

Instructor: Peter Wallenstein

Phone 231-8376

E-mail <pwallens@vt.edu>

Office hours: after class most days; Tuesdays, 10:00–11:30 and 2:00–3:00; and by appointment

Office: 409 Major Williams

Plan to stop by and see me from time to time

## HISTORICAL METHODS

**HIST 2004 is designed to introduce undergraduate students to the methods and materials of "doing history." How to do it? How to do it well?** Note that this is more a "how to" than a "what happened" kind of course; we will be moving around in time and space and from method to method.

Intended as the foundation for further serious work by the History Department's beginning historians (and other undergraduates who wish to learn more about the mysteries of doing good history and writing good papers), this course—I call it the Wallenstein Professional Development Institute—is designed to introduce:

- 1) **sources** for doing history,
- 2) **methods** for extracting the stories those sources can tell, and
- 3) **approaches** for presenting the results.

What do you want to know? What do you want to say? How best to say it? And how best to present the whole thing? Superior papers reflect (a) a successful search for appropriate sources; (b) a critical and imaginative mind, including a sense of what is relevant, appropriate, significant (together with a knack for showing it to be so); and (c) a facility for clear writing—as well as (d) an appropriate narrative strategy and (e) an acceptable style sheet. You might make a checklist of these features for each of your assignments. Keep in mind that, especially in this course, while the facts and ideas are vitally important, so are your sources and methods. I want to know how you mapped your search, and where you looked, as well as what you found.

Having successfully completed this course, students should be much better prepared to go out into the world—and certainly into upper-division history courses—and conceive, research, and write effective papers and reports. How to find journal articles on the subject of your choice? How to make use of legal materials and census records? And how to compile a bibliography, or format a footnote? These kinds of things should become matters about which you feel confident (and have reason to feel confident) that—although there will always be challenges and complications—you can accomplish.

This syllabus offers only an **overview of the course assignments**. From time to time (roughly once a week) I will provide e-mail (or hard copy) assignment sheets (**mini-syllabi**) that indicate what library or other assignments you are to prepare for class. You are responsible for receiving any e-mail messages I send as well as picking up any assignment sheets (usually posted on my door) should you miss class—though of course you will be in class. Note: The class will not be meeting on Monday 10/8 (term break), or Wednesday 10/17 or Wednesday 10/31 (I expect to be away).

I am assigning **two books** for this class:

Robert C. **Williams, The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History** (2003), which introduces the discipline, with many examples and exercises;

Robert William **Fogel, The Slavery Debates: A Retrospective, 1952–1990** (2003), which reviews the development of a major area of historical inquiry since World War II, and thus builds on the first book to show how scholars' understanding of the past changes—how the methods, the materials, the perspectives, the questions as well as the answers can undergo at least partial transformation.

The Fogel and Williams books we will read mostly during the first half of the semester, a chapter or so at a time—various short response papers may be due the evening (midnight is fine) before class.

The books we will all be reading make up a minor fraction of the term's work. This course entails considerable **hands-on** experience, much of it in class, much of it out of class. Some of the in-class work is designed to help you get up to speed for the out-of-class assignments. Each student must do frequent library assignments and be prepared to discuss major findings in class. As a rule, you can expect to do one short written report each week (usually 1 to 3 pages, sometimes due at the start of class, sometimes the night before) as well as one quite substantial project. Get them all done. Get them done well . . . and on time.

Much of your work you will be doing in **materials in the library**—among them census records (hard copy published volumes of aggregate data, as well as microfilm copies of the original census schedules containing information about individuals), newspapers (on microfilm) and the indexes to them, and some legal materials.

You will also make use of various **on-line resources**, available to you via the Virginia Tech library page—among them Lexis-Nexis (to get the decisions of federal courts and state supreme courts, or perhaps articles in law journals); America: History and Life (to find journal articles as well as books on a given topic or by a given person); and the New York Times.

Your writing will be expected to display a command of such things as effective paragraphing, appropriate word choice, and proper punctuation. As for footnotes (actually, endnotes) and bibliography, you must cite primary and secondary sources, as appropriate, and your work must display an historian's (Chicago-style) formatting. Use the assigned books to supply you **model citations** for notes (see notes at the end of chapters in Williams) as well as bibliographic entries.

**The big project.** The most ambitious piece of writing for this course, a mini-term paper, will involve a project that results in an excellent essay with the following specifications:

- a narrative of **2,500-4,000 words**, or 10 to 15 standard double-spaced pages (short for a journal article, but long for most conference papers); **plus**
- properly formatted endnotes and bibliography;
- bibliographical annotation—that is, you will briefly evaluate (in a sentence, or fragment, or two) each major item as to its value in general and its utility for your project;
- and at least one apt visual, perhaps a map or a photograph.

My expertise emphasizes on U.S. history, and the library is particularly well supplied with primary sources in Virginia history. So I have in mind, for these longer papers, **topics in 19th- or 20th-century U.S. history**—(1) the law and politics of race and civil rights, or (2) the law and politics of marriage and family, or, especially, (3) the history of Virginia, on its 400th anniversary. A comparatively wide array of materials can be fairly readily found for doing Virginia history—social or political, nineteenth or twentieth century. A sample of possible topics might include race relations in 20th-century Loudoun County; an exploration of Mabry Mill in Floyd County; a history of high schools in twentieth-century Caroline County; an account of higher education in Civil War Virginia.

