what has been done, what needs to be done, and why. You may want to point to models for what you hope to do, while at the same time making clear how your work will extend or challenge what has gone before.

**5. Method and Theory.** Here, you outline the research strategies, methods, and theoretical constructs that will help you answer the questions asked in the previous section. (You may want to address some of these issues in the historiography section by including therein relevant theoretical works or by discussing the methodologies and theoretical concerns that have guided previous works in your field.) "Methods" might include such matters as statistical analysis, oral history, ethnography, archival research, readings of visual images, and material objects. "Theories" might include Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonial studies, queer theory, and the new historicism and other schools of literary criticism.<sup>3</sup> In this section, you might also talk about the conversations you seek to join, for your choices will affect how you address method and theory. Do you see yourself as speaking mainly to an audience of specialists? As building bridges among subfields and/or disciplines? As addressing policy makers, activists, or various publics?

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<sup>3</sup> Some historians have a problematic relationship to theory, but none of us is without theory. In my view, we should aspire to draw self-confidently on the insights and tools of various intellectual movements while seeking our own special blend of empirical rigor, eloquent story-telling, and theoretical import.

**6. Sources.** First, what sorts of evidence will you use? Legal records, censuses, interviews, diaries, letters, material artifacts, music, folklore? How rich are these sources and what special problems do they present? (You will probably want to discuss here how the sources have been used in the past.) Will you use an extensive and coherent body of papers or will you be piecing together documents, artifacts, and clues from many places? Second, what have you concluded about access? Are your archives closed in August or shut everyday for two-hour lunches? Do your archives charge fees? If you are doing interviews, how will you choose your interviewees and evaluate the co-produced, retrospective evidence that oral history provides? Do you need to begin now to submit Freedom of Information Act requests? Do you need to locate papers hidden away in attics? If so, how?

**7. Organization.** Will you proceed topically or chronologically? Provide titles of chapters with a *brief* explanation of the contents of each.

**8. Time table.** How much time will you allot to (a) research, (b) writing, and (c) polishing? This might seem like the most straightforward part of a prospectus, but I advise you to consider timetable throughout. If you write a brilliant prospectus that takes 10 years to complete, you will not be doing yourself a favor. A dissertation is the end of doctoral training, but it is rarely the end of research and writing. Since you will be working further on the topic to produce articles and possibly a book, you do not need to cover everything between reaching ABD status and acquiring your PhD--indeed, you *cannot* cover everything. In short, be practical and realistic.

**9. Other nuts-and-bolts.** How, in practical terms, will you go about your research? Will you use a data-management program or take notes the old fashioned way? How will you manage the travel involved? What will you do first? What might you postpone (for the book) if you run out of time? You might not include most of these in your final prospectus, but they are worth considering now.

**10. Funding Sources.** What sources for grants and fellowships from within and without the university appear most promising? What is the schedule for applications? Have you applied yet?

**11. Bibliography.** Aim for 2-3 pages of bibliography. List primary sources in sufficient detail (don't just give archival numbers) and fairly exhaustively (it's fine to group items into a general category, but be sure to cover all general categories). Organize by archive; separate out primary sources in print and/or online. List *selected* secondary sources, and consider organizing by topics.

## OUR SCHEDULE

(Or How We'll get from *The Prospectus* to *Your Prospectus*)

### 1. MON 11 JANUARY: INTRODUCTION.

We'll sort out objectives and logistics. We might try to reschedule our meeting time; we might split into smaller groups for most of the semester; we will set up writing partnerships.

- PREP: Please purchase directly from the American Historical Association and read for discussion the AHA's new pamphlet *From Concept to Completion*.

### 2. MON 18 JANUARY: MLK HOLIDAY. NO CLASS.

January is your month for thinking and gathering steam. Use it well, and don't make the mistake of treating this as a week off. Talk with your dissertation advisor; wade into the primary sources of your project; mess around in the secondary literature; check in with me. The more groundwork you complete in these first weeks, the better your prospectus.

- PREP: Please get a copy of this book and make good use of it: Wayne C. Booth, et al, eds., *The Craft of Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2008). Be sure to read chapters 3 and 4 right now.
- PREP: Please also read Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1998), pp. 240-263 on "reader-based" and "criterion-based" feedback. A fast skim should do the trick. Why read this? Giving and receiving feedback is an essential part of this course. It is also essential to writing good history, period.
- PREP: Please secure a copy of Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*. Read it. Treasure it.

### 3. MON 25 JANUARY: THE TASK AHEAD.

We'll talk about the dissertation in general and the prospectus in particular.

- PREP: Please familiarize yourself with this website and the resources on it: [www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/dissertation.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/dissertation.html)
- PREP: I'll pre-circulate a couple of prospectuses written by your senior colleagues, and they will join us for part of the conversation.

