

Women's Studies 532
A HISTORY OF THE (AMERICAN) BODY
 Spring 2006

Instructor: Judith A. Houck
 Office: 1426 Medical Sciences Center (263-6287)
 Email: jahouck@wisc.edu
 Office Hours: 9:30-11:30 Wednesday and by appointment.

Do bodies have a history? What do bodies mean? Are we our bodies? Who decides the value of a body? What are the consequences of having the "wrong" body?

Perhaps it all started with the nature-nurture debate. By dividing the living world into biology (flesh, blood, genes, hormones, germs) and culture (environment, politics, tradition, commerce, history), we have come to regard bodies as objects immune to historical forces. This course challenges this understanding of bodies. By focusing primarily on American bodies in the 19th and 20th centuries, this course demonstrates that human bodies have social and cultural histories. The lived experience and cultural meanings of human bodies are dependent on their social settings. Biology is surely not irrelevant to bodily experience. But the interpretation and valuation of biology—indeed what is considered biological—change over time. Within a larger three-unit framework (outlined below), this course will highlight the social values placed on different bodies and the changing social expectations bodies create. This course will pay particular attention to the following questions: How have cultural and social changes in American history influenced the meaning and experience of bodies? How have attempts to establish social status and difference focused on bodies? How has the social and economic value of bodies differed according to race, class, sex, and "fitness?" How has a focus on bodies individualized social problems?

COURSE READER

Available at History of Science office, 7143 Social Sciences
 (No refunds available for course readers)

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Participation:	20%
Historical Research Project:	20%
Midterm:	20%
Final:	20%
Historical Roots Paper:	20%

Participation:

Because the discussion of readings is a major component of this course, you will be graded on your preparation for and involvement in class. This approach asks that you engage fully with the material and explore your own beliefs about historical events and processes. I evaluate participation by how well you talk about your ideas, listen and respond to others' ideas, remain sensitive to the feelings of other class members, and take responsibility for moving class discussion forward. Expressing one's ideas and getting reactions from others can help you evaluate your own opinions and ultimately sharpen your thinking. Although I set the grading criteria, you assign your own participation grade daily (though I reserve the right to change them). Please note that the most valuable participation does not necessarily

come from the student who speaks most. Students who do not listen to their classmates, who do not make room for various viewpoints and speakers, will not earn the highest participation. (See Appendix I.)

As part of your participation grade, I expect you to complete reading guides before you come to class and turn them in at the end of the discussion. I will provide the reading guides the class session before they are due. These are to help you approach the reading, provide a starting point for class discussion, and guide your study before the exams. **You will be expected to turn in 8 of these**, but I urge you to do them every week. For days I do not provide reading guides, I have attached a few general guidelines (Appendix II) to help you think about the texts.

Examinations:

The midterm and the final will be take home essays. I will provide the questions on the midterm on March 6. **It will be due March 27.** I will provide the questions for the final on May 1. **It will be due at 5:05 PM on May 10.**

Grading criteria: See the exams.

Historical Research Project:

Although this course does not require a formal research paper, I would like you to get your hands dirty in the primary sources and learn to make an argument about the past. With these goals in mind, you will embark on a historical research project that examines the cultural gendering of bodies. To do this, first find a set of three documents from an era at least 30 years in the past that provides *advice* on the links between bodies and gender representation (performance, if you will.) **A list of these sources is due February 13.**

What kind of sources will work? As you are no doubt aware, there are cultural texts all around giving us advice about gender, so your choice of texts is really wide open. If you are stuck, look at the syllabus for ideas. There are all sorts of books written to young boys and young girls that would be great. Bride magazines are filled with messages about how women should use their bodies to signal “femininity.” What about “feminine hygiene” advertisements or make-up tips in *Seventeen* magazine? Editions of *Boy's Life* or *Sports Illustrated* could be useful as might be marriage manuals. You get the idea.

After you identify your sources (and after I approve them), use them to create an argument, a claim, about the relationship of bodies and gender in the past. The best papers will use course materials to provide some background to the paper's claims. The paper should be between five and seven pages. **Polished first drafts are due February 20.** I will turn the drafts over to your Writing Fellow for her comments. After you have received your draft back from your Fellow, you will meet with her to plan your revision. **Final drafts are due Wednesday, March 8.**

Grading Criteria: See Appendix III.

