

GUIDELINES for ACADEMIC WORK

In order to successfully participate in the seminars, it is crucial for you to do scholarly work and historical research. Please find the guidelines of academic work that apply at the Department of North American History below.

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1) HOW TO RESEARCH A TOPIC

There are several ways to do research for your class presentation, your final paper etc. If you need to get an overview over the time period you are covering, you should start with a textbook. Textbooks cannot be cited in your work, but they will facilitate you getting familiar with a topic. Common textbooks are Christof Mauch and Anke Ortlepps [Geschichte der USA](#), Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty*, or Mary Beth Norton's *A People and a Nation*.

Now you are ready to focus your search. Think of appropriate key words, or names or events you can use as search terms. A good start is the [Library of the Department for North American History](#). There you can find primary sources and secondary literature, as well as journals and databases. Additionally you can research the [Cologne University Library](#). What you can also do in order to get an idea what kind of literature is out there on your topic, is search the extensive catalog of the [Library of Congress](#). Here, you may find titles that do not appear in the USB, but which you can probably get through interlibrary loan. In order to find articles on your topic, you can also search the database [America: History and Life](#).

Another great database to which Cologne has access is [JSTOR](#). It includes a great variety of journals and you will find great articles there.

Another good way is to check the bibliography and the footnotes of books that you have already identified as crucial for your topic; it is very likely that you will come across other works that are useful for you there. Also, if you check out books from the library, browse the shelf and see what else is there on your topic.

Finally, check out Umberto Eco's *How to Write a Thesis*, Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* and Anthony Brundage's [Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing](#).

2) HOW TO FIND AND USE ONLINE RESOURCES

Alongside the university's library catalogues and databases, the internet is a great resource to find literature as well as a great variety of other materials useful for your project. However, some websites are more useful and reliable than others and here are a few guidelines and suggestions.

- You can find a broad range of databases on the website of the [North American History Department Library](#)

Wikipedia

While Wikipedia is a good start to get an overview of a topic and get some basic info on certain peoples and events, you have to keep in mind that everyone with internet access can contribute articles to this internet encyclopedia. As a consequence, not all contributors are experts in their fields and the content of the article may contain factual errors and inaccuracies. Wikipedia itself states that "As a consequence of the open structure, Wikipedia "makes no guarantee of validity" of its content, since no one is ultimately responsible for any claims appearing in it."¹ Moreover, you cannot always know who edited an article and why they did so.

Thus, **Wikipedia does not count as a source that can be cited** in your bibliography, and whatever info you find there should be backed up by additional scholarly texts.

A German alternative that offers short articles (written by scholars) on various topics, methods and concepts of history is [Docupedia](#). On this site, you can find, for instance, introductory articles on Visual History, Cultural Turns, History of Decolonisation, Environmental History... The texts do not have a US-focus, yet are still useful for gaining some first insights into a certain field of study or a concept.

University Websites

University websites in the United States can easily be recognized by their .edu ending. They are usually a lot more trustworthy since their content has been written by scholars and often experts in the scholarly fields. Many

¹ Quoted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia#Accuracy_of_content

universities have made parts of their research foci available online; some have a special research focus and provide digital material that you can use. Here are some examples:

- [The Children and Youth in History Project](#) at the George Mason University
- [The Adoption History Project](#) at the University of Oregon
- [Emergence of Advertising in America](#) at the Duke University

There are many, many more. Usually, they provide a short introductory essay about the topic as well as an overview of the sources that can be accessed online.

Other (digital) libraries and archives

Many presidential libraries have parts of their collections digitalized and thus provide a rich resource for research. Here are some examples:

- The [John F. Kennedy Presidential Library](#) that offers a great variety of material on the Civil Rights Struggle.
- Another great source is the [King Center](#) in Atlanta, Georgia, that has many materials relating to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- The University of Houston also has an archive on American history called [“Digital History,”](#) covering all centuries, various topics, and personalities.
- The same is true for the digital history project [“History Matters”](#) of the George Mason University

You may also want to search PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), which is a bit similar to *Deutschlandfunk*. Although they do mini-series and documentaries and are not professional researchers, they often collaborate with highly-respected scholars, such as Henry Louis Gates, for their [African American History Project](#). You cannot cite this as a source (unless you critically engage with the material, i.e. make it part of your analysis), but it may be useful to get an overview or find material suitable for class presentations.

