

Faculty Information Literacy Stipend Final Report

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Course: WRTR 2306: Honors Humanities Seminar II

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Introduction

My main goal in creating this assignment was my concern over my post-pandemic students' research skills. While in the past I had run only one research-based assignment in this course (the final argumentative Research Paper), since the pandemic I had found my students struggling badly with research requirements which students in previous years had found much easier.

Among the crucial goals of WRTR 2306 is for students to acquire university-level research skills and information literacy, enabling them to do effective work in their future courses, and in any onward academic or professional contexts that require them (which for university graduates is virtually all of them). The key idea of this assignment was to get students to develop basic and necessary research skills independently of the analytical and interpretive demands of the course. The previous assignment required them to learn the research skills *and* do sophisticated analytical work at the same time, and this double task was proving simply too difficult.

Description of the information literacy assignment or activities

In this assignment, I required the students to choose an important historical journey performed by a real person in the past, and then plan how they would re-create that journey themselves. The planning would necessarily involve a wide range of research. To complete the assignment requirements, students needed to find and use a range of academic and non-academic resources.

I wanted the research task in this assignment to feel real and meaningful to the students, and the idea is that planning a trip would be a concrete, meaningful activity to them, in a way that (say) analyzing the meaning of a text might not. I have included the full assignment below in the Appendix section.

Method of assessment

On the whole, students did do well at this assignment. Without the added pressure of detailed textual analysis and interpretation (which they did later in their final assignment) they were able to focus just on defining a (simple) research question, and on finding and evaluating sources. Grades were mostly high, and most students did seem satisfied with their learning. All students succeeded in producing research reports that outlined the purposes and procedures of their imagined journey. They even all succeeded in finding a historical map on which to plot their journey (a requirement that proved to be the most difficult component of the assignment).

Results and impact on student learning

The success of this assignment was demonstrated primarily in the results of the *subsequent* assignment: their final research paper. This final assignment, which students had struggled with badly in recent years, required them to combine research skills with sophisticated analytical skills in discussing an

ethical controversy of their choosing. Because students were coming into this final assignment with their research skills already in place, their analytical and interpretive engagement with texts was much better, because they were not trying to juggle too many new balls at the same time.

Summary and next steps

I plan to continue using this assignment, or a version of it, in future iterations of WRTR 2306. The main thing I will do differently is explicitly encourage students to cultivate an attitude of patience and persistence with research tasks. I found that students were very quick to give up on a search if it did not yield instant results (no doubt a consequence of the instant gratification that characterizes much of modern digital culture). Some of the assignment components (in particular the historical map) are specifically intended to be difficult, in order that students can begin to develop some rudiments of resourcefulness, and start to outgrow the deep infantilism that their parents, educators, and technology have inculcated. If I make it clear up-front that certain components of the assignment will be difficult, and are deliberately intended to force them into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable mode of determined persistence, then they may be better prepared for that part of the assignment.

Appendix

Research Assignment: The Journey

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” – L. P. Hartley

Both WRTR 2305 and 2306 are courses about finding and making meaning. There exists a very old tradition of attempting to find and/or make meaning through the device of the Journey. Travel forces you to encounter unfamiliar places, and people with beliefs and values that are different from your own, and if you’re doing it right, travel always involves learning new things. Unfortunately, we cannot go on a journey in this course, but we can do the next best thing – because planning a trip is half the fun, right?

In 1961, a young Oxford undergraduate named Tim Severin, along with two fellow adventurers, launched the Marco Polo Route Project. Equipped with two motorcycles, the three young men set out to recreate Marco Polo’s 13th-century journey from Venice to China, in an effort to investigate the accuracy of Polo’s much-doubted tales. Severin recorded their journey in his fascinating book *Tracking Marco Polo*, launching his multi-decade career as an author-adventurer, which he spent recreating important historical journeys.

In this assignment, you will pretend that you are going to recreate a historical journey. You will research this journey, to determine both its purpose and your plans for its execution, and you will submit a report of about 1000 words on this research. The main purpose of this assignment is to help you to become comfortable and familiar with a wide range of research resources.