### 4. MON 1 FEBRUARY. TOPIC, QUESTIONS, AND RATIONALE.

Please bring to class a 2-3 page draft that makes a stab at explaining your topic, questions, and rationale. Yes, a stab, just a stab.<sup>4</sup> It may take you all semester to find a way to say briefly and persuasively what you are doing and why. It may be years before you can really take the last step of articulating the larger issues your project will illuminate. Right now, all you have to do is to take the first step. Make it a big step--that is, *push the question of importance as far as you can*. Aim to say not only why your project will make readers think differently about such-and-such but also what deeper insight or wisdom you hope to impart. You might (or might not) find it helpful to frame

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<sup>4</sup> This is just a first step. It will be flawed. Relax. Good writing and the good thinking rarely pop out fully formed. They are the product of revision . . . and revision . . . and revision. It's our job in this class to help each of you along that path of revision. To that end, we'll provide you with a *safe place for first steps*. No one is going to judge you or your work on the basis of first steps; it's the final product that matters. And it's our collective job to help you make the final product as good as it can be.

this issue autobiographically: “What draws me to this topic? What is its personal resonance for me?”

- PREP: Bring copies of your paper for each member of the class. Be prepared to read the first paragraph aloud, *as if you were presenting it at a conference* as a prologue to a longer paper.
- PREP: Also, please read and be inspired by Mary Beth Norton, “Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witchcraft Trials,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan., 21, 2000), B4-B5. Be prepared to discuss how Norton handles the “what is there new to say” question; how she positions herself vis-à-vis the historiography on her subject; how she moves from her specific topic to issues of general import; how she speaks to non-specialists; how she describes her strategies of organization, explanation, and narration; how and when she presents her hypothetical answers to the questions she poses; and, finally, how she convinces us that she is a “reliable narrator”—a guide we want to follow, an observer we want to trust.

**5. MON 8 FEBRUARY: TAKING THE PLUNGE.** Today, we’ll critique the first section of your prospectuses, consisting of items 1 and 3 above.

- PREP FOR EVERYONE: Please post your text on Blackboard by noon on the Friday before class. If you like, you may note at the end any issues on which you especially welcome advice.
- PREP FOR EVERYONE: As soon as possible thereafter (and no later than noon on Sunday), please send your comments on each paper *to that paper’s critic only* (not to everyone in the class).
- PREP FOR PARTNERS: Come to class with two copies (one for me, one for your partner) of all the critiques submitted by others in the class.
- PREP FOR PARTNERS: Come to class with two copies (one for me, one for your partner) of your own two-paragraph critique of your partner’s paper.<sup>5</sup> DO NOT report on every comment submitted to you. DO NOT provide a tally of pros and cons. DO integrate the points that you find especially valuable into your own comments. In the first paragraph, describe specifically what you found most interesting or effective in your partner’s draft. In the second paragraph, offer suggestions for improvement--think about how you would approach the work differently, and try to help the author make the writing more convincing and compelling.
- PREP FOR PARTNERS: Make detailed editorial suggestions on your partner’s paper and return that to him/her as well.<sup>6</sup>

In class, we’ll proceed draft by draft, with the writing partner of each draft in control. You’ll offer a summary of your critique orally in class, then give your writing partner a few minutes to respond, and then open the floor to discussion so that others can bring up and elaborate on their observations.

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<sup>5</sup> In writing your critique, please bear in mind the distinction between *critique* (“detailed analysis and assessment”) and *critical* (“expression of the faults of a work”).

<sup>6</sup> Use Strunk and White to justify your edits.

## **6. MONDAY 15 FEBRUARY: PRESIDENTS' DAY HOLIDAY**

We'll not meet on this Monday, but continue to forge ahead steadily. This will be a good time to check in with your advisor, if you have not done so for a couple of weeks.

**7. MON 22 FEBRUARY: PLUNGING AGAIN.** Today, we'll discuss your draft of sections 6-9. In terms of your dissertation's organization, think especially about the arc of your narrative—where the story begins; what drives it forward; what conflicts it contains, and how they are resolved; what will sustain your readers' attention, inducing them to keep turning pages; and how will you bring it all to a satisfying close.

- PREP: For sections 6-9, we will proceed as for February 8<sup>th</sup>.

**8. MON 1 MARCH. BUSY WORK AND THEORY.** Today, we'll discuss your drafts of sections 10 and 11. We'll also talk about theory.

- PREP FOR BUSY WORK: For section 10 and 11, we'll proceed as for February 8<sup>th</sup>.
- PREP FOR THEORY: Please spend some time browsing for theory. Look at the theory/method sections of books in your field; browse in a good academic bookstore, or the library; use online resources to demystify the mystifying. Your objective is to get a sense of the major theories in play today *and* the theories that might be useful to you. Please select 1-2 pages drawn either from a work that blends theory with historical concerns or from a work of theory that might be helpful to you. Write a one-paragraph explanation for your choice. Be nuts-and-bolts practical about how you would apply the approach you choose. Then post your choice and explanation by noon on the Friday before class.
- PREP FOR THEORY: Print out, read, and reflect on your colleagues' selections.

