Some suggestions for finding and researching final paper topics

The final paper in History 1318 is a research paper on a topic of your choice related to the themes of the course (from any time-place context). It must include some discussion of the role material bibliography of a primary source (i.e. the significance of the physical form of a text) and address the relevant historical and historiographical contexts (i.e. this is a history paper). One form for the paper would be to focus on a primary source (a manuscript, rare or modern book) and analyze the text and the material forms of the text in historical context; this kind of paper would also need to introduce some historiographical elements, while keeping its emphasis on primary source analysis. Another form would be historiographical, to study the secondary literature on a question (e.g. authorship, readership, censorship…); this kind of paper would have to include at least one primary source as an example in discussing the historiography of the question.

Whatever your choice, please consult with your instructors—a written statement of your final paper topic is due in class on Monday April 3. We urge you to start working on your final paper already now. **Research takes a lot of time!** If you’re interested in a topic that comes later in the syllabus, reading the syllabus assignments now can be an efficient way to start (i.e. work saved for later too).

**Stage One: casting around for a good topic for you**
Once you have selected an area of interest, the best way to identify a more specific topic is to consult your instructors and to read and browse in a few synthetic secondary sources or reference books. Your goal is to gain a general understanding of the issues relevant to your area of interest and a general background in the relevant history and historiography and to follow up on the footnotes and references that seem useful and interesting to you until you find a specific primary source and a historiographical question on which there is a secondary literature on which you are interested in focusing.

**How to find primary and secondary sources on a topic of interest:**
- start with the course assignments. Be attentive while doing assigned readings or readings on your own to references in the footnotes or in the bibliography. Look beyond the assigned parts of books, in case these are of interest.
- consult a good reference book or specialized textbook: see the extensive resources guide made for this course, available from the course website. Browse these (or other similar) books for sections of interest, for bibliographical essays; these should give you a sense of whether you want to look further in this area; often there are no footnotes, but a guide to further reading--follow up these references. Reference books should be located using HOLLIS like any other books: some are shelved in reference rooms, others in the regular stacks (they may or may not circulate).
- search for a book on a topic of interest, using HOLLIS. Use keyword and subject searches. Since the results will often by VERY large, learn to use "expanded search," limiting a search by language, by library (Lamont will give you more introductory books on a large subject), by date (for this Stage One, you can often focus on secondary sources published since, say, 1980). Be on the look-out for authors whose names you recognize from the footnotes in the assigned reading and in reference book bibliographies--these will tend to be the most respected scholars in a field. You can find good subject headings by looking at the subject heading of a book you know and like and then entering that heading in a general search to get more books on the same topic.
- browse the library stacks in a specific area: HOLLIS gives you a call number within the Harvard libraries--you then go to the shelf and find the book. Once you are in the stacks browsing the shelves is a special pleasure which can also be very rewarding.
- consult your instructors in office hours during the next two weeks to make sure your topic is viable and promising before going further with it. For your topic to be viable there must a reasonable body of sources available at Harvard in a language you can read. Some topics are unmanageably large and need to be
narrowed; others may need to be broadened.

**-start early to allow for changes:** topic selection is one of the hardest parts of research—you may be disappointed with what you find in following a certain path and want to start over again. As long as you have allowed plenty of time, this is fine. The work invested in topic selection and paths not followed through is never wasted—it is part of your reading and learning experience and you never know when it will come in handy in discussing or writing about another issue in this course, or elsewhere.

**Stage Two: researching your selected topic**

Once you have identified your topic, you will need to gain a good grasp of the relevant history and at the same time draw up a comprehensive (not necessarily exhaustive) bibliography of secondary sources which you will read and analyze in your paper.

-search for articles on your topic using bibliographical databases, notably on **e-resources**. DO NOT rely exclusively on JSTOR which yields an arbitrary set of results, based on the access decisions of different journals. To search systematically, use field-specific databases like Historical Abstracts (Europe since 1450) and History of Science or MLA databases; see the resources guide for more ideas. There is no database specific to the history of the book on e-resources, but the SHARP website has many useful links. These databases will give you references to books and above all articles—articles tend to be more specialized and will never appear directly in HOLLIS which is a catalog of books and journals. Some databases will provide an abstract, some will provide full text; most will offer just a reference to the article. To pursue a reference of interest, you search for the journal title in HOLLIS, get the call number in the Harvard system and go to the shelf to read/copy the article. In the rather unlikely event that the journal is not in the Harvard libraries (try alternate modes of searching before reaching this conclusion!) you can order a copy through Interlibrary Loan Request—but this takes time (ca. 2 weeks to get the article).

**-take good notes**, including the full bibliographical reference and page number of anything you record in your notes. Double check quotations you record for accuracy! At this stage you can't predict which quotations and references you will want to include (and therefore footnote) in your paper. Think about using a note-taking database program.

**-stick with it!** You may experience second thoughts about your choice of topic once you are involved in researching and writing the paper; but if you have proceeded carefully through the process of topic selection you should feel confident that you did the best you could. Your topic may not always feel perfect but it is much better to stick with a topic you have selected carefully and already worked on rather than casting about at the last minute for a new one.

**Resources:**

-in addition to the resources guide on the course website, consult a reference librarian if you are having problems. Barbara Burg is the designated Reference Librarian for History in Widener—she's terrific! She is delighted to meet with students individually and to respond to emails asking for help in identifying relevant resources on a particular topic (e.g. a time-place context with which your instructors are not very familiar). She will not do your research for you—she will offer suggestions of leads to pursue. Her email is bburg@fas

-Use the libraries wisely: recall books; put traces on books that should be on the shelf but aren't; use ILL. Conversely, return books on time when recalled; share books and information with others in the class. I recommend using group emails to ask if someone else in the class might have checked out a book you need on short notice, and to respond to such requests. We will draw up a list of topics that your are all working on (after April 3), to facilitate sharing of resources and ideas.

-consult your instructors soon—Amy and I want to hear from you and can help at every stage: offering good points of departure for your research, further ways to develop a topic etc. We look forward to hearing from you before the April 3 deadline!