Historical Roots of Contemporary Issues Paper:

Over the course of the semester, be on the lookout for newspaper or magazine articles that address some aspect of the social and cultural importance of bodies, particularly as it has been presented on this syllabus. I suggest that you collect some that look especially interesting. Choose one article, and discuss how the history you have learned informs the current issue. Again, you must make an argument about the role of history. You could, for example, create a thesis about how the past helps explain the present or you could argue how the past can help guide the future. Or you could try something else as the issue and article suggest. But your paper must have a thesis and it must connect historical analysis with a current issue. (Aim for about five pages. Eight pages are too many. Three pages are too few.) **The polished first draft is due April 17.** I will turn the drafts over to your Writing Fellow for her comments. After

you have received your draft back from your Fellow, you will meet with her to plan your revision. **The final draft is due Wednesday, May 3.**

Grading Criteria: See Appendix III.

Writing Fellows:

To help with the writing assignments this semester, we have the opportunity to work with the Undergraduate Writing Fellow Program. The Writing Fellows are gifted undergraduates who have received special training to offer critical evaluation and helpful suggestions on your drafts. After you turn in your drafts, I will give them to the Fellows who will read and provide written comments. You will then meet with your Fellow to discuss the paper and strategies for the rewrite. These meetings are mandatory.

This is a terrific opportunity for several reasons. First, our work is always improved by input from others. While the Fellows have no special training in the *content* of the course, they are trained to help you develop a well-constructed and persuasive essay. Second, good writing comes through practice and rewriting. The two-draft policy provides a chance for both. Finally, it helps your grade. Many of you will be writing your first historical research paper for this class, and it can be surprisingly challenging. Getting two chances to get it right will improve the quality of your final product. Our Writing Fellows are Julie Curti (jmcurti@wisc.edu), Kathleen Kiefaber (kekiefaber@wisc.edu), and Amy Westmoreland (westmoreland@wisc.edu).

Late Paper Policy:

Assignments that are late, for whatever reason, will be docked 5 points per day unless I have granted prior approval. This applies to all final assignments, including the take-home exams. Assignments a week or more late will not be accepted.

Late drafts will be accepted only in extraordinary cases and only with my prior approval. If you do not turn in a draft, your final paper will be lowered by a minimum of 10 points. Do not assume that I will make an allowance in your case. Chances are good that I won't. Only a very few circumstances that result in late papers are completely unforeseeable. Use the phone.

GRADUATE STUDENT COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Graduate students will be required to attend a separate seminar, read five additional books, write two book reviews (both due by **March 31**), write a 10-12 page research paper (draft due **April 21**; final due **May 5**), and take the final.

Seminar Participation, 30%; Book Reviews, 10% each; Final, 20%; Research paper, 30%.

GRADING SCALE

93-100	A
88-92	AB
83-87	B
77-82	BC
70-76	C
59-69	D
0-58	F

If you have questions about a grade, speak first to the instructor (Houck). If the question is not resolved, speak with the Chair, Jane Collins or Mariamne Whatley, Associate Chair. They will attempt to resolve the issue informally and inform you of the Appeals Procedures if no resolution is reached informally.

I wish to include fully any students with special needs in this course. Please let me know if you need any special accommodations in the instruction or evaluation procedures in order to enable you to participate fully. The McBurney Center will provide useful assistance and documentation.

SCHEDULE

January 23	Biological Bodies
January 30	Sexed and Gendered Bodies
February 6	Racialized Bodies
February 13	Feminine Bodies (Bibliography due)
February 20	Masculine Bodies (First draft of historical research project due)
February 27	Sexual Bodies
March 6	Sexually Deviant Bodies
March 8	(Final draft of historical research project due)
March 20	Correctable Bodies? (ALICE DREGER VISIT)
March 27	Plastic Bodies (Midterm due)
April 3	Fit Bodies
April 10	Unfit Bodies
April 17	Disciplined Bodies (First draft of historical roots paper due)
April 24	Reproductive Bodies
May 1	Diseased Bodies
May 3	(Final draft of historical roots paper due)
May 10	(Final due, 5:05 PM)

SEXY BODIES

January 23 Biological Bodies

Bordo, Susan, and Monica Udvardy. "Body, The, " in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Ed. Maryanne Horowitz. Vol. 1. Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005. 230-238. 6 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale. University of Wisconsin - Madison. 17 January 2006

Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, "Creating Natural Distinctions," in *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 309-317.

