

Assignment # 3: Writing an historical argument

Purpose of this exercise: To practice writing an argument that supports a thesis using primary and secondary historical sources; critically evaluating sources; and citation in Chicago style.

What you do:

- Invent a thesis (a claim or statement) about the past that you can support with two to four primary sources, plus at least one secondary source of information to help you evaluate them. The subject may be anything that interests you that can be discussed using written primary sources written up to 1500 CE. It may be easiest to pick a general subject, read several primary sources about it, and then figure out a thesis that the sources could support, rather than developing a thesis and then looking for evidence.
- Write a three to four page paper that explains the thesis and shows that it is probably correct, using the two to four primary sources, plus any secondary sources you need for supporting information. As a historian, you are obliged to evaluate the reliability and possible biases of the primary sources, and take this into account in your discussion.

Picking a subject: Our textbook, Bentley and Ziegler 2008, *Traditions and Encounters*, could be a starting point for ideas. The links on the class website to lists of online primary and secondary sources should also be useful.

Inventing a thesis:

- An appropriate thesis is a general conclusion or interpretation. Examples might include “Roman commoners liked violent spectacles”, “Piracy was a serious problem for Ptolemaic maritime traders”, “Women affected Athenian policies, but only indirectly”, or “The crusaders often acted more for personal gain than to control holy places”. Please come up with your own thesis; do not use one of these examples.
- Figure out a thesis that can be supported by your sources. If your thesis is “Urban slaves in Rome could become wealthy”, you could support it with several sources that describe particular urban slaves who had many possessions or other indications of being wealthy.
- Do not use a thesis that is simply stated in your sources. For example, do not make your thesis “The Peloponnesian war was caused by Sparta’s fear of rising Athenian power”, and then support it by showing that Thucydides said exactly that. Your thesis should be something that you figure out from the sources, not the opinion of someone who wrote one of the sources.
- Please pick a thesis and set of sources that is different from those being used by others in this class, to the best of your knowledge.

Acceptable sources:

- Primary and secondary sources may be found in books, journal articles, online databases, or internet websites, if they are academic and reputable. Wikipedia and the like are useful for orienting yourself and getting ideas, but they are not acceptable sources.
- This time, there is no minimum length for sources. For long sources, please use and cite just a specific portion of the source (such as pages 13-16 of a book, rather than the whole book).

Hints for finding primary and secondary sources: See the instructions for Assignment 2 for some hints about finding primary and secondary sources.

Do it yourself: Once again, the point of this exercise is for *you* to practice working with a primary source. So do this exercise yourself, not in collaboration with classmates.

What you turn in: A single computer file that contains:

1. A three to four page paper, double-spaced
2. with endnotes
3. with a bibliography listing the full reference information for all of your sources
4. plus an appendix containing the full text of the primary sources or the portions that you used for this paper. If the source is electronic, copy it. If it is only available on paper, you may submit xerox copies on paper or scan the source and include the images with your paper. The idea is that I should be able to refer to your sources while reading your paper.

Content:

1. Clearly state and explain your thesis. This may require a little background that you might get from secondary sources.
2. Defend your thesis. That is, explain how your primary sources show that your thesis is correct. This will typically involve quoting small portions of the primary sources, paraphrasing parts of the primary sources, and explaining your interpretation of them and how they support your thesis. Write this as an argument, convincing me that your thesis is true. Be thorough, and try to cover as many angles as necessary to make a solid case.
3. Be critical of your sources. As you use them to support your thesis, explain who the authors of the primary sources were, how they came to have their information, whether they might have any biases, and so on. That is, show that they should be trustworthy as support for your thesis. In many cases, this will require some information from secondary sources about your primary sources.
4. Be sure to cite your primary and secondary sources properly throughout the paper.

Guidance: You will find practical suggestions and examples of how to approach these tasks in the two readings for Sept. 15, and a bit in the first chapter of Arnold, assigned for Sept. 3.

Quotations: No quotations longer than two lines. Maximum of one quotation per page.

Format: Same as Assignment 2: Chicago style, with endnotes. See the posted Chicago Style Guide for History 201. Be sure to properly cite all your facts and quotations.

Turning it in: Same as Assignment #2: Email the paper to bruce.owen@sonoma.edu as an attachment. No paper copy is involved. A good way is to click “Email me!” on the class website.

File format: Same as Assignment #2: Save the paper in Word 95 (.doc), Word 2000 (.doc), or Rich Text (.rtf) format. These are nearly universal formats that any word processor should be able to make and open. The command to save in these formats is often under “Save As”.

File name: Like Assignment #2: Name the file in this format:

h201-09f-Assignment3-LastnameFirstname

Replace “LastnameFirstname” with your name, last name first, capitalizing the first letter of each name. Your word processor will usually add a 3-letter file extension like “.doc” or “.rtf”.

Drafts: Same as Assignment #2: I will gladly discuss your assignment or comment on a draft before the assignment is due. Allow at least a few days before the deadline so I can reply and you can revise. My comments may help you write a better essay and get a better grade. If you email a draft, please name the file as above, but add “-draft”, like

h201-09f-Assignment3-SmithJohn-draft.doc

Grading: This assignment is worth 200 points, out of 1000 for the course. The grading rubric is attached.

Assignment # 3: Writing an historical argument
(3-4 page essay)

Points	Possible	Item
	20	Thesis is clear, concrete, well explained; a conclusion or interpretation.
	65	Thesis is well supported using primary sources
	25	Primary sources are critiqued for reliability, bias, etc.
	20	2 to 4 appropriate primary sources
	20	Appropriate secondary source(s)
	20	Bibliography is complete and in approximately correct format
	20	Citations in the text are appropriate and in approximately correct format
	10	Primary source is attached or otherwise available
		Late (-10%)
	200	Total