So choose a journey you want to research – and don’t be afraid to be creative and ambitious! Marco Polo is only one of countless possibilities. You might consider:

- the route taken by a historical explorer
- a religious pilgrimage

- your ancestors' immigration experience (to the United States, or to somewhere else)
- a historical trade route
- a historical military campaign

Assignment Structure

This assignment is a report, not an argumentative essay – so you do not need a thesis statement. What you do need are the following **five** sections, each with its own subheading:

Introduction

In this section, you will identify the historical journey that you will be planning. Identify a **specific historical document** associated with your journey: this document is a **primary source**. For Tim Severin, Marco Polo's journal was the key primary source. Your primary source might be a journal or diary, letters, a painting, a poem, a guidebook, documentary film footage, a newspaper article (or series of articles), and so on. This section will comprise one paragraph in which you explain what the journey is, what your primary source is, and why this source is suitable and relevant.

Aims

Explain what it is that you hope to learn by going on this journey. Maybe the original journey's veracity is doubtful, and you are undertaking the trip *Mythbusters*-style to prove whether it was even possible. Maybe you are going on a pilgrimage in the hopes of having your own meaningful spiritual experience. Maybe you want to understand your own family history better. Maybe you want to compare a historical description of certain places with their modern appearance. There are lots of good reasons to go on a journey: make sure yours has a clear purpose.

Practical Planning

Present in one or two paragraphs an explanation of the documents and equipment that you will need for this trip. For instance, will you need Visas in order to be able to enter certain countries? Will you need letters of introduction or other special documents to be allowed to enter certain buildings or visit certain sites? Will you need to buy or rent a particular vehicle? Will you need plane, train, bus, or boat tickets? Will you need special clothing and equipment (e.g. mountain-climbing equipment, scuba gear, pack mule, traditional pilgrim garb)?

N.B. You do not need to make a budget, because that would make the assignment too burdensome. But you do need to explain some of the practical requirements for the trip and how you might meet them. For the sake of the exercise, you can assume or imagine that you have substantial funds, if the journey would be impossible without them.

Map

Whoever heard of a successful journey without maps? In this section you will present a **historical map** from a relevant period and mark your route on it. Accompany this map with a brief explanation of where it comes from and why it is relevant to your journey.

Ethical Considerations

In doing this assignment, you are planning to walk out of your life and into somebody else's. What are the ethical implications of doing so? Might you be engaging in poverty tourism? Or cultural appropriation? Is there a danger that you might be trespassing on someone else's religious faith? Is it possible that you will find what you are looking for and simply fail to understand or recognize it? Are you at risk of disturbing or destroying historical evidence? Is it legal to go to the place you want to visit?

In this section of the assignment, briefly explain what the ethical questions, considerations, doubts, and challenges might be for this journey. You do not have to justify or excuse your journey: your task is simply to indicate that you are aware of these considerations and you understand what they are. (Coming up with counterarguments and justifications would go beyond the requirements of this assignment.). Make sure you are citing at least one source in this section.

Format and Citations

This report must be in MLA format, **including a Works Cited page**. Everything you need to know about correct MLA formatting can be found here:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/index.html

And here:

<https://guides.smu.edu/citations/MLA>

I specifically encourage you to check out the very helpful MLA Sample Paper:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_sample_paper.html

Research Requirements

The Works Cited page of this report must contain **at least eight sources** (yes, this includes the map).

Your cited sources must include:

- At least one primary source
- One historical map
- At least one peer-reviewed academic journal article
- At least one product description of something you will need to buy for the journey
- At least one source related to an ethical aspect of your journey

It is just possible that your historical map might be your primary source. If so that's fine, but make sure that you explain this in the Introduction section, and make sure that you still have at least eight sources in total.

Rubric

Here is what I am looking for in evaluating this assignment:

- You have identified a **specific historical journey** that has a **specific purpose** and is linked to a **specific primary source**
- You have cited **at least eight sources** and have met the **specific research requirements** listed above
- You have completed **all five sections** of the report
- You have done all of this in **clear, grammatical sentences**