January 30 Sexed and Gendered Bodies

Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London: 1889), 266-271.

Edward H. Clark, *Sex in Education, Or a Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), excerpts.

Anke Ehrhardt et al, "Fetal Androgens and Female Gender Identity in Early Treated Androgenital Syndrome," *Johns Hopkins Medical Journal* 122 (1968): 160-167.

J. Imperato-McGinley et al, "Androgens and the Evolution of Male Gender Identity Among Male Hermaphrodites..." *NEJM* 300, i (1979): 1233-37.

Responses to "Androgens and the Evolution of Male Gender" *NEJM* 301, ii (1979): 839-840.

Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes, Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," *Sciences*, March/April 1993, 20-25.

Responses to "Five Sexes," *Sciences*, July/August 1993, 3-4.

Susan Lawrence and Kae Bendixen, "His and Hers: Male and Female Anatomy in Anatomy Texts for U. S. Medical Students," *Soc. Sci. Med.* 35 (1992): 925-934.

February 6 Racialized Bodies

Joyce Chaplin "Natural Philosophy and an Early Racial Idiom in North America: Comparing English and Indian Bodies," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 229-252.

Samuel A. Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *DeBow's Review*, 1851.

Eileen Boris, "You Wouldn't Want One of 'Em Dancing With Your Wife: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II," *American Quarterly* 50 (1998): 77-108.

Jared Diamond, "Race Without Color," *Discover Magazine*, November 1994, 82-89.

February 13 Feminine Bodies

Mary Wood-Allen, *What a Young Girl Ought to Know* (Philadelphia: Vir Publishing Co., 1904), 171-187.

Mary Wood-Allen, *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (Philadelphia: Vir Publishing Co., 1904), 105-116.

William Howard Lee, *Confidential Chats With Girls* (New York: Edward J. Clode, 1911), 14-31.

Olive Richards Landers, "You and Your Looks," in *The Modern Handbook for Girls* (New York: Books Inc, 1933), 20-42.

Elana Levine, "Having a Female Body Doesn't Make You Feminine: Feminine Hygiene Advertising and 1970s Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* (2002): 36-47.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "Body Projects," in *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 97-137.

February 20 Masculine Bodies

William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects* (Buffalo, 1849), excerpts.
Bernarr MacFadden, *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood* (New York: Physical Culture Publishing Co., 1900), excerpts.

William A. McKeever, *Training the Boy* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 147-148, 160-162.

Michael S. Kimmel, "Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 33 (1994): 7-36.

Gail Bederman, "Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation and 'Civilization,'" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 170-215.

John F. Kasson, "Who Is the Perfect Man? Eugen Sandow and A New Standard for America," in *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and The Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 21-76.

February 27 Sexual Bodies

"A Trail for Rape in New York, 1793."

William A. Alcott, "Physical Laws of Marriage," in *The Physiology of Marriage* (Boston, 1866), 111-127.

George W. Corner, *Attaining Manhood: A Doctor Talks to Boys About Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 41-69.

"How to Get and Keep Boys Interested," in *On Becoming A Woman* (New York: Dell, 1959), 56-72.

Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman*, (1973), excerpts.

Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 93-104.

Jessamyn Neuhaus, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000): 447-473.

March 6 Sexually Deviant Bodies

J. Allen Gilbert, "Homosexuality and Its Treatment," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders* 52 (1920): 297-322

G. Frank Lydston, "The Race Problem in Its Relation to Sexual Vice and Crime," in *The Diseases of Society* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1904), 393-399.

Jennifer Terry, "Anxious Slippages Between 'Us' and 'Them': A Brief History of the Scientific Search for Homosexual Bodies." in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 129-169.

Nayan Shah, "Between 'Oriental Depravity' and 'Natural Degenerates': Spatial Borderlands and the Making of Ordinary Americans," 703-725.

BODY TYPES

March 20 Correctable Bodies?

