

**History 9805**  
**Writing History**

Fall Term

Wednesdays 12:30 pm – 3:30 pm, Lawson Hall 2270C

**Professor Rob MacDougall**

Office: Lawson Hall 2228

Office Hours: **Thurs, 10am-noon**. I am in my office a lot, and you are always welcome to drop in. However, I will try to make a point of being in my office on Thursday mornings.

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### Course Description

This is a graduate course about the **writing** of history—the actual art and craft of writing historical nonfiction. It is not a seminar on research methods, historiography, or any particular subfield of history. It is a weekly writing workshop, in which we will all give and get criticism, working together to improve our writing skills.

The work of the course consists of **weekly writing assignments** that we will share and critique in class, paying attention not only to questions of evidence and argument but also to issues like voice, pace, storytelling, and style. We will also read advice on academic and other writing, along with samples of effective prose. The purpose of the readings is to suggest strategies and techniques that we can apply to our own work, and to help us each think about how and maybe even why we want to write about the past.

### Readings

There is one required book for this course, which will be available at the Campus Bookstore:

Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Other readings will be made available in PDF format or on reserve.

### Assignments and Evaluation

There will be a **short writing assignment** (usually 300-600 words, but sometimes longer) **every week**. Each week we will all read and discuss a small set of the assignments submitted. On weeks 5, 9, and 13, you will hand in a revised (and usually expanded) version of one of the previous 3 weekly assignments. All assignments will be read, and all count, but only the three revisions will receive numeric grades.

Course grades will be calculated as follows:

- 20% Weekly writing assignments (due every week; you may miss one without penalty)
- 20% Revision #1 (due week 4; a revised version of assignment from week 1, 2, or 3)
- 20% Revision #2 (due week 9; a revised version of assignment from week 5, 6, 7, or 8)
- 20% Revision #3 (due week 13; a revised version of assignment from week 10, 11, and 12)
- 20% Participation and feedback on other students' work (every week)

## Schedule

This schedule remains subject to change.

### **Week 1      September 14      Welcome to the Course**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 1-2.  
 Jill Lepore, "How To Write a Paper for This Class"  
 Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style*, pp. 11-26.

Short excerpts from three pieces of historical writing I admire: Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*; Jonathan Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*; George Packer, *The Unwinding*.

**Write:** What is a work of historical writing (a book, an article, a chapter, whatever) that you particularly admire, or wish you had written? What do you admire about the writing? How or why does it work for you? Write a piece of 300-600 words on this topic and email it to me by Sunday, Sept. 18.

### **Week 2      September 21      Writing as Practice**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapter 3.  
 Barbara Tuchman, "In Search of History," in *Practicing History*, pp. 13-24.  
 Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, pp. 3-8, 32-48.  
 Paul Silvia, *How To Write A Lot*, pp. 3-47.

Examples of my own freewriting and writing logs.

**Write:** What is something (ideally non-academic) that you know a lot about? Identify a controversy, issue, problem, or unanswered question in that area. What do different people think about this issue? And what do you think? Write a piece of 300-600 words laying out the issue and email it to me by Sunday, Sept. 25.

### **Week 3      September 28      Writing to be Read**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 4-7 and Chapter 16.  
 Patrick Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD*, pp. 11-17.

Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin"

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past"

Francois Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery"

**Write:** Re-read one of the sample articles (Darnton, Hall, or Furstenberg) and underline or highlight all the instances you can find of explicit metalanguage, both textual and paratextual. (What this means is explained in Hayot, Chapter 16, and will be discussed in class.) Read through again and underline or highlight all the instances of implicit metalanguage you can find. Then write a 300-600 word precis or summary of the article, capturing its argument with as much accuracy and precision as you can. Email this to me by Sunday, Oct. 2.

**Week 4      October 5      Framing an Argument**

**Read:** Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say / I Say*, pp. 1-29, 55-67.  
Patrick Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD*, pp. 18-42.

Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin" (again)

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" (again)

Francois Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery" (again)

**Write:** Submit a revised and polished version of your assignment from Week 1, 2, or 3. Email this to me by Sunday, Oct. 9.