The project must be substantial enough that you have time and space to explore a variety of appropriate sources, **primary and secondary**; develop some central idea or theme; and generate and incorporate information that aptly illustrates your generalizations. In presenting this essay, you will be expected to move back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general. Keep in mind (whether you find a particular source at the library or on the web, whether it is hard copy or electronic) that just because something is written down does not make it true, and just because it is true does not make it relevant

or interesting. Your task is to sift for truth and relevance and make clear the significance you see in what you select for inclusion.

Process and chronology. The project will be accomplished in stages, each of them graded:

Preferably by the beginning of class **Wednesday, September 26** (and definitely by the beginning of class **Wednesday, October 3**, you will be turning in a proposal—an introduction to your project—a page that contains 1) a tentative title and 2) a statement, perhaps 200 words, of what you plan to do, and how; and a second page that supplies 3) a formal bibliography of your 8 or 10 most promising sources, primary as well as secondary (specify which are which), briefly annotated.

A draft of one “chapter” of the paper (one-third to one-quarter of the whole thing)—accompanied, of course, by the proposal (the copy you handed in and I turned back)—is due **Wednesday, October 24**.

A first version (not a first draft—it should be as complete and clean as you can get it—and it must be accompanied by the proposal, the copy that has my comments, as well as the sample chapter) is due no later than 4 pm **Friday, November 10**. Be sure you get it back the next week, before you head out for break.

A final version (this one to be accompanied, too—by the proposal, chapter, and preliminary version—the complete package) is due in class **Wednesday, November 28** (the week after Thanksgiving); but if you need additional time, get it all to me by 4 pm the next day.

Regarding all assignments for this course:

Each essay should carry a descriptive title (but not a separate title page).

I expect that each piece of work will be “perfect,” the best you can do at that time; that it will be carefully proofread; and that it will reflect whatever comments I have made about the presentation of your previous papers. First drafts are rarely welcome—I want finished quality. Take pride in your work—do work that you can take pride in.

Essays must be readily legible. I strongly prefer that they be word-processed (dark printer or e-mail). Regardless, I do not want to be getting hairy pages torn from a notebook.

If you **e-mail** me a paper, be sure that the **subject line** identifies the course and the assignment (e.g., Methods-census). And if you send an **attachment**, be sure to identify the **file** by the course, your name, the date, and the assignment (e.g., Methods-Smith-0916-census).

Given all the short assignments for this class, it is imperative that you stay current. All out-of-class written assignments are due at the start of class. (If I find them under my door when I return from class, or if they arrive by e-mail after I leave for class, they are late.) Lateness will result in a reduction of as much as 10 points per day (or partial day). If you miss the due date for something, do not just wait until the next class to turn it in—get it to me as soon as possible.

**My expectations.** All assignments will be evaluated on language (including spelling and word use—it's/its, affect/effect, however/but) and grammar as well as content, **style as well as substance**. I encourage students to work together, in groups of two or three, on short assignments as well as on your larger projects (for example, three people might huddle along the way while each writes on a different aspect of some larger topic). Also, students will report back to the class on your discoveries and on the progress of your work on your research projects.

If I direct you to the Writing Center for assistance, your making use of that University resource becomes a class assignment for you, to be successfully attended to and completed.

Class attendance. Much of the work in this course will take place in class. Plan on few if any absences. If you cannot commit to attending class far more often than not, you might better enroll in some other course, any other course. You are graded on your attendance, your participation, and your performance on in-class assignments; and you are expected to know, and apply, what we cover in class. Do not skip class to complete any work—it's already late.

Retain all graded work through the term—and copies on disk of all electronically prepared items you turn in. Late in the term I will make available to each of you a list of items that I have received (and the grade on each). If my records seem in some way at odds with your understanding of your performance, you will have in your possession the original graded work so that you can help me correct the record.

**Honor Code.** Faculty are urged to say something in each syllabus about the Honor Code. It should go without saying that the Honor Code applies to all the work you do in this course. You are encouraged to work together on assignments, unless otherwise directed, but you must turn in work that is in fact your own. For further guidance, you might consult your three assigned books. Theft of language and/or ideas constitutes a crime against the institution and the enterprise. **Write your own**, and cite if you borrow—that is what quotation marks and footnotes (or endnotes or internal notes) are for. Students—and faculty—are entitled to a cheat-free learning environment, and of course I expect integrity. If I encounter an abuse of this expectation, you can expect a zero on the assignment—which in itself can mean that you fail the class—and a close encounter with the Honor Court. Enough said.

Your work—**acceptable or not?** I confess that I consider HIST 2004 to be a gate-keeping kind of course, the path that must be negotiated to qualify for further work as an undergraduate history major. The simplest way of describing my grading system in this course is to say that your work will be deemed either satisfactory/acceptable (A, really nice; B, pretty good; or C, at least acceptable) or unsatisfactory (anything less).