- Alice Domurat Dreger, "Doubtful Sex: The Fate of the Hermaphrodite in Victorian Medicine," *Victorian Studies* (1998): 335-370.
- Alice Domurat Dreger, "The Limits of Individuality," in *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17-50.
- Alice Domurat Dreger, "'Ambiguous Sex' or Ambivalent Medicine," *Hastings Center Report*, May/June 1998, 24-35.
- Alice Dreger, "When Medicine Goes to Far in the Pursuit of Normalcy," *NYT* 28 July 1998.
- Alice Dreger, "Guilt Trips and the Art of Blaming Mom for Everything," *NYT* 3 November 1998.

March 27 Plastic Bodies

- Jill Fields, "'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930," *Journal of Women's History* (1999): 355-384.
- Elizabeth Haiken, "The Lifting of the Middle Class: Aging in Post-World War II America," in *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 131-174.
- David Serlin, "The Other Arms Race," in *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21-56.

April 3 Fit Bodies

- Martha Verbrugge, "Stronger in Body as Well as in Mind," in *Able-Bodied Womanhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 139-161.
- Harvey Green, "Living the Strenuous Life," in *Fit for American: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1986), 219-258.
- Carolyn Thomas de la Pena, "Designing the Electric Body: Sexuality, Masculinity and the Electric Belt in America, 1880-1920," *Journal of Design History* 14 (2001): 275-289.
- Margaret A. Lowe, "Fir for Academia: Gaining Pounds, Vigor, and Virtue," in *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 29-53.

April 10 Unfit Bodies

- Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), excerpts.
- Thurman B. Rice, *Racial Hygiene: A Practice Discussion of Eugenics and Race Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 93-97, 108-113.
- Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "The Cultural Work of American Freak Shows, 1835-1940," in *Extraordinary Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 55-80.
- R.A. R. Edwards, "Sound and Fury; or, Much Ado about Nothing? Cochlear Implants in Historical Perspective," *JAH* (2005): 892-920.

April 17 Disciplined Bodies

- Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record* (Chicago, 1894).
- Jane Mayer, "The Experiment," *The New Yorker*, July 11, 18, 2005, 60-71.
- Deborah Sontag, "Fierce Entanglements," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 November 2002, 52-57+.

April 24 Reproductive Bodies

- Wendy Kline, "'Marriage is Not Complete without Children': Positive Eugenics, 1930-1960," in *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 124-156, 189-195
- Rickie Solinger, "Race and 'Value': Black and White Illegitimate Babies, in the USA, 1945-

1965,” in *Women and Health in America*, 2^d ed., Judith Walzer Leavitt, ed. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 371-387.

Rayna Rapp, “The Disabled Fetal Imaginary,” in *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 129-164.

Katha Pollitt, “Fetal Rights, Women’s Wrongs,” in *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 169-186.

May 1 **Diseased Bodies**

Amy L. Fairchild and Eileen A. Tynan, “Policies of Containment: Immigration in the Era of AIDS,” *AJPH* 84 (1994): 2011-2022.

Emily Martin, “The Body at War: Medical Views of the Immune System,” in *Flexible Bodies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 49-63.

Susan Cahn, “Come Out, Come Out, Whatever You’ve Got! Or, Still Crazy After All These Years,” *Feminist Studies* 29 (2003).

Appendix I: How to Grade Your Participation

1) Attendance

If you show up on time and stay the whole class period, you earn full credit.

3 points

- If not, adjust accordingly.
- 2) Attention 2 points
 If you pay attention to the conversation, give yourself full credit.
 If you read a magazine, do a crossword puzzle, or take a nap,
 adjust accordingly.
- 3) Preparation 2 points
 If you read all the readings, give yourself full credit. If not, adjust
 accordingly.

4) Participation

Participation points gauge several aspects of course involvement. They reflect whether you have understood the basic issues, engaged with the material, volunteered your opinions, and listened to your classmates. Choose the category (and the point assignment) that best fits your situation.

Category A—no participation

0

did not participate in discussion

Category B—good participation

1

answered a question when directly asked
 volunteered an item for a board list

Category C—better participation

2

asked a question
 participated in small groups discussion
 voluntarily offered an interpretation of an event or reading
 voluntarily responded to a classmates comment
 voluntarily offered a summary of a reading

The discussion format is based upon the notion that students can and do learn from each other. To acknowledge this, **one extra discussion point will be assigned by your peers.** After every discussion, you will indicate which two people you believe contributed most valuably to discussion that day and explain why. Please note that this is not a reward for sheer quantity. Instead, perhaps someone asked one question that you made you rethink an issue. Perhaps somebody brought two disparate strains together in a way that enlivened discussion. So carefully consider which of your classmates helped you engage and analyze the material.

