

History 301.02: [Writing the] History of Environmental Disasters

Fall 2021

Class Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:30 am-12:50 pm; SBS S328

Instructor: Chris Sellers, N-301A, SBS Bldg., History Dept.

Office Hours: 1-2 pm, 4-4:30 pm Tuesdays and Thursdays or by appointment

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HIS 301 is a writing intensive course for junior History majors and minors, intended to prepare you for the 400-level research seminar. In this course we will be thinking, reading, and (especially) writing about the history of environmental disasters, with a twentieth- and twenty-first century focus. We'll look at a variety of disasters—industrial and “natural,” fast and slow. While we will concentrate on more on those in the U.S., we'll also include examples from Europe and Asia in the mix.

At the same time, we'll also be learning how to research and write history. You'll become acquainted with how to find secondary and primary sources, also how to begin interpreting your evidence and culling and crafting it into an historical narrative, an argument about changes over time. We'll spend lots of time on writing, from the basics of outlining, organizing, and referencing to weaving the building blocks of a historical argument. Your semester's work will include many building-block assignments, in-class as well as for homework, a book review, and a shortish (5 pp.) paper on a disaster, or type of disaster, of your own choosing.

Course Objectives:

- 1). Learning to analyze environmental disasters and ask historical questions about them.
- 2). Source analysis: Learning to interpret and critique primary and secondary sources.
- 3). Writing and argumentation: Becoming proficient in the standards of writing in the field of history.
- 4). Historical research methods: Establishing competency in library- and/or archival-based research.
- 5). Learning to compose historical narratives and arguments about environmental disasters.

The course aims to devote equal attention to the three skill sets mentioned in 2)-4). The overall objective is to prepare students for the 401 capstone seminar.

Requirements:

- 1) Class attendance and other participation, (20%) including in-class and group exercises (all of which require completing the assigned readings in advance of every class). If you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed. I strongly suggest you find a fellow classmate to be your back up should you miss a class. Detailed instructions for these assignments will be given to you in class and via the BB site.
- 2) Book Review (3 pages) (20% of grade). This paper will be typed, double spaced and with formal citations, and based on the book *Plutopia*, which we will read together. You will receive instructions for this essay early in the semester; it is due September 28.

- 3) 12x Homework Exercises (36% of grade, evenly divided between them; see schedule for assignments and due dates).
- a. #1: Self-Assessment
 - b. #2: Analyzing the Structure of a Historical Essay
 - c. #3: Questionnaire
 - d. #4: Set up Google Drive folders
 - e. #5: Proposal and Questions; 2x secondary sources
 - f. #6: Choose and analyze primary source
 - g. #7: Revised Paper Proposal with secondary and primary sources
 - h. #8: Detailed outline
 - i. #9: First 3 paragraphs
 - j. #10: Final Draft
 - k. #11: Review of classmate's paper
 - l. #12: Assessment of Google Drive folders
- 4) Final 5-page paper (24%). This paper (typed, double spaced and with formal citations) will be based on a disaster or type of disaster you will select, using primary as well as secondary sources that you will gather. Your final draft is due by December 2. You will be given detailed instructions for this essay later in the semester.

Required Course Books:

Richard Marius and Melvin Page, *A Short Guide to Writing about History* 9th Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2012)

Kate Brown, *Plutopia; Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York: Oxford, 2013)

Both are available in the online campus bookstore.

All the other required readings will be posted on our course Blackboard site.

Critical Incident Management: Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. **Until/unless the latest COVID guidance is explicitly amended by SBU, during Fall 2021 "disruptive behavior" will include refusal to wear a mask during classes.** For the latest COVID guidance, please refer to: <https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/strongertogether/latest.php>

Classroom Etiquette:

To avoid disturbing your fellow students, please turn off your cell phone during class and refrain from talking to each other. Also, while airing differences of opinion is welcome, students are expected to treat each other and their instructors with respect.

