

## **Historical Op-Ed Article