Second Paper: Research Essay

The second essay builds on the skills you developed in the first essay. This assignment may begin two ways:

1. Start with a Source Pairing of a primary document and a secondary work drawn from the list provided on the course website.

For example, you might choose a pairing like the following:

Primary Document: the Supreme Court's decision in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case—the decision:

Once you’ve chosen your pairing, you will use it as a starting point for library research to find other sources related to your topic, including at least one more secondary article or chapter (adding up to a total of 40-50 pages including the first). Rather than look at Brown v. Board of Education, for instance, you might want to write about the case of Ada Lois Sipuel, an African-American woman who was rejected by the University of Oklahoma School of Law in 1946 because of her race.

2. If you prefer, you may just dive in to the Primary Source Collections listed on the Course Website. In that case, you must also find some secondary work (at least 2-3 long articles, approx. 40-50 pages, total) to guide or provoke you as you develop your own interpretation. (You may simply choose to vindicate, modify, or refute one of the articles you find.) In many cases, you may need context for the Source Collection you choose. If so, be sure to choose secondary works that provide it—and ask your TA, Professor, or the Reference Librarian and History Liaison, Laurie Scrivener, for help.

Note on Secondary Works for both option 1 and 2: Scholarly articles in the “History” section on J-STOR are probably your best bet. But there are reputable articles that may be relevant to historical topics in, such specialized magazines as American Heritage, Smithsonian, the New England Journal of Medicine, or the Scientific American, or in major long-form news and opinion magazines like The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The Economist, etc.

Requirements and Deadlines:

- The research essay will be approximately 1,600 -1,800 words.
- The final draft of the research essay is due Monday, November 21. Submit it on Canvas (and, if your TA requires it, also as a hard copy).
- As a rule of thumb, use 12-15 primary sources as a target figure, adding up to a total of approximately 30-50 pages of primary source material. Depending on the length of the sources you use, you may need to go over (or even under) the 12-15 target. Check with your TA for approval in that case.
- You are also required to examine at least two secondary works (including the one you started with, if you chose option 1), either articles from reputable journals, essays from anthologies, or chapters from a pertinent book or two on the topic. Always choose secondary works that you find clear and engaging--and that teach you something important and make you want to know more.
• Select a paper topic by Week Eight. See the syllabus for the schedule of preliminary assignments (Due Oct. 13 and Nov. 3) that build up to submission of the final draft of your essay (again, Nov. 21).
• The research essay itself is worth 225 points. You can lose 40 points by missing the first of the preliminary assignments (Oct. 13). The second preliminary assignment is worth 50 points (Nov. 3).

Writing the Essay: Success in these assignments will depend on careful research and clear writing. Go to the History Hub and to the Writing Center, see your TA, or see your professor when you need feedback or help. The course website features tutorials to help you:

• Evaluate the Sources: Before you can develop your argument, you need to survey your evidence. Take notes while reading, commenting on the most prominent themes and surprising details in the sources.
• Craft a Thesis: A strong thesis goes beyond simply reporting what you found. It uses the evidence to broaden, qualify, or contradict conventional notions of an important theme in U.S. history. (If you have no idea what the conventional notion may be, just refer to whatever you learned from TV or on the streets. In some cases, you may just want to say that most people seem to know hardly anything about the topic, and then explain why knowing what you discovered about it might change important beliefs they have.) Your thesis may emerge gradually as you wrestle with your documents in early drafts. It may change radically somewhere in the process, as you realize that your first thesis idea, on closer inspection, did not fit the evidence: changes like that are healthy and fun. Don’t be afraid of them. In your finished paper, however, highlight your thesis in the introduction.
• Use the Evidence: Most of a history essay should consist of “evidence paragraphs,” which develop and support the thesis with facts and quotations. These paragraphs explain how your well-chosen evidence supports your case. Relate your quotations to themes from class or the course readings.
• Consider the Possibilities: Think about the unforeseen implications of the evidence and the possible objections to your interpretation.
• Organize the Essay: As your paragraphs emerge, unify each one with a topic sentence, and arrange them in a sequence that builds toward your strongest claims. Your finished essay should have a clearly sign-posted order as it advances from the introduction through your body paragraphs to your conclusion.