The Library of Congress

The [Library of Congress](#) in Washington, DC, is the largest library in the world, containing not only books, Congressional records, magazines and (historical) newspapers, but also many primary sources such as maps,

photographs, audio recordings etc. Especially noteworthy for our purpose is their “American Memory” Collection, a digital, searchable collection on various topics such as Advertising or African American History.

The Smithsonian Institution

The [Smithsonian Institution](#) in Washington, DC, is the world’s largest museum and research complex. The institution offers a wide variety of digitalized primary sources that can be searched by keyword and topic.

3) HOW TO ANALYZE A SOURCE

There is a plethora of sources out there that are of interest to historians, students, and scholars doing historical research. Depending on the type of source, different insights can be gained and different questions must be asked.

Generally, you want to ask yourself **when** and **where** the source was created; was the primary source created directly after the event (i.e. a battle, a demonstration, a public speech etc.) to which it refers, or years later (in which case the memory might be clouded)? Was the author a participant in the event, a firsthand observer, or do they use interviews of active participants to describe the event?

Why it was created and by **whom**; is your source a diary that was intended to be kept private? Is it an advertising image that was popularized in various magazines?

Is it a “reliable source”? We assume that every source is biased in some way. Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened, or perhaps only what the creator wants us to think happened. Thus, historians must always read sources skeptically and critically and not take the given content at face value.

Questions for analyzing a source can thus be:

- Who created the source?
- Why was it created?
- When and where was it created?
- Was it intended for public use and circulation, or is it rather a source for personal use (such as diaries, family photographs, letters etc.)?
- Does the source intend to persuade its audience?
- Does the creator seem reliable and honest?
- Does the information seem accurate (double check with other sources and/or secondary texts)?

There is a great variety of primary sources that are of interest. These can be presidential addresses, letters, diaries, speeches, i.e. textual sources, but also audio-visual ones such as posters, movies, postcards, advertisements and so on. Among the most common types of sources are:

➤ **Published Documents**

Some primary sources are published documents. They were created for large audiences and were distributed widely. Published documents include books, magazines, newspapers, government documents, non-government reports, literature of all kinds, advertisements, maps, pamphlets, posters, laws, and court decisions.

➤ **Unpublished Documents**

Many types of unpublished documents have been saved and can be used as primary sources. These include personal letters, diaries, journals, wills, deeds, family Bibles containing family histories, school report cards, and many other sources. Unpublished business records such as correspondence, financial ledgers, information about customers, board meeting minutes, and research and development files also give clues about the past.

➤ **Oral Traditions/Oral Histories**

Oral traditions and oral histories provide another way to learn about the past from people with firsthand knowledge of historical events. Oral histories provide important historical evidence about people, especially minority groups, who were excluded from mainstream publications or did not leave behind written primary sources. Oral histories are as old as human beings. Before the invention

of writing, information passed from generation to generation through the spoken word. Many people around the world continue to use oral traditions to pass along knowledge and wisdom. Interviews and recordings of community elders and witnesses to historical events provide exciting stories, anecdotes, and other information about the past.

➤ **Visual Documents and Artifacts**

Visual documents include photographs, films, paintings, and other types of artwork or popular culture artefacts. Because visual documents capture moments in time, they can provide evidence of changes over time. Visual documents include evidence about a culture at specific moments in history: its customs, preferences, styles, special occasions, work, and play.

(For further info see, [Teaching with Documents](#))

➤ **Objects and Artifacts**

Sources for historical analysis need not be text-based, although studying material culture through physical objects is often complicated by a lack of accessibility. Nonetheless, objects such as tools, furniture, toys, and clothes can give evidence to how people lived in the past. The same questions as for written sources are relevant when examining objects and one should also consider how an object was used, by whom and when.

