

Historicizing Communities

One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistence with which he [sic] reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterization of events, agents and agencies found in the always incomplete historical account.

--Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse

To be studied as history, a set of past human actions must be felt by members of some human group to belong to its past, to be intelligible, and worth understanding from the point of view of its present interests.

--W. B. Gallie, Philosophy and the Historical Understanding

The rhetorician must know more about history, and the historian must know more about rhetoric.

--Everett Lee Hunt

This project will give you an opportunity to examine and write about the history of some aspect of a social, professional, academic or public community that you already participate in or wish to join and, thus, are eager to learn more about.

Rationale:

As all of the epigraphs above suggest, history is a rhetorical act. History is always written by someone (or social group), for someone (or social group) to serve some purpose. Depending on the subject positions of both the writers and readers, different histories may emerge to explain the same past event. No one history can fully cover or explain any event; it can only select out aspects of it. Such a recognition poses two important issues for readers and writers of history. First, readers need to understand the rhetorical situation of the history they are reading. Who wrote it? For whom? To what end? What aspects of the event are focused on and what are left out? How might a writer with a different subject position (in relation to the event) have written a different account? Similarly, history writers need to understand their own subject position in relation to the past event(s) they are telling, and that of their readers. They need to have a clear purpose for this history: i.e., does it fill a gap in the historical understanding? does it challenge past explanations? does it build on or reaffirm past understandings? Which social group would believe that this is an event or set of human actions that are worth understanding in the present?

Historical analysis then helps us to better understand the various communities we participate in, the people we live with, and the origins of the beliefs, practices and values that we and those around us subscribe to. We can also better understand why there may be vast differences in beliefs, practices and values among the people we live with, as well as those who are far removed from us in both space and time.

Assignment:

For this project you will select one aspect of a community to do an historical analysis. There are any number of aspects you might select and a focused selection will be the key. Here are some examples to help you think about an area for historical treatment: history of a company; history of a product (or type of product) promoted by the company; history of an activity related to the community (e.g., a sport for sport sites or treatment of pets through time); history of advertising in relation to the product; role of men or women over time in the ads or in the activity or in the organization (e.g., role of women or men in a particular sport; a founding woman or man); history of transportation; history of fashion; history of a hobby and so on. This is just a small number of the myriad of possibilities for this assignment. The key will be to identify an aspect related to the social organization of the community that you want to learn more about.

The second key will be to set limits on the history. In the brief number of pages you will have to work with, you cannot possibly cover a large time span or large areas. Historians typically limit their examination of activities, people or phenomena to a particular time period (e.g., twenty or fifty years, etc.) and to a particular place (a country, a state, or a city or a particular private or public building or organization). If the topic is a one-shot deal (say the history of a particular event), the limits are already in place. If, however, the topic covers a

phenomenon through time, then you will need to set the limits and have a reason for why you picked a particular time frame and place.

There are two major ways of several that historians conduct historical research: 1) archival research and 2) oral history research. Some historians combine the two. Clearly, the kind of research you need to do will be contingent on the past action or event or phenomenon you want to study and write about. Oral history requires events from the recent past, since the informants must still be living and have experienced the event(s). You will need to decide which kind or combination of methods applicable to your project. The invention activities will help you here.

You will complete a series of invention activities (heuristics) to help you conduct and write up your history. Along the way you will work with peers in class to both gain guidance for your project and to provide guidance to them for their projects. The activities are sequenced to help you move through the process of research and writing but you will no doubt find yourself returning to some of them as you write. Writing and research are recursive processes.

Paper:

You will write a 3-5 page paper historicizing an event, activity, person (or people) or phenomenon that is related in some way to the community that most interests you. Histories typically are chronologically ordered—or in Hayden White's term "plotted" like a story. The idea is to recreate the event in ways to help your readers

better understand it. As with virtually all writing, however, you will need to design a clear rhetorical situation (a target audience, the purposes, your role as writer, the context) to help you decide which details to include and what the best organization will be.

Hint:

Don't wait till the last minute to do the research and writing for this project. You cannot do the research all in one go. You will need to give yourself time to think about the historical data you are collecting. You need to figure out what holes you may need to fill through further research. And you need to figure out your perspective and position on the past event you are writing about. The invention activities are sequenced to help you pace your work, so don't circumvent these.