

HSHM235/HIST234: Guidelines for the Course Paper

Dear All,

Since the date for submission of the course paper is approaching, I am writing to provide you with some guidance on this assignment. In some ways the task resembles that of a reading response. Once again, we are NOT looking for a book report or an outline of your personal reactions to the work. We are hoping instead that you will use the book as a point of departure to make a significant historical argument. In addition, just as with the reading responses, you should pay careful attention to matters of style, organization, and format as well as to substance. In arriving at a mark, we will give approximately equal weight to substance and presentation. Once again, just as for a reading response, this is not a research paper but is expected to be based on the single book you have selected.

In terms of substance, one way to approach the assignment is to begin with the somewhat bland default question that could apply to any of the books on the list. That question is simply, “What can the historian of medicine learn from reading this particular work?” Although not very imaginative, that question at least guarantees that you are starting off in the right direction, and that you have the right set of issues in mind.

Having considered that generic question, however, you should then be in a position to take the assignment one step further. Having decided what a historian of medicine can learn from the book, you will be in a good position to focus on the main point that seems most important and interesting. In other words, having considered all the major lessons that could be derived from the book for medical history, you should decide which lesson is most important and you should focus the essay on that. For example, having read Novel X that tells you all about tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, you might decide that in answer to the generic question it would be possible to write an essay assessing what the novel tells us about the social construction of tuberculosis before the germ theory of disease. Then, going one step further, you might limit the topic further by deciding to write on the fact that Novel X demonstrates that consumption in the nineteenth century was a major factor in the development of new ideals of female beauty stressing pallor, emaciation, and spirituality. You could then devise an interesting and well targeted title. (Obviously the example of Novel X is pure invention, and its purpose is just to give you an idea of how to go about the assignment and come up with a title.) The next step is to present your title to your TA to make certain that it is in fact appropriate for our course.

Having decided on a title and a central argument, you would then support your case by using specific information, citations, and details from the novel or the work of history. In our invented example, for instance, you could discuss the meaning of the plot, the heroine, the attitudes of other protagonists towards her, and the metaphors the author deployed that confirm your argument. If you had done a little bit of additional reading on the author, you might also say that the author had a lifelong interest in tuberculosis because he or she was in fact a consumptive who had spent long years in a sanatorium. In the course of this essay you would have numerous references to the text; a few apt

quotations; and a number of citations. As in all historical essays, you will want to be certain that you build your paper around a central thesis, and that the paper comes to a clear conclusion.

I hope that I have not confused you. You should discuss the essays further in section, and you should have your essay title approved by your teaching assistant. A good reference work for the correct scholarly conventions is the Chicago Manual of Style, which is also available online.