

### HIST 2C: FAMILY HISTORY PAPER ASSIGNMENT

**Purpose:** Why is history important ("for life," as Nietzsche wrote)? One of the best ways to understand the here and now and where we are headed is to know what happened in the past, and how and why. Our understanding of ourselves increases as we learn more about our family history. In paper one you practiced one thing historians do: finding sources of information about a historical figure. For this assignment you will practice another method of historical research: an oral history interview. The main goal is to create a primary source, and interpret it--in other words, draw meaning from it. you should learn something about yourself in the process, as well as about how historical forces shape our lives, implicitly and explicitly. You may even come to see why practicing and studying and knowing about history is relevant.

How does this project connect to the "world history" topic of this course? Migration is one of the most powerful world-historical forces (Strayer p. 1142 discusses this). How true is that? We will do some clicker polling to see how mobile our ancestors were, and why.

Note: the primary purpose of this assignment is NOT to find out about a historical event, but which and how such events affect individuals' lives, if at all.

**Range of Topic Possibilities:** For this assignment you have a fair amount of flexibility: while most students will interview one person in their family, you may also interview non-family members you know (who may have experienced some obvious historical event). If your own family experienced an especially noteworthy event, you may interview multiple family members about that event. If your family has documents such as photos, letters or other artifacts, snapshots of them may be included as resources (and illustrations) in your paper.

**I. Prospectus (due May 13-16 in section, or May 15 in lecture; your TA will let you know).**

Length: 1 page. Leave a large (1.5") margin for comments. The prospectus should include:

1. Who will you interview for this paper? When, where and how will you interview them? (It's ok if you end up changing this scheduled time and place, but you must have a plan.)
  - Ideally, this person will be someone in your family, but can also be an older friend or community member. Older interview partners are usually more suitable, because they have experienced a longer range of history. You can ask a parent about what they know about *their* parents' experiences, too. Especially if your family has been geographically stable (some mistakenly say "uninteresting"), try to explore how far back you can take your family history. Another possibility is to interview someone younger, like an Iraq/Afghanistan war vet, or a sibling who has taken a different life course than you did. *If a single historical event* turns out to be the focus of the assignment/interview, it is ok to interview multiple people/family members about it. That can be done in a group setting, individually, or both.
  - You need to talk to your interview partner(s) **in advance** to be sure they are willing, and to set up the interview time. That is the purpose of the prospectus. The Memorial Day weekend may be a good opportunity for the longer interview. Face-to-face interviews are much better than on the phone.
  - Let them know that the interview will be at least a half hour, perhaps up to two hours.
  - Ask a few preliminary questions about their background, which you will need for no. 2:
2. A brief biographical sketch of the person--as much as you can say without going into an extended, formal interview with them. For example: when & where they were born, into what kind of family, where have they lived, what do they have done & do for a living.
3. Given what you wrote in #2, think of some world-historical events that your person has lived through, which may have affected their life. *Research* and summarize some information about those events. Note how you think those events might have affected that person's life. (In your final paper, you can compare their answers to your expectations as recorded here.)

4. Formulate and include some (3-6) additional *open-ended* questions that you might ask in the interview. These are to be used as back-up prompts, in case the person has trouble telling you about their life. "Open-ended" means the questions can't be answered yes or no, but require an "essay" explanation. Especially for family members, the National Day of Listening website has lists of good questions: [diy.storycorps.org/great-questions-list](http://diy.storycorps.org/great-questions-list). (You may of course also ask some of these personal questions that you don't include in your paper.)

## II. The Interview (sometime between May 17 and May 26 [Memorial Day])

- A. Especially if you don't know the person well, introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the interview again. Let them know they don't have to talk about anything they don't want to.
- B. Take notes, even if you record and transcribe the interview. Notes do *not* need to be typed. (There are many good smartphone apps for recording and transcribing, e.g. Dragon for iphones.) Note the date, time, location and situation at the top of your paper (no laptops!). As an appendix to your final essay, you will attach at least 1-2 pages (original or photocopy) of these notes.
- C. If you need to, confirm or get more detail about the basic background information in I.2, above.
- D. Ask your interviewee to tell about their life, from the beginning. Tell them you are interested in hearing what *they* consider to be most important and memorable. When they are done you will have a few more specific questions. Only ask your prospectus questions if necessary. (You can however also ask personal questions that aren't part of the paper assignment--like those on the story corps website.) It is best to let the person talk, without making suggestions. Some people may need prompting; others may need to be gently steered back to telling their life story.
- E. **Once they have told you about their life**, ask them to talk about the following questions. In each case, be sure to ask them why. If events i and iii are different, try to find out why.
  - i. What **personal event(s)** affected your life the most? Did they shape your values? How and why? Examples? (If you are interview a parent about a grandparent, modify accordingly.)
  - ii. What was the most significant **change of residence** in your life? Why? If never moved, why not? How many generations back do you have to go before you find a migration experience? Which?
  - iii. What **"big history" (world-historical) events** occurred during your lifetime? (You may also talk about what such an event is--economic situation, war, disease, natural disaster?) To what extent did any of these affect your life? Why--or why not? If so, how?

## III. The Paper (due May 29, 12:30pm in lecture--also upload to Gauchospace by 6pm)

- a. Your paper should be 1200-1600 words (about 5 pages) in length, not including the "appendices" (page of interview notes, and commented prospectus). May be more pages if you include images.
- b. You must **insert the word count** with your name and section info at the top.
- c. Give your essay a **title**: what main theme emerged from the interview, what is the theme of your interpretation? Your title choice should indicate one or both of them. You might include an especially revealing quotation as a subtitle. Craft a strong leading sentence/paragraph to explain.
- d. About half of your paper should be a summary of the life story as told in your interview, and about half analysis and interpretation. You cannot recap the entire life story in detail, since that would leave no space for analysis. IF a historical event turns out to be a main focus, you may need to do some outside research, in which case you should cite any sources you use.
- e. Appendix A: at least one page of your notes. May be the original, a photocopy, or typed up.
- f. Appendix B: your prospectus, as returned by your TA.

## IV. Grading

- o You will be graded partly on the quality of your interview and write-up (including grammar & style), but especially on how you analyze, interpret, explain and assess the story you were told, relating it to the course content and concepts (any paradigm shifts? EIEIO factors at work?), and drawing meaning and insights about those "uses of history for life."
- o How interesting the life story or any world-historical event your interviewee experienced was will *not* affect your grade.