Spring 2006

Appendix II: Approaching Texts

As you read:

Decide whether the source is a primary source or a secondary source. (In general, a primary source is a text generated at the time of the event or issue or person discussed. A secondary source is a document that analyzes that event, issue, or person from a historical perspective. If the topic of discussion is tuberculosis in the early 19th century, primary sources might include medical literature, newspaper articles, journal entries, short stories, domestic health guides, and personal letters from the early 19th century. Secondary sources might include a historian's account of tuberculosis in the early 19th century that was written in the 20th century. There are cases where the differences are more fuzzy, but start from this rough distinction.

If the source is a primary source:

- a) Note the date. What else happened at the same time? Make sure you understand the chronology of the sources for any given topic.
- b) What perspective does it illuminate? Was it written by a middle-class woman facing childbirth? Was it written by a physician advising women how to cope with childbirth?
- c) What is the author's goal? Is she trying to persuade? Inform? Seduce? Scold?
- d) Who is the intended audience for the piece?
- e) Look up words and phrases you don't know.
- f) Can you identify a take-home message?

If the source is a secondary source:

- a) Figure out the author's argument. Every article has a main point. Make sure you know what it is. (Knowing the argument is different than knowing what the article is about).
- b) What kind of evidence does the author use? (Prescriptive literature, diary entries, medical journals?) Is the evidence appropriate for the argument?
- c) Is the argument persuasive? Has the author proven his or her claim?
- d) Keep track of the chronology. In other words, if the author is describing change over time, make sure you understand how, when, and why things change.
- e) Look up words and phrases you don't know.

Appendix III

Grading Criteria:

The paper will be evaluated on the specificity of its thesis, the soundness of its organization, the strength of its analysis, the effectiveness of its evidence, the originality of its ideas, and the grace of its style.

Thesis: A thesis is the reason a paper exists; it is the point you are trying to make. A thesis should not merely describe what the paper does (“This paper examines the validity of the biological understandings of gendered behaviors”). Instead, your thesis statement establishes your claim (“The efforts to link gendered behavior and biology always rely on culturally and historically specific notions of gender. The failure to recognize the culture-bound definitions of gender weakens the claims that gendered behaviors--such as playing with truck--are biologically based.”)

Organization: The organization of your paper should revolve around your thesis. Each paragraph should build an argument in support of the thesis. Consider every paragraph a mini-argument. It should have one main idea (presented in the topic sentence) and three to five sentences (or so) that clearly support the topic sentence. Each paragraph should be connected to the one above it by a transition. End with a conclusion that explains how your paper contributes to the history of the American body.

Evidence: For the critical reaction paper, your evidence will come from the course reader. For the research project, you will need to track down the evidence yourself. In both cases, I will evaluate the appropriateness of the evidence for the claims you are trying to make.

Analysis: Your paper should analyze and interpret the evidence to support your claim. Imagine for a moment a courtroom drama on TV. The gun, the barking dog, the tire tracks are all deployed by the prosecutor to support her case. But she does not merely describe the evidence; she uses it to make a point. She claims that the fingerprints on the gun, coupled with the tire tracks that match Jane Doe’s car prove that Jane murdered Hello Kitty. Or pretend you are the defense attorney who analyzes the same evidence to prove Jane is innocent. The defense attorney notes that the finger prints provided only a three-point match, and besides, Jane shoots regularly at the firing range. Further, he claims that Jane loaned her car to her friend Willy that night so he could attend a “Dance, Dance Revolution” tournament. In other words, evidence does not speak for itself; your analysis gives evidence meaning. In the same way, you must analyze your sources, you must interpret them, to make a convincing case.

Originality: A first-rate essay will not just reiterate the claims made in the readings or the ideas raised in discussion. Instead, the best essays will use the readings and discussions as the starting point to explore and create your own interpretations of a topic.

Style: The best ideas can fail to impress if packaged carelessly or imprecisely. Vague or messy prose tends to leave the reader puzzled and frustrated rather than persuaded and enlightened. Take care that your prose illuminates your ideas rather than obscures them. Take your work seriously enough to pay attention to the way it is packaged.