**Week 5      October 12      Introductions and Conclusions**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 11-12, 17-18.

John R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, pp. 1-11.

Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, pp. 3-12.

George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 1-29.

We will also look at the Darnton, Hall, and Furstenberg articles again.

**Write:** Write a 300-600 word introduction to a hypothetical or imaginary seminar paper or article on some historical topic. Think about *engaging* the reader, *locating* your paper in historiographical context, and *teaching* your reader what they need to know. End your introduction with a clear statement of your hypothetical thesis or argument. Email your introduction to me by Sunday, Oct. 16.

**Week 6      October 19      Using Evidence**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 15, 19, 21, 23.  
 Barbara Tuchman, "History by the Ounce," in *Practicing History*, pp. 33-44.

Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, pp. 19-30.  
 Jonathan Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*, pp. 1-17.  
 Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin" (again)

**Write:** Write a 300-600 word piece that makes an argument and supports that argument with historical evidence and examples. Email this to me by Sunday, Oct. 23.

**Week 7      October 26      Engaging Counterarguments**

**Read:** Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say / I Say*, pp. 68-101.

Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"  
 Naomi Lamoreaux, "Rethinking the Transition to Capitalism in the Early American Northeast"  
 Francois Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery" (again)

**Write:** Write a 300-600 word piece that engages a counterargument to your argument. Email this to me by Sunday, Oct. 30.

**Week 8      November 2      Telling Stories**

**Read:** Stephen Pyne, *Voice & Vision*, pp. 204-217.  
 James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories"

Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, pp. 73-83.  
 Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map*, pp. 25-55.  
 Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland*, pp. 254-273.

**Write:** Write a 300-600 word narrative account of a historical event. Email this to me by Sunday, Nov. 6.

**Week 9      November 9      Teaching With Words**

**Read:** Stephen Pyne, *Voice & Vision*, pp. 250-267.

Amy Reading, *The Mark Inside*, pp. 5-23.  
 Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, pp. 177-200.  
 Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map*, pp. 25-55. (again)

**Write:** Write a 300-600 word piece in which some specialized knowledge—information not likely common to the reader—is essential to understanding. Make an argument, tell a story, or describe an event, moment, or idea. Email this to me by Sunday, Nov. 13.

**Week 10      November 16      Rewriting: Strategy and Structure**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 8-10.  
Stephen Pyne, *Voice & Vision*, pp. 218-236.

Robert MacDougall, “Sympathetic Physics: The Keely Motor versus the Laws of Thermodynamics” (multiple drafts)

**Write:** Submit a revised and polished version of your assignment from Week 5, 6, 7, or 8. Email this to me by Sunday, Nov. 20.

**Week 11      November 23      Rewriting: Paragraphs**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 13-14.

Robert MacDougall, “Sympathetic Physics: The Keely Motor versus the Laws of Thermodynamics” (again)

**Write:** Take a piece of historical writing you have done and still find interesting—it could be from this class but a longer piece from another course would be ideal. If the piece is longer than 1500 words, pull out a section of 500-1500 words. Rewrite the section paying careful attention to the principles of structure and paragraphing discussed in your readings and in class. Email the revised section to me by Sunday, Nov. 27.

**Week 12      November 30      Rewriting: Sentences and Words**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 29-31.  
Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, pp. 17-43.  
Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools*, pp. 11-56.

Selected sentences from previous readings.

**Write:** Take the piece you submitted last week. Rewrite it again, paying careful attention to your sentences, and all the ideas about sentence structure and rhythm discussed in your readings and in class. Email the revised section to me by Sunday, Dec. 4.

**Week 13      December 7      Being a Writer**

**Read:** Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 32-34.  
Stephen Pyne, *Voice & Vision*, pp. 277-300.  
Gregory Semenza, *Graduate Study for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp. 214-237.

**Write:** Submit a revised and polished version of your assignment from Week 11 and 12. Email this to me by Sunday, Dec. 11.