**9. MON 8 MARCH. DEEP WATER.** We'll discuss the sections 4 and 5 of your prospectus.

- PREP: For sections 4 and 5, we will proceed as for February 8<sup>th</sup>.

## **10. MON 15 MARCH: SPRING BREAK**

## **11. MON 22 MARCH 15: SURFACING.**

• PREP: Please bring copies of the abstract of your prospectus (section 2) to class. We'll have a "abstract" workshop.

**12. MON 29 MARCH. NO CLASS.** I have put a two-week break here to accommodate those of you who will be taking written examinations this semester. If necessary, we'll shift these weeks to other points in the semester. Or if you prefer, we can continue to meet.

- PREP: If you are not distracted by exams, keep working! Revise, consult, revise.

## **13. MON 5 APRIL. NO CLASS.**

- PREP: If you are not distracted by exams, keep working! Revise, consult, revise.

## **14. MON 12 APRIL. DRAFT AND CONFESSIONS.**

- PREP FOR EVERYONE: Pull the various parts of your prospectus into a single whole. Read it. Revise it. Then write a 1-2 paragraph comment on what you see



as the weakest part of your prospectus. Post prospectus draft and comment on Blackboard by noon on the *Thursday* before class.

- PREP FOR EVERYONE: Read and reflect on your colleagues' prospectuses and confessions. We'll discuss in class.
- PREP FOR PARTNERS: Make detailed editorial suggestions on your partner's prospectus and return that to him/her in class.
- PREP FOR PARTNERS. Come to class with two copies (one for me, one for your partner) of your response to your writing partner's confessions. Have they identified the weakest parts of their prospectus? What have they missed? Do you have advice or solutions to the problems posed?

**15. MON 19 APRIL. THE VIGNETTE.** Please write a vignette related to your topic, something that might be used as an evocative, provocative, or allegorical opening paragraph of your prospectus. Examples include a dramatic incident, a conversation or debate, a courtroom scene, or a description of a place. Whatever you choose, let your reader see, hear, smell, feel what happened. Show rather than tell.

- PREP: Please post your text on Blackboard by noon on the Friday before class. If you like, you may note at the end any issues on which you especially welcome advice.
- PREP: Please *briefly* critique each vignette and bring two copies (one for me, one for the author) to class.
- I will ask some of you to read your vignettes aloud, and we will talk about how choice of an opening can set the tone and define the trajectory of a work.

**16. MON 26 APRIL. DONE.** We'll discuss your final prospectus.

- PREP: Please post a copy on Blackboard by noon on *Thursday*. Note any issues on which you especially need advice.
- PREP: Please also give a copy to your advisor.
- PREP: Bring to class two copies (one for me and one for the author) of a brief critique of each colleague's paper. Begin with what you found most interesting or effective in your partner's draft. Then, offer suggestions for the future.

## EVALUATION<sup>7</sup>

Your prospectus is the first of a genre that is basic to success in academia: the research proposal. In this genre, evaluation is key. Right now, you need to convince your committee that you have a strong enough project to be released into the archives. For the rest of your academic career, you will need to convince funding committees that your research is viable and worthwhile.

These are some of the criteria commonly used in evaluations:

- Is the proposal cast in a form that can be readily understood by non-specialists?
  - Is the proposal coherent and error-free?
  - Is the question/hypothesis clear?
  - Is the question/hypothesis original and important?
  - Can the question/hypothesis be answered by the proposed research?
  - Does the proposal suggest that its author is sufficiently grounded in the existing literature on the topic?
  - Are the stated methods and theories appropriate?
  - Is the research feasible? Can it be accomplished in the time proposed?
  - In the final analysis, is the proposal compelling?
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- Letters of recommendation are important aids in evaluation, but many grant proposals stumble all on their own. They are too specialized; they assume (rather than prove) the importance of their topic; they are under-informed about the topic or the sources; they include silly errors; they are dull and plodding.

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<sup>7</sup> A word about gender-inclusive language. Some readers will be offended by the generic use of “he” or “man” or “mankind.” Other readers will be offended by obvious efforts to avoid such terms. What’s a poor writer to do? Avoid the issue altogether. Instead of “he” or “he/she” pluralize and use “they.” Instead of “men” or “men and women,” use “people.” Instead of “mankind” or “humankind,” use “humanity.” In other words, seek out already-inclusive forms and words. Then, all your readers will be happy.

## **BORING, BUT NECESSARY**

### **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will learn how to conceptualize and design a research project.
- Students will learn how to articulate the theories and methods of their historical work.
- Students will learn how to embed their research into larger historiographical debates.
- Students will learn how to write a compelling and elegant prospectus.

### **Academic Integrity:**

At this level of scholarly study, I should not have to warn you about matters of academic integrity, but I am required to do so. All your work must be your own. Do not plagiarize. Do not cheat. If in doubt, ask me. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00.

### **Disabilities:**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible and certainly no later than February 1<sup>st</sup>.