

## Paper 3: History of the Present

AMH 2020 / Professor Mas / Fall 2020

**Length:** 4-5 pages

**Due:** December 11

**Bonus:** If you turn in your paper *on* or *before* December 4, you will be awarded +5 points towards a past quiz, paper, or classwork assignment.

### DESCRIPTION

2020 has been a historic year. We've seen how national and local governments have responded to a global pandemic. Cities have seen unprecedented protests in the wake of police atrocities and racial injustice. And this week we will witness (and many will hopefully participate in) a decisive presidential election. How can history help us make sense of these turbulent times? In 4-5 pages, you will write an essay that approaches a contemporary problem from a historical perspective, drawing from primary and secondary sources to write a thesis-driven essay.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to use skills of historical analysis to help us gain a deeper understanding of the present. Your aim is to tell the reader, in detail and with examples, how a historical perspective can help us develop a better understanding of current events.

This paper will be based on your research into primary and secondary sources, relating to a topic of your choice. You may choose among topics that range from politics to economics, from social relations to science and medicine, from religion to popular culture.

Below, I've provided a set of options for how you might approach the paper. But if there is a particular idea or topic that you'd really like to explore and that's not listed in one of the options, feel free to run it by me or your TA.

### TASK

Your task involves researching the past to understand the present. Like you did in your previous paper, this historical research requires investigating primary and secondary sources.

The number of primary sources you use in your paper will vary based on the nature of your topic, but you should include at least **two (2) distinct primary sources**.

One of those sources may relate to the contemporary issue you are exploring, such as a recent new article, a tweet, a music video, an economic report, a campaign advertisement, etc., that you'd like to use as the basis of your paper. The other may be a primary source from a past historical event or moment that offers insight or useful comparison for your topic. Or, perhaps both of your sources derive from a more distant past, to shed light on some contemporary issue. Just make sure that you

approach your primary sources with historical thinking skills, asking critical questions about the author of the source, its audience, the source's intentions or purpose, the particular cultural values, social structures, and intellectual trends that shape its rhetoric and meanings, and the historical context in which it was produced.

Some of you might also decide to use **oral history** sources, or recorded interviews of individuals who offer their recollections of a historical event.

You should also utilize at least **two (2) secondary readings**—academic articles, books, etc. related to your chosen topic, and written by professional historians. This will serve as supporting literature, helping you to contextualize your topic and sources.

When writing your paper, follow the same guidelines for Paper 2. Your paper should follow a coherent structure, with topic sentences and transitions, and it should center on a particular thesis or argument.

## PAPER OPTIONS

### Option A. Historical Perspectives on Covid-19

This option gives you the chance to trace some historical antecedents for the current pandemic in the United States. You may focus on a particular event, theme, or problem relating to the Covid-19 crisis, and approach it from a historical perspective. What larger processes in American history help us understand this current crisis? What past events offer some insights or lessons for today?

Some possible topics or themes to explore:

- **A past pandemic, between 1877 and the present.** For example, the 1918 influenza, HIV/AIDS, Ebola in 2014. You should not just compare and contrast the two pandemics, but really use a past medical event to help us understand how we got here, and why we continue to face certain obstacles to health.
- **The history of vaccines and vaccination campaigns.** For months, many of us have had our eyes set on a future vaccine that will carry us out of this crisis. What does the history of vaccines tell us about our current reliance on this potential solution, and perhaps the problems that might arise in its administration? This topic takes you deeper into the history of medicine and public health in the United States, where you might investigate the role of politics and government funding for public health and research, or the tensions between public health mandates (to be vaccinated for certain diseases) and individual liberties. This might take you to the smallpox vaccination campaign in the Progressive era, or the development and widespread popularity of the polio vaccine, or anti-vaccination movements in modern American history – as just a few examples.
- **Race and racism in health and medicine.** Epidemiological data has shown that people of color have been more severely impacted by the current pandemic. This is part of a longer pattern of health disparities along lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Investigate the history of race in American medicine, by focusing on a specific topic, such as segregation of hospitals and medical schools, or the biography of a particular African American health worker.
- **Political responses to disasters or crises.** Look at a particular disaster, such as a devastating hurricane (the “Great Miami Hurricane” of 1926, Andrew in 1992 Miami, Katrina in 2005 New Orleans, or Maria in Puerto Rico), nuclear disasters (or fear of nuclear attack) during the Cold War, or the Great

Depression of the 1930s. How did the government respond? What is the role of the government in protecting citizens from crises? What forms of prevention, relief, and recovery have worked in the past, to shed light on how the government might respond to crisis today?