Using Blackboard:

I'll be posting much material for this course, from day-to-day announcements to samples of course papers, on the class Blackboard sites. Here's how to get access to our class's on-line Blackboard site:

You can access class information on-line at: <http://blackboard.sunysb.edu> If you used Blackboard during

the Fall semester, your login information (Username and Password) has not changed. If you have never used Stony Brook's Blackboard system, your initial password is your SOLAR ID# and your username is the same as your Stony Brook (sparky) username, which is generally your first initial and the first 7 letters of your last name. For help or more information see:

<http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/helpdesk/docs/blackboard/bbstudent.php> For problems logging in, go to the helpdesk in the Main Library SINC Site or the Union SINC Site, you can also call: 631-632-9602 or e-mail: helpme@ic.sunysb.edu

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses and will be treated as such in this course. In recent years, the incidence of plagiarism seems to have increased on this campus and others around the country. At the end of your syllabus is a statement drafted by Stony Brook's Academic Judiciary Committee to help educate students about the definition of plagiarism. Please read the attached statement on plagiarism. Note that the first offense of plagiarism, even if unintentional, may result in a failing grade for the course, and possibly worse. If you are in doubt, consult the instructor before submitting "doubtful" work.

Students with Disabilities:

If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services at (631) 632-6748 or <http://studentaffairs.stonybrook.edu/dss/>. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and Disability Support Services. For procedures and information go to the following website: <http://www.sunysb.edu/ehs/fire/disabilities.shtml>

OUTLINE OF COURSE TOPICS AND READINGS

Readings available on our Blackboard site are marked BB below

August 24—Introduction and First Exercises

What are environmental disasters? How may we study and write their history?

August 26—Thinking and Writing Historically: A Preview

Marius and Page, Chapter 1, "Writing and History," 1-20

Blackboard:

- Wineburg. "Thinking Like a Historian" (3 pp.)
- American Historical Association, "The History Disciplinary Core" (2 pp.)

Homework #1: Self-Assessment—Background and Experience with History Writing

August 31: Time, Social Analysis, and Disaster History: Superstorm Sandy

Blackboard:

- Superstorm Research Lab, "A Tale of Two Sandys" (2013), 17 pp.
- Christopher Sellers, "Storms Hit Poor People Harder, from Superstorm Sandy to Hurricane Maria," *The Conversation* (November 11, 2017) (4 pp.)

<https://theconversation.com/storms-hit-poorer-people-harder-from-superstorm-sandy-to-hurricane-maria-87658>

- “Mapping Sandy’s Inequalities,” [project of History 401, fall 2017] on website “Stories of Environmental Danger and Disaster” (2017)
<https://inequality.studies.stonybrook.edu/wordpress/mapping-sandys-inequalities/>
- Trotter and Fernandez, “Hurricane Katrina: Urban History from the Eye of the Storm,” *Journal of Urban History* 35(7)(July 2009):607-13 (read first four pages closely; skim rest)

Part One: Into the Secondary Literature:

September 2: Environmental Disasters: Natural, Social, or Industrial?

Marius and Page, 26-43

Blackboard:

- Rob Nixon, “Slow Violence,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 26, 2011) (6 pp.)
- Smith, “There’s No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,” *Understanding Katrina; Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (2006) (7 pp.)
- Youtube video: United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction; “There’s No Such Thing as a ‘Natural’ Disaster” (2021; 1 minute)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSYUg7F2MsI>
- Chris Sellers and Jo Melling, “Introduction; From Dangerous Trades to Trade in Dangers,” *Dangerous Trade: Histories of Industrial Hazards across a Globalizing World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 1-16

Homework #2: Analyzing the Structure of a Historical Essay

September 7—Historical Approaches to Environmental Disaster: Short Examples

Marius and Page, 99-107

- Ted Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape,” from *Acts of God* (20 pp.)
- Myrna Santiago, “Work, Home and Natural Environments: Health and Safety in the Mexican Oil Industry, 1900-1938,” from *Dangerous Trade* (9 pp.)
- Cameron Burd, “How to Plan a Disaster: Politics, Nature, and Hurricane Katrina [Extended Review of Andrew Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (2020)],” *Reviews in American History* 49(2)(June 2021): 304-09.