Example Questions for Various Types of Sources:

- **Artifact:** What kind of material? What does it look and feel like? What's the shape, size, color, texture of it? Is there anything printed on it? What might have been its use? Who might have used it and when? Was it an everyday item, or rather reserved for special occasions? Does it tell you anything about the technology at the time?
- **Photograph:** What's your overall impression of/initial response to the photograph? What can be seen on the photograph? What's in the foreground, what's in the background, why that framing? Try to read the photograph as if it were a text and try to get as much information as possible out of it (people, objects, activities). When was it possibly taken? By whom? For what purpose? Was it privately used or widely distributed/reprinted?
- **Poster:** What are the main colors? Or is it black-and-white? Is there a verbal or visual message? Is it dramatic, subtle, attention-catching? What

is the intended audience for the visual? Where was it published? When and by whom?

- **Written Document:** Is it a newspaper, a letter, a diary, an advertisement, a report, a speech, a press release etc.? Is it handwritten or typed, labelled “confidential” or open to public access? Who created it, when and why? Is the author a well-known historical figure?
- **Motion Picture:** Is it a movie, a documentary, a newsreel, a propaganda film, a commercial etc.? What can be gleaned from the title? When was it released? Any info on who directed it? What was the intended audience? What are the characters like? What is the plot about? What about music, the camera work, the actors? For further information consult the [AGuF](#).

For further info refer to [Clearinghouse’s Guide](#) and [University of Delaware](#).

4) HOW TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER

Formal Aspects:

- **Cover Sheet:** Your paper should have a cover sheet including your name, *Matrikelnummer*, your semester and what subjects you are studying. It should also include the title of the seminar, the semester and, of course, the title of your paper.
- **Content:** The following page should be the content. Your first chapter is usually the
 - Introduction (though you should give it a catchier title than that) and should be about 10% of your paper. The aim of the introduction is to give the reader a pretty good idea of what your paper addresses, what sources/literature you use and how you plan to work through your topic. It is important that you clearly present your research question and thesis in the introduction.
 - The main part should likewise be organized in chapters and that organization reflects your main points and ideas. The headings of each chapter should give the reader an immediate idea of what you are going to do in that chapter.
 - The very last part is the conclusion (also about 10%); it can also be an epilogue or an outlook, yet in any case should it sum up your key arguments and insights. Reiterate your research question,

indicating how this was answered, and your thesis, including how your arguments supported this.

- The conclusion is followed by the “Works Cited” section, that alphabetically lists all the material you used, i.e. primary sources, secondary literature, websites, blogs, journal articles, etc. First, list all the of the primary sources consulted, then the secondary literature.

Citation Style: Historians usually adhere to the Chicago Manual of Style and use footnotes in their texts. However, if you have mainly worked with MLA (guidelines by the Modern Language Association) and you use in-text citation, that’s fine, too. Whatever style you chose, make sure that it is consistent throughout your paper.

Length: You all study according to different POs, so please check and see what the requirements are for you. For North American Studies your term paper should be 20-25 pages long (60.000-75.000 characters, incl. spaces & footnotes, +- 10%). Essays should be 10 pages long (25.000 characters, incl. spaces & footnotes, +- 10%).

Basic Guidelines:

- When you have a rough idea of your topic, think about if it is feasible and if you can address the issue on a couple of pages. Sometimes students start with very big ideas – that’s fine, but think about how you can narrow it down to a more specific question/topic that you can deal with in your paper.
- Then ask yourself:
 - Do I have a thesis, a problem, a research question?
 - Does my topic have a historical perspective, and does the paper provide a historical contextualization?
 - Does the table of contents reflect the research question and my approach?
 - What kind of sources do I have? Have you been successful in finding additional material, i.e. appropriate monographs, anthologies, articles etc. through your research?
 - How are the sources connected/ related to my research question? Do they help me to address the question/ issue at hand?
 - Your sources are not limited to texts; photographs, advertisements/ commercials, music/song lyrics, movies etc. can also be great

sources! Textual sources can vary from court decisions/law suits to letters, cookbooks, newspaper articles, surveys etc.

- When you have finished a first draft, please proofread! Also, ask a friend to read your paper; are they convinced by the logic of your argument and by your selection of sources, literature, and other materials?
- Make sure to pay attention to the formal aspects noted above.