### Option B. Election 2020: Who Gets A Say?

This fall, millions of Americans are exercising their right to vote. Although seen as a cornerstone of American citizenship and democracy, the vote has been historically denied or suppressed for certain groups of Americans: notably, women before the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment and African Americans before the Voting Rights Act of 1966. Using this year's decisive election as a starting point, what does the history and present of electoral politics tell us about the shifting boundaries of citizenship, and the nature of American democracy? In your paper, choose a specific topic or past event to focus on.

You might consider (but are not limited to) one of the following themes or topics:

- ***Felon re-enfranchisement in Florida***. How do the legacies of Jim Crow continue to shape voting rights? For starting points, check out the panel discussion on [Voting Rights in Florida](#) hosted by FIU's Wolfsonian Public Humanities Lab, and [this article](#) by investigative journalist Dexter Filkins.
- ***Women and the vote***. 100 years ago, the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified, giving women the constitutional right to vote. What are the legacies of the amendment today? What are the unfinished processes of the feminist movement that brought about suffrage? You might consider, for example, the ongoing efforts to pass the [Equal Rights Amendment](#), first proposed by suffragist Alice Paul in 1923 and which was fiercely debated in the 1970s. Or you might look at the #MeToo movement from a historical vantage point, and perhaps consider why there has been so much focus on [women](#) (and [white women](#), in particular) as a key constituency deciding the present election.

### Option C. Oral History: Documenting and Interpreting the Recent Past

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to *verify* their findings, *analyze* them, and place them in an accurate historical *context*. In oral history projects, an interviewee recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record.

For this option, you will [conduct an oral history interview](#) as the basis of your paper, to shed light on one of the following topics:

- Immigrants in American Life
- The fight for racial justice—from 1950s-60s Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter

Depending on your topic, you will interview someone about their experiences of either (a) immigration and integrating into American society, or (b) participating in the African American civil rights movement, broadly defined. The person you interview is ideally an older person who is not in your immediate family (although interviewing a grandparent, for example, is not discouraged). You should record the interview so that you can use quotes in your paper, so make sure to [get permission](#) from your interviewee before recording him/her. If you cannot find a willing individual to interview, you may work with existing oral

histories, which are stored on online databases (I will provide some of these databases in a list of resources on Canvas).

- Before embarking on your interview, you will need to prepare a list of appropriate questions, and after the interview, you will need to edit the responses into a coherent narrative. You must take special care in preparing the questions for your interviewee(s). Please refer to the section below on ***Effective Interviewing Techniques***. If you choose the oral history option you will need to gain the consent of all of your interviewees.
- When writing your final paper, you should begin with an introduction that demonstrates your historical knowledge of the topic and that outlines your purposes. This knowledge will come from reading secondary works on the topic, but also from conducting research in primary sources: newspapers, magazines, archival collections, including oral histories that have already been conducted and collected, etc. What are you seeking to determine from these interviews? What is the crucial context or historical background for this topic? This section should be about 250-300 words long.
- The body paragraphs of the paper could focus on certain themes that emerge from your interview and supplementary research, quoting parts of your interview(s) as evidence, where appropriate. The body of your essay should be about 500-750 words long.
- The paper should close with commentary on the interview(s). What insight do they provide us with? How do they enrich our understanding of the topic, and of American life today? This concluding section should be about 250-300 words long.

#### **Option D. Monuments in Question: The Politics of Historical Memory**

Recent debates have emerged over the removal of Confederate monuments—sometimes by deliberate planning and other times by popular vandalism. Recent anti-racist protests have called on the broader public to re-think the place of monuments to the Confederacy (or to [colonial conquest](#)), compelling leaders to acknowledge their histories, as well as their ongoing status as symbols of white supremacy. Indeed, we know from this class that many of those monuments were erected in the aftermath of the Reconstruction during the rise of Jim Crow, as white supremacists bolstered the narrative of the “Lost Cause” and glorified the Confederacy.

