

Department: History

Course No.: 1100/W [135/W]

Credits: 3

Title: The Historian as Detective

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Content Area: CA1 Arts and Humanities

WQ: Writing

Catalog Copy:

HIST 135. The Historian as Detective. Either semester. Three credits. Uses historical documents focusing on a single incident in the past to reconstruct what happened and why. Emphasizes development of historical research skills such as evaluating evidence, explaining cause and effect, and understanding events in their larger social, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

HIST 135W. The Historian as Detective. Either semester. Three credits. Prerequisite: ENGL 105 or 110 or 111 or 250. Uses historical documents focusing on a single incident in the past to reconstruct what happened and why. Emphasizes development of historical research skills such as evaluating evidence, explaining cause and effect, and understanding events in their larger social, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

Course Information: 1a. Using historical documents focusing on a single incident in the past, students will reconstruct what happened and why. In the process, they will acquire the skills of historical detection and, in future, be able to decipher historical records to explain cause and effect, understand how information is

produced and circulated, appreciate the influence of larger historical contexts on everyday life, and create an interpretation of the past that is historically sound (for being based on careful, critical reading of all available evidence) and that makes an original contribution to our understanding of the past.

1b. Readings will consist entirely of primary documents such as newspapers, court records, censuses, memoirs, diaries, correspondence. HIST 135 will have small workshop-style assignments due every class or every week, in which students will analyze primary documents for purpose, context, and meaning. HIST 135W will have fewer small assignments and instead involve students in the same close analysis of primary sources but in three 5-page papers, each revised after teacher and/or peer review. Both HIST 135 and 135W will have an exercise which requires students to take notes and present their note-taking for review and discussion, and both HIST 135 and 135W will require students to engage in a full-class collaborative writing project, so that one major achievement at the end of this course is a research paper of about 30 pages in length, with multiple authors. Also 135 and 135W will require a final exam in which students will be given an entirely unfamiliar set of primary documents on a new topic and be asked to explain in an essay format how they would go about making sense of them. Since class activities will focus entirely on discussion of readings and workshop-style analytical activities (mapping information from documents, for example), class participation will be a major part of the final grade.

1c. This course aims to (1) introduce students to the basic skills of historical practice and (2) give them an understanding of how multiple interpretations of the past can emerge from the evidentiary record. Specifically, they will learn, through their own engagement with different types of records, how and why certain historical documents were produced and survived into the present as a record of the past, to look for and see the past from multiple perspectives, to come to terms with ambivalence and ambiguity (how do we write about uncertainty with some certainty?), to be faithful to the documentary record while also going beyond it to read between the lines, and the very basic skills of responsible note-taking and citation.

Meets Goals of Gen Ed.: This course meets all the criteria of general education. Through in-class discussion, written assignments (in both 135 and 135W), and especially in the collaborative writing assignments (which involves teams of students and eventually the entire class), they will become more articulate orally and in writing. Students will through this experience make the transition from being history consumers to history producers, and so will add a new dimension to their understanding of what history is. The intense focus on a single incident will reveal contradictions in the “facts” due to distortions, lies, misunderstandings, rumors, and mistakes that are naturally found in any collection of historic documents. Seeing this unfold over the course of the semester, students will acquire critical judgment and techniques to evaluate reliability and point of view in texts, visual materials, and material objects. Moral sensitivity, awareness of their era and society, and diversity of culture and experience will also all enter in to the course as students see how in other times and places, people were treated differently than in their own world today (e.g., witches were hung or employers could, legally, whip their employees) in ways that raise questions about what constitutes moral human relations in a diverse, changing world. Probably the one criterion that will be addressed the most will be how knowledge is

acquired, since students will be analyzing how the shards of the past came to be available to us in the present and will then be charged with creating knowledge themselves by piecing together an explanation for why this incident happened or took the path that it did.

CA1 Criteria: This course engages students in historical and critical investigation and analysis.

W Criteria: This course will have a non-W version and a W version. The non-W HIST 135 will have more written assignments of the same type as the W version but will not expect revisions of all assignments as in the W course and will not have the extensive writing instruction during class time that is in the W version of the course.

HIST 135W will require three five-page papers in which students will study a set of primary documents organized around certain themes and questions posed by the instructor. These papers will be revised based on instructor comments. The first paper will also be used as a writing template for the rest of the semester, in that the instructor will prepare a checklist of writing problems for each student, and expect them to work on these problems throughout the semester. Particularly important to this course (but difficult to calculate how this breaks down in terms of how many pages per student) is an extensive collaborative writing project, in which the entire class will produce a research paper of the standard length and with all the attributes of a history journal article—30 pages with footnotes. Working in small teams and in full-class discussions, students will produce a page or two each, but revise and revise and revise so that the final product reflects a consensus interpretation. By making our final interpretation co-authored, students should become aware of how multiple interpretations are possible, how evidence from historical documents interacts with interpretive conclusions, and the range of options available for solving particular writing problems. This should make the act of writing a conscious one as we will spend several weeks discussing it out loud, not working alone at our computers. This last assignment will be graded based on the quality of a student's contribution, instructor observation of in-class contributions to team discussions, and a peer evaluation system in which teammates comment on who contributed what. No student will pass the course without first having demonstrated satisfactory writing on all of the final papers.

Role of Grad Students: This course can be taught in different ways depending on instructor preference. Uncertainty over how the new general education requirements will affect enrollment in existing 100-level history courses (particularly the impact on the changing requirements around HIST 100/101) suggests that a pilot class of HIST 135W (thus, a single section of 19 students) is the best way to launch this new course. In that case, no graduate student assistants will be needed. However, the History Department intends over time to expand this course into a large survey class taught with graduate teaching assistants, estimated at two full G.A.'s working with two sections of 19 students each for a total class size of 76 students. In that case, graduate assistants would run discussion sections, lead students in collaborative writing projects, and play a critical role in the course's evolution. In this case, only advanced graduate students would serve as the instructors' assistants, and they would be under the supervision of the

instructor. We also would expect to hire ABD PhD candidates as instructors of their own sections, in which case they would be supervised by the faculty member on the History Department's graduate committee designated as the graduate teaching advisor. For all students working as G.A.'s in classes of HIST 135W or as instructors of record for their own section of HIST 135W, we would expect them to receive training and guidance in writing instruction from the Writing Center.

**Supplementary Information:** This course won a course-development award in the Vice-Provost's competition for new general education courses, Spring 2005.