



Center for Writing and Speaking

F NO. 12 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Historiographical Essays

Historiography is the study of how history is written. No single scholar's approach is "correct" or unimpeachable, because no matter how much he or she tries to treat the subject at hand in a fair and unbiased manner, the final product is invariably shaped by political agendas and pressures, contemporary trends in academia, limitations of resources, and the inherent subjectivity of critical analysis. This is why two historians can look at the same sources and come up with radically different conclusions regarding their significance and what they tell us about a subject. Because the way in which history is remembered and taught can legitimate, debunk, or otherwise influence current ideological agendas, it's our job to evaluate how well professional historians conceptualize their research, analyze their sources, and present the information to the scholarly community or the "popular" audience. A historiographical essay is one which summarizes and analyzes historians' changing arguments and interpretations of a historical topic.

Example:

Perspective 1 (Carol F. Karlsen): The Salem witch trials were primarily an attack on the community's most economically powerful women.

Perspective 2 (Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum): Gender was inconsequential in the genesis of the witch trials; rather, they were a result of an eruption of long-bubbling tensions between the leading families of Salem Town (who were merchants) and those of Salem Village (who were farmers).

Some questions to ask:

- What kind of history does each historian embrace? Social? Cultural? Economic? Political? Revisionist? Postmodern? Marxist? Materialist? Metahistorical? The answer is usually a combination of categories like these.
- How has the study or interpretation of this particular topic been influenced by recent developments in historical study or thinking? Is the approach teleological - that is, does it unfairly use the benefit of hindsight?
- What is each historian's main argument? Which historian's view is more convincing, and why?
- What are the two historians' most significant areas of agreement and disagreement? What are the bigger questions that they collectively address? What are the primary strengths and weaknesses of each historian's approach and analysis?
- What sources does each historian use to prove his or her argument? Are they adequate? Creatively used?
- Are there gaps in logic or curious omissions?
- What, if any, agendas seem to be influencing the study? Look in the acknowledgements and see who funded it!

Other guidelines:

- Don't just summarize the historians' analyses – delve beneath the surface!
- Support your critiques of the readings with specific evidence
- Consider the strengths and weakness of each piece, but also make an argument about what you think of the topic under consideration given these strengths and weaknesses.

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