For this option, choose a particular artifact that memorializes the Confederacy, whether it be a monument or a street name, such as “South Dixie Highway.” What are the origins of this memorialization? What do recent efforts to remove a particular monument or change a name tell us about a longer history of uneven power relations, and who has the power to write or memorialize the past?

As a starting point, I recommend watching the panel discussion entitled “[Monumental](#),” hosted by FIU’s Center for the Humanities in an Urban Environment earlier this fall.

## Effective Interviewing Techniques

1. Be sure to find out the pertinent personal information from the subject—age, place of birth, place of residence and occupation during the time of the events in question.
2. Make sure your interviewee signs a consent form so that you have formal permission to use the information in your paper. A formal consent form can be as simple as the following:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, grant permission on this date \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ to use material from an interview with me conducted on \_\_\_\_\_ on the topic \_\_\_\_\_ . This material may be used for an essay I am writing for the course “American History Introductory Survey since 1877” with Dr. Catherine Mas.

3. Avoid leading questions, like: “you must have been so relieved when the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and brought World War II to an end.” Instead you could ask, “how did you feel when you first learned about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?”
4. If the interviewee is uncomfortable answering questions about sensitive issues, then avoid those questions and move to ones that the interviewee wishes to address.
5. Give the interviewee time to answer—that person may not have reflected on these issues for some time and will need time to think about them. Don’t worry if there are long pauses or moments of silence.
6. Do not cut off an interviewee when he/she goes off on a seemingly unimportant tangent. Tangents are often more important than they first appear. You should avoid interrupting your subject. Let the person finish; this is their story to tell!
7. Remember, you are trying to learn from your interviewees, not demonstrate to them how knowledgeable you are. They are the primary focus of the interview, not you.
8. Ask your questions very clearly and make sure that your subject has understood them. Be prepared to rephrase questions and have rephrased versions written out in case you need them.
9. Make sure you have read the relevant sections of the readings and done additional research in secondary works and in primary sources (including archival sources) before you begin your interview. It makes no sense to interview someone on a topic that you have not familiarized yourself with. If you are not familiar with your topic then regardless of how good the interviewee is your paper will suffer as a consequence of your knowledge gap; also, you will not be able to develop new questions on the spot if you are not familiar with the historical landscape.
10. Read transcripts of, or listen to audio recordings of, or view documentary film footage of oral histories that have been previously conducted on your topic. You need to be able to compare the responses of your interviewee/s to those of other people who lived through and reflected on those same events.

### ***Interviewing family members***

Family histories can provide fascinating insights into the past. You may attempt to reconstruct the story of your family’s experiences in the United States through interviews with relatives, family diaries, photographs, documents, and letters. In doing this you might wish to use some of the questions below:

1. For how many generations has your family been in the United States? Or, did your grandparents or great grandparents migrate to this region from another part of the country?

2. Where did they come from and why did they leave?
3. What was their journey to America, or to a new part of the country like?
4. Where did they set up residence (what town, or city, or village)?
5. What jobs did they have?
6. How many children did they have?
7. What kind of living and working conditions did they experience?
8. Did they change jobs and residences?
9. How did they react to the major historical events of their time (e.g. World War II, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, 9/11)? What were the main crises of their lives and how did they deal with them?
10. How did the next generation of the family fare?

When you go on to write your paper, you should demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the various eras you cover. Make sure you place the family member's experience into broader historical context. Make it clear to the reader that you are aware of the course themes and course content and how your family's immigration experience relates to those themes.

You could demonstrate this historical understanding in footnotes. For example, if writing about your grandmother's experiences migrating from Cuba to Miami in the 1970s, you could construct a footnote discussing the impact of the Cold War on Cuban refugee experiences and US-Cuba relations. This knowledge of the period may be acquired from secondary works, or from primary source materials (newspapers, magazines, census records, immigration records, government documents, oral history collections).