

Historiography, the Historiographic Essay and the Senior Thesis

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What is historiography?

Historiography is the study of changes in methods, interpretations, and conclusions of historians over time. Thus, historiography is the historical study of the work of other historians. Historiography identifies, compares, and evaluates the viewpoints of historians writing on the same subject. It can take several forms. Historiography might look at the way historians have treated the same topic over time. Yet it might compare views of historians from several historical 'schools' on the same event. It might trace the history of a single explanatory paradigm over a long period of time. Or it may thematically analyze the most recent and up-to-date historical scholarship on a given topic. In any case, historiography focuses attention not on a historical event itself, but rather on how historians have interpreted that event.

What is the historiographic essay?

A historiographic essay is not original research. The goal of your essay is to evaluate the secondary literature. The essay should assess each work--its interpretation, use of evidence, methodology, and anything else that you find important. The larger purpose of this essay, though, is to provide an overall assessment of the secondary literature on your particular topic or subject. And that overall assessment should be clearly articulated as a thesis in your historiographic essay. Your essay should explain important interpretive issues--questions that have helped to shape the scholarship on your topic. You should point out trends in the literature, such as the emergence of new arguments or themes or the persistence or development of interpretive differences. You should also discuss the overall strengths or weaknesses in the literature as a whole and, as appropriate, make suggestions for what needs to be done to improve it, which your Senior Thesis should aspire to

accomplish. Your selection of secondary works need not be exhaustive. That's impossible with most topics. But please choose carefully so that you include major works as well as recent interpretations--those that have been influential, controversial, or widely read. Thus:

- . a discussion of the questions (and answers) that historians have asked about your topic
- . a discussion of how these questions and answers have changed over time, particularly in the last decade or so
- . your analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of past and current approaches to your topic
- . and your analysis of what remains to be done on your topic and what will be your contribution

A historiographic essay combines some of the features of a book review with those of a short, thesis-driven essay. You should begin by reading critically historians' interpretations, keeping in mind the questions you would need to answer if you were going to write book reviews about them. You should not, however, treat the historiographic essay as several book reviews strung together. Rather, you should synthesize your material and construct an argument in support of a thesis assessing the works overall. In this way, a historiographic essay can be considered a comparative book review in which you analyze what the books have in common and where they differ (consider theme, arguments, style, approaches, conclusions, sources, et cetera), but within a structure you create to demonstrate your thesis.

How does it fit into my senior thesis?

This historiographic essay will become, in the spring, a part of your final senior thesis. Each senior thesis needs some historiographical analysis. This serves the purpose of identifying for your reader the basic understanding that you have derived from others about your subject, particularly when this assessment offers a starting point. Historiographical discussions also allow you to set your work off from that of others; it can

identify for your reader how your essay will challenge or support the conclusions of other works. It serves intellectually to contextualize your contribution to that of other historians. Each senior thesis will include a historiographic component that may run up to ten pages. Depending on the degree to which your final paper in the fall term addressed the necessary subjects, it may well suffice, though expect to do some revising for the final senior thesis.

How do I begin?

Once you have identified a topic, you need to start scouring library catalogs (particularly Summit) to find what secondary literature is readily available on your topic. You should build a bibliographic list of works that you want to consider because they seem relevant. Look for books published with university presses, these are likely more scholarly than those that are not. Note that once you actually get your hands on a book, it may not be about what you thought it was about, and therefore may not be relevant. You should search journals for state of the field historiographic essays in which you can get a sense of what the current relevant and significant works are in your area. Look for review essays in journals and bibliographic essays in books that may deal with your topic. Search online for bibliographies. Often you may find bibliographic and reading lists that have been compiled in your field on academic web-pages. Eventually, you must settle on at least six books and two journal articles on which to base your historiographic essay, though you may refer to other works as well. Thus, your essay will be an analysis of these scholarly works.