**Second attempts.** Some work may cry out for a second attempt. Unsatisfactory work (D, F) must be satisfactorily redone (C or better). So humor me. Satisfy my expectations here, and keep in mind that mediocrity is not encouraged. Rewritten essays must abide by the following rules:

- 1) All reworked assignments must be turned in within a week of the class I hand things back; absence on turn-back day does not extend the deadline; the reduction of 10 points for each day, or partial day, that you turn in something late is a separate consideration, so, in that sense, you could do satisfactory work, either on the original pass at an assignment or the re-try, and end up with less than a C grade on it.
- 2) The original version (bearing my scrawled comments) must accompany the new version, and you must have addressed the concerns (stylistic and substantive) that I expressed on the original version. As for stylistic concerns, it does not remotely suffice that you fix the single instance I noted of a characteristic problem—all such must be identified and fixed; I am not your editor, and I do not pretend to note every example of a lapse. I want you to learn to recognize things that need fixing.
- 3) For each assignment, I will average the original and the re-try, if any. So consider the permanent grade on the assignment to be the average between the first attempt and the re-try; if the re-try is also unsatisfactory, the grade is a zero (think of each graded piece of work as starting out at zero and staying there until either the first try or a re-try earns a grade that crests 70).
- 4) Even if you do "satisfactory" work on an essay, you may re-do it to improve it. Just follow all the procedures indicated here.
- 5) Note that a re-try does not guarantee a higher grade—or even keeping the original grade—though a good-faith effort will likely lift the evaluation.

Along the way, you will likely find yourselves **not only consumers of historical knowledge—but producers** as well. Let's talk about the essays that really turn out well (lots of them, right?). I have tentative plans, at the end of the term (if you each approve of your essay's inclusion), to compile the stronger essays in a published collection, produced at the Copy Center. Your essay must have earned at least a straight B, and I'll need it in electronic format as a Word file. You can own a copy of that collection, at cost, if you wish.

Let's go further. As you develop your essays, short or long, you will be exemplifying what I mean when I

speak of the strengths and promise of **undergraduate research at a research institution**. As part of that enterprise, you will be encouraged—pending production of a fine piece of work—to submit an essay in the annual statewide competition conducted by the Virginia Social Science Association (papers will be due at some point around New Year's—and the VSSA's annual conference is planned for the Virginia Military Institute next April 5). And you will be urged, too, to propose a paper for presentation at the Virginia Tech undergraduate research symposium next spring, as well as for presentation at the Virginia Tech History Graduate Student Association's annual conference, also next spring. Juniors and sophomores, keep in mind next fall's Middle Atlantic Regional Conference of Undergraduate Scholarship (**MARCUS**), held each October at Sweet Briar College. Also, the History Department runs essay competitions each spring—one on Virginia and/or Civil War, the other on any topic. Hear me?

**Final grades.** Numeric grades will convert at 920 for a straight A, and 900-919 A–; 870 or more will convert to B+, 830 to B, 800 B–, 750 C+, and **700 the lowest straight C**. If that does not cover everyone, 670 will suffice for a D+, 630 a D, and 600 the lowest D–. I'd like to see nothing but A and B, but I might not get that. You need at least a straight C (700 points) to satisfy the Department requirement for a History major. You should plan on earning **at least a straight C on the big project**.

Students will be evaluated on the basis of the effectiveness of the following, with (1) **class** attendance and class work counting one-third; (2) the frequent short **essays** (all together) also counting about one-third; and (3) the big **project** (the proposal, the chapter, the preliminary version, and the final version) the final third:

1) any in-class exercise; or any quiz; as well as your class attendance and your participation in class discussion (including oral presentations of your big project)—the ideas you bring to class, the questions, your in-class contributions to everyone's cooperative learning;

2) your frequent short essays, as well as the out-of-class exercises;

3) the big project—each of the three written presentations, especially the final version, which you should strive to make clean, elegant, and convincing. Finally, there is:

4) an **optional final exam**, whether taken at the appointed time (**Wednesday, December 12, 7:45–9:45 AM**) or (at least in part), take-home and due in my office then. You should know by reading day what your final grade will be without the final, so you can decide whether to take it. An outstanding performance on the final exam can enhance your grade total by as many as 20 points (for example, raising it from 685 to 705). Note, though, that a particularly weak performance will have a similar power to reduce your over-all grade by that amount.

Note that this course is **front-loaded**. Rather than just turning in a large project at the end of term, you will be turning in the bulk of your written work (through the first edition of your project) before mid-November. Moreover, the final exam will not have the power to alter your final grade by more than a single increment, for example from A– to A (or B+). So do not let things slide on the premise that you can rescue yourself later.

**BONUS: Be critical of what you read.** Be attentive to statements—in one of these assigned books (or another book; or a current newspaper; or CNN)—that appear wrong, silly, inadequate. If you see a flagrant error (of fact or diction), you might e-mail it to me and bring it to class.

I have taught this course many times over the years, though the particulars have certainly changed. It involves a lot of work, but I like it (in fact, it has altered the way I approach teaching my other classes), and most students respond well to it. Welcome aboard. Let's get started.