Some particular items to keep in mind.

Strive for clarity

If a reader must read a sentence three times to understand it, the writing hinders the idea. Sometimes hazy prose reflects hazy thinking. Make sure you know exactly what you are trying to say before you say it.

Strive for precision

Avoid claims like “people thought,” “doctors argued,” “women dieted.” Which people, doctors, or women? All of them?

Avoid baggy sentences

Good prose is direct prose. As a result, good writers rid their sentences of all extraneous words. For example, I could advise you that if there is any way at all to get rid of extra words in your sentences that are not absolutely necessary, they should be gotten rid of if you can. Or in the words of Strunck and White, “Omit needless words.”

Use active voice

Instead of saying “The study was conducted,” try “Mr. Smith conducted the study.” This is desirable for several reasons. 1) It often allows you to omit needless words. 2) It forces you to identify the historical actors. “It was generally believed...” is a dead give-away that you only have a vague ideas who believed. 3) Active voice forces you to use punchy verbs rather than the drab and generally unhelpful form of the verb “to be.” (See next point.)

Use vigorous verbs

Verbs provide the foundation of good writing. Unfortunately we often use verbs that provide no action such as forms of the verb “to be” or its helper verbs (am, is, was, were, are, be, been, being, have, has, had, do, does, did). These are perfectly fine, but try replacing them with something jazzier or omit them altogether. “She was a good student,” provides basic but bland information. “She excelled in math and science,” adds verve and specificity. Further, “he laughed” can usually replace “he was laughing.” Finally, avoid turning perfectly good verbs into nouns. Consider the following: “The mirror *had* a reflection of the lake on it.” “The mirror reflected the lake,” is stronger.

Avoid careless stuff

Run a spell check. Check for run-on sentences and sentence fragments. Proof-read.

What do grades mean?

A (93-100) For outstanding papers only. Thesis and argument are clear, thought-provoking, and persuasive; research is thorough, appropriate, and creative; relationships drawn between evidence and ideas are sophisticated, subtle, and/or original. The paper also connects to larger trends addressed by the course. Writing is grammatically correct and succinct. The argument flows well from point to point, without any puffery or wasted words.

AB (88-92) For very good papers that for some reason fall short of the criteria listed above. For example, the argument may be murky in one place; information may be presented that doesn't directly or clearly contribute to the argument; writing style may be awkward here and there, or flawed by one or two consistent (if minor) grammatical errors.

B (83-87) Your basic good grade. The paper may pursue a straightforward but not especially deep or sophisticated argument; it is okay as far as it goes, but it doesn't penetrate the material very far. It may lack enough primary research to make the argument completely persuasive. It may have a flash of brilliance that is unfulfilled, counterbalanced by minor grammatical problems, a weakness in argumentation, and/or a significant misunderstanding of events or chronology.

BC (78-82) The paper shows some of the basics of the ideal paper, but is weakened by a lack of serious think-work, evidence gathering, or writing problems. It may make superficial connections without offering sufficient evidence to make the connections plausible or persuasive, or it may have what is in principle a good argument supported by incorrect facts or chronology. Alternatively, it may provide a fairly solid argument with minor flaws, from which the reader is repeatedly distracted by awkward or ungrammatical prose.

C (70-77) A grade signifying some serious problems in paper design, expository writing, or primary research. It may deliver facts without a recognizable thesis or argument; it may wander away from the point; or it may be a thoughtful attempt so weakened by writing problems (grammar, punctuation, word choice) that it is difficult for the reader to understand a crucial point you are trying to make. Alternatively, it may offer an strong thesis without providing sufficient primary evidence. Also used for papers that do not ask historical questions.

D (60-69) A marginal grade. This grade usually indicates a paper does not meet the requirements of the assignment in two or more ways: the paper does not ask an historical question, lacks an original thesis, and/or relies almost exclusively on secondary sources. There may be some evidence of reading in the secondary literature, but the paper indicates no effort at synthesis or critical engagement. Also used for essays that are just barely coherent.

F (0-59) For unacceptable essays. An essay may be judged unacceptable if it contains plagiarism (see below); if it fails to meet three of the major requirements for the paper; if it consists primarily of content inappropriate to the themes of the course; or if the writing fails to meet standard college-level requirements of basic communication in English.