

Historiography Assignment

What is an historiography?

When writing about an historical topic, historians generally contribute to the information already published about the topic. Therefore, historiography can be described as the study of historical writing or, as it's often referred, "the history of history." An historiography includes the main arguments about the topic that have been published before and serves to situate the historian's published work within this larger context. By writing a historiography, you will demonstrate your understanding of the main arguments concerning your topic, any disagreements among historians regarding your topic, and any consensus that exists among historians regarding your topic. Your historiography should include the major historian's writing about your topic as well as their main arguments (or theses). A good historiography will present information that shows the connections between the major historians. For example, does one historian's work respond to an argument or disagree with an argument from another historian? Does it expand on that argument? A good historiography serves as a comparison to the other bodies of work on the same topic. You should consider a historiography as a comparison of the scholarly work by historians on similar topics, events, or controversies in American history. A historiography can compare and contrast either published books or articles in scholarly journals.

Questions usually answered in a historiography include: *How does this book or article relate to work already published on this historical controversy? Does the author agree or disagree with other historians who have written on the same topic? Does the author present any new information, kinds of evidence or arguments? How does this book or article compare with information in other, related books or articles? What is the significance of the differences and of the issues the books or articles have in common?*

What is the process for writing an historiography?

1. Peruse and decide on a topic that you would be interested in further researching
2. Develop a research question of interest to you. See the attached handout for suggestions on what this looks like.
3. Research and find various sources needed. These may include books, scholarly articles, websites, and primary source documents. You must have **at least 6 sources** that you will be discussing.
4. Read or skim each source and take Cornell notes. Consider and record the arguments or theses presented in each source. Compare and contrast the information you have read. Your notes should capture answers to some of the following guiding questions:
 - a. What is the thesis or argument put forth in each source?
 - b. How do the different sources relate to each other?
 - c. Do some of the sources have the same thesis for your topic?
 - d. Do some of the sources contradict each other?
5. Begin writing your historiography.
6. Finish with an annotated bibliography to describe and cite your sources.

What does the final product look like and when is it due?

Your goal is to understand and summarize the different interpretations surrounding your topic. You are writing an integrated analysis which incorporates these interpretations to outline the historical debate that exists around your topic. The final product will be a **2-3 page**, double spaced, essay with an annotated bibliography. Avoid merely summarizing the various arguments, be sure to compare and contrast each of them and weave them into a narrative of the historical debate. This will be due on:

_____, May _____.

What questions should I consider as I research my topic

- What is the fundamental historical debate taking place within this topic or period of study? In other words, what is the controversy that historian's drives varying perspectives?
- How has the historiography of your topic evolved over time? What has changed in terms of interpretation of events and ideas? What was the initial interpretation of this event, idea or person? How has it changed and why?
- Have the "discovery" or re-interpretation of sources caused historians to ask new questions or take their research in new directions?
- Are the historians under study controlled by a particular "historical school of thought?" How does their lens contribute to and differentiate the interpretations they make?

How do I get started finding the sources?

1. Read the Foner annotated bibliography to familiarize yourself with the issues and learn the historians who seem to be involved in the historical debate. Take notes and add to your annotated bib.
2. Use the databases and resources at oprfhs.org to find “review articles” of historians writing about newly published works. These contain great information on books you may already be looking into and give you an idea of what historians are saying on the topic. Take notes and add to your annotated bib.
3. Collect books you’ve discovered through these first two steps. Read introductions and bibliographies to see what they are arguing. Take notes and add to your annotated bib.
4. Start to map out the various arguments and compare for consensus and contradiction. Find a way to organize the ideas that you are comfortable with. Start to consider how these individual pieces may fit together to create a broader historical debate around your topic. How do they fit together? How does each perspective add to, challenge, or alter the existing debate. Be mindful of chronology here. This mapping should give you a roadmap to begin writing.

What are some possible topics I could research?

Your historiography will must focus on a topic from the Cold War or later, an area we won’t spend much time discussing in class. This gives you an opportunity to gain exposure to the most recent history of the United States. Choose from the following list or suggest your own topic for approval (you must come and talk to me about it before pursuing further research).

The Cold War to 2000

- Cold War
- Red Scare
- African American Politics and the Red Scare
- McCarthyism
- Red Scare and Impact on Education
- Brown v. Board of Education
- J. Edgar Hoover
- Historically Black Colleges
- Korean War
- General Douglas MacArthur
- McCarran Act of 1950
- Interstate Highway Act
- Rise of Suburbia
- Civil Rights Movement
- Martin Luther King and Malcolm X
- Space Race
- Women’s Movement
- Rise of African American Islamic Movement
- Cuban Missile Crisis
- Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs
- War on Poverty
- War on Drugs
- Turbulent 1960s
- Vietnam War
- Antiwar Movement
- Efficacy of Student Protestors (Civil Rights and/or Antiwar)
- American Indian Movement
- Johnson and the Invasion of Cambodia
- CIA and Cold War
- Alger Hiss
- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
- The Warren Court
- Reagan Presidency
- Conservative Movement
- Reaganomics
- Reagan and the Cold War
- Latinos in America
- Asians in America
- Woodstock and Counterculture
- Fundamentalist Christianity
- Truly Urban Poor
- Nixon and Foreign Policy
- Second Amendment Rights
- Watergate
- Gay Rights
- Rights of the Disabled
- Title IX
- Bush Presidency
- Clinton Presidency
- NAFTA
- Monica Lewinsky Scandal

Example historiography

THE CHARACTER OF SLAVERY

NO issue in American history has produced a more spirited debate than the nature of plantation slavery. The debate began well before the Civil War, when abolitionists strove to expose slavery to the world as a brutal, dehumanizing institution, while southern defenders of slavery tried to depict it as a benevolent and paternalistic system. But by the late nineteenth century, with white Americans eager for sectional conciliation, most northern and southern chroniclers of slavery began to accept a romanticized and unthreatening picture of the Old South and its peculiar institution.