Come to class ready to discuss how the different modes of historical writing discussed in Marius and Page apply to these essays.

September 9—A History of Nuclear Disasters I

Brown, *Plutopia*, Chapters 1-11

In class: team 1 will lead discussion of their questions and examples

September 14—A History of Nuclear Disasters II

Brown, *Plutopia*, Chapters 12-20

In class: team 2 will lead discussion of their questions and examples

September 16—A History of Nuclear Disasters III

Brown, *Plutopia*, Chapters 21-33

In class: team 3 will lead discussion of their questions and examples

September 21—A History of Nuclear Disasters IV
Brown, *Plutopia*, Chapters 34-43

In class: team 4 will lead discussion of their questions and examples

Part 2: Setting Your Topic; Searching for Sources

September 23— Getting Ready to Research

Marius and Page, 48-66.

Introducing databases and other research tools for disaster history; looking up a potential topic for your research

Homework #3--Questionnaire on potential research paper topic

September 28—Secondary Research and Note-taking

Marius and Page, 75-85

Come to class ready to discuss your own approach to note-taking.

In-class exercises: continuing secondary research on potential topics; storing and notetaking

Book Review due September 28

October 5— Analyzing Primary Sources

Marius and Page, 43-47; 124-33

Introducing Primary Sources

In-Class Exercises: Secondary as well primary source searching

Homework #4: Set up Google Drive folders to collect sources and notes

October 7—Library Visit

Meet with Chris Filstrup for introduction to using the library for history research.

October 12—Fall Break

October 14—Formulating Your Research Questions

Be ready to workshop your topics and questions in class discussion

Homework #5: Paragraph Proposal of Topic and Questions, Two Secondary Sources, annotated

October 21—Analyzing Primary Sources for Environmental Disaster History

Blackboard:

“How Do Historians Use Newspapers?” and “Questions To Ask” at

<https://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/newsmain.html>

Sloan, “Oral History and Hurricane Katrina,” *Oral History Review* 35(2)(2008): 176-86

“Making Sense of Oral History; How Do Historians Use It?” at

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/how.html>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Historical Hurricane Tracks,”

<https://coast.noaa.gov/hurricanes/#map=4/32/-80>

Homework #6: Pick a primary source you have found and analyze by answering assigned questions.

October 23—Analyzing Primary Sources #2—Examples

Source analysis of newspaper article, oral history, and scientific study TBA, dependent on student choices of projects

October 28—Citing Sources; Organizing

Marius and Page, 86-96; 133-42

Homework #7: Revised Paper Proposal with secondary sources and some primary sources, cited properly using Chicago style, the historian's gold standard

Part 3: Writing Up Your Research

November 2—

No class meeting; individual meetings on research paper proposals
Gathering further primary and secondary sources and taking notes.

November 4—Honing Grammar and Writerly Skills

Marius and Page, 107-23

Homework #8: Detailed Outline of Research Paper

November 9—How do I cite, again?

Marius and Page, 124-42

Homework #9: First 3 paragraphs of your research paper due.

November 11—Class Presentations, Round 1

[5 Minute Presentation (Can use PowerPoint/5 Minutes for Questions)]

November 16—Class Presentations, Round 2

Homework #10: Final Draft of your paper due; copies for professor and your partner
First 8 paragraphs due

November 23—Workshopping drafts in-class

Homework #11—Review of your classmate's paper

November 25—Thanksgiving

November 30—Individual meetings with professor.

Homework #12—Your Google drive folders need to be ready for assessment

December 2— **Final essays due**; wrap-up discussion and celebration; students' choice of disaster film!