



Good Practices from Mellon Library Partners, 2004-2005

Building Up to the History Research Paper

Environment: History 8B, Modern Latin America, is a large lecture class (~100 students) that includes weekly one hour discussion sections of about 20, led by graduate students. It is an introductory history class for majors and non-majors. The professor wanted to introduce students to primary sources, which, in many cases would be in either Spanish or Portuguese. Only about half the students were literate in either of those languages.

Impact: Working in groups and requiring a small number of sources helped students focus their efforts. Finding primary sources in some cases stimulated students' thinking about narrowing their topics, and helped them understand the virtue of secondary sources for background information. Not having to write the paper itself, but doing the research was a good warm-up for the later assignment of researching and writing a history paper by themselves.

By the end of the session, students were beginning to recognize primary sources from lists of citations. The evidence of learning came mostly in the *second* research paper assignment, later in the semester, where students were better able to develop narrow topic questions, and to find relevant sources with more facility than is usual for a lower division class.

Description: A major problem for new history students is to develop a historical question or thesis of a scale that can be addressed reasonably well in a short paper. It is also difficult for students to understand the characteristics of primary and secondary sources, to find them, and to analyze them. In week 2, discussion sections were organized into groups, each of which included a student who could read Spanish or Portuguese. Each of the six discussion sections attended a 50-minute research seminar in a Moffitt classroom in which we discussed primary sources, where they come from, and how to find them. I demonstrated strategies for using Pathfinder and Historical Abstracts to find primary and secondary sources, and left 20 minutes for students to work on their own research topics in their groups. In week 4, students were required to find 3-5 primary sources and at least 2 secondary sources on one topic (from a list of nine possible topics). In week six, each group turned in an annotated bibliography summarizing each of their sources, and a research question that could serve as the basis of a short paper using the sources collected.

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Assignment 1. Group Research Project: Annotated Bibliography of Primary Sources

Your GSI will place you in teams. A team of three-four students, at least one of whom is literate in Spanish, will work together. Each of you will be primarily responsible for one piece of the project (one for finding sources, another for presenting them, a third for writing up the bibliography, for example), and you will all be given the same grade.

Together you will choose a caudillo or social conflict in Latin America in the 19th century and find 3-5 primary sources about it. You will jointly read and analyze each source, and find out something about the person or organization that created it.

You will then search for at least 2 secondary sources discussing the conflict. How do they interpret this conflict? What do they consider the major issues? How do your sources confirm or complicate their arguments?

You will create an annotated bibliography listing the sources and what you have learned about them, using the Chicago Manual of Style. You'll distill what your documents tell you about the nature of the conflict: who was involved, why they became involved, what the key issues were, who supported which side, and what its ultimate significance was. Finally you will use what you have learned to write a thesis statement that could be used as the basis of a research paper on the event.

Learning goals:

- Understand the uses and virtues of different kinds of primary sources
- Learn to find primary sources
- Use correct bibliographic citation style
- Extract meaning from primary sources, placing the source in the context of the event
- Be able to develop a thesis statement of reasonable scope for a short research paper
- Get background information from specialized reference sources in order to choose an interesting topic