The first major scholarly examination of slavery was Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918), which portrayed slavery as an essentially benign institution in which kindly masters looked after submissive and generally contented African Americans. Phillips's apologia for slavery remained the authoritative work on the subject for nearly thirty years.

In the 1940s, challenges to Phillips began to emerge. Melville J. Herskovits disputed Phillips's contention that black Americans retained little of their African cultural inheritance. Herbert Aptheker published a chronicle of slave revolts as a way of refuting Phillips's claim that blacks were submissive and content.

A somewhat different challenge to Phillips emerged in the 1950s from historians who emphasized the brutality of the institution. Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery* (1959) described a labor system that did serious physical and psychological

damage to its victims. They portrayed slavery as something like a prison, in which men and women had virtually no space to develop their own social and cultural lives. Elkins compared the system to Nazi concentration camps and likened the childlike "Sambo" personality of slavery to tragic distortions of character produced by the Holocaust.

In the early 1970s, an explosion of new scholarship on slavery shifted the emphasis away from the damage the system inflicted on African Americans and toward the striking success of the slaves themselves in building a culture of their own. John Blasingame in 1973 argued that "the most remarkable aspect of the whole process of enslavement is the extent to which the American-born slaves were able to retain their ancestors' culture." Herbert Gutman, in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), challenged the prevailing belief that slavery had weakened and even destroyed the African American family. On the contrary, Gutman argued, the black family survived slavery with impressive strength, although with some significant differences from the prevailing form of the white family. Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974) revealed how African Americans manipulated white paternalist assumptions to build a large cultural space of their own where they could develop their own family life, social traditions, and religious patterns. That same year, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman published the controversial *Time on the Cross*, a highly quantitative study that supported some of



(The Granger Collection, NYC)

the claims of Gutman and Genovese about black achievement but that went much further in portraying slavery as a successful and reasonably humane (if ultimately immoral) system. Slave workers, they argued, were better treated and lived in greater comfort than most Northern industrial workers of the same era. Their conclusions produced a storm of criticism.

Other important scholarship includes African American slave women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* (1988) examined the lives of both white and black women on the plantation. She portrayed slave women as defined by their dual roles as members of the plantation workforce and anchors of the black family. Slave women, she argued, professed loyalty to their mistresses when forced to serve them as domestics; but their real loyalty remained to their own communities and families.

Recent studies by Walter Johnson and Ira Berlin mark an at least partial return to the "damage" approach to slavery of the 1970s. Johnson's *Soul by Soul* (2000) examines the South's largest slave market, New Orleans.

For whites, he argues, purchasing slaves was a way of fulfilling the middle-class male fantasy of success and independence. For the slaves themselves, the trade was dehumanizing and destructive to black families and communities. Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone* (2000) and *Generation of Captivity* (2003)—among the most important studies of slavery in a generation—similarly emphasize the dehumanizing character of the slave market and show that, whatever white slaveowners might say, slavery was less a social system than a commodification of human beings.

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, & EVALUATE

1. Why might the conclusions drawn by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman in *Time on the Cross* have provoked vehement criticism?
2. What might be some reasons for the resurrection of focus on the "damage" thesis of slavery, as in the works by Walter Johnson and Ira Berlin?

Annotated Bibliography

What?

An annotated bibliography is a list of the sources used in your historiography. Each source is summarized and evaluated for its relevance and credibility by the researcher and each source includes proper documentation in Chicago style/Turabian format.

Why?

An annotated bibliography is an excellent method and tool for beginning research. Because the researcher must include a summary and evaluation of the source, they are forced to read the source carefully and thoroughly. This task compels the researcher to read more critically (how credible the source is and its relevance to the question topic) as opposed to simply collecting information. Additionally, undertaking an annotated bibliography allows the researcher to see what is currently written about the topic in question and what the current perspectives are on the topic which in turn develops the researcher's understanding and personal point of view of the topic, and in this case, fuels the historiography.

How?

- An annotated bibliography begins with the source information in Chicago style/Turabian format.
- A **summary** of the source: what are the main arguments? What topics are covered? If someone asked you what the source was about, what would you say?
- An **assessment** of the source: is the source relevant to your historiography? How does it compare with other sources in your bibliography? Is it reliable information? Is it biased, objective? What the goal of the source?
- A **reflection** of the source: how does it fit into your historiography? Was the source helpful? Does it change your perspective of your topic? How can you use this source in your research?
- Do this in brief and don't feel like you have to answer each question robotically. This is in essence providing the citation and adding a blurb summarizing what it is and discussing its relevance and utility to your research.

Sample?

Annotated Bibliography
Topic: Pragmatist approaches to epistemology

Encyclopedia Britannica, 9th ed., "Pragmatism."

A well-written article about the philosophical movement called Pragmatism.
Contains useful information and critical remarks.

Johanson, Arnold E. "Philosophy and the Limits of Doubt." Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1969.

The author investigates the nature and the forms of doubt in classical pragmatism. A comprehensive and innovative PhD dissertation.

Mead, George H. *The Philosophy of the Act*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938.

A fundamental work by the founder of social psychology. According to Mead, thought and act exist in union. The theoretical cannot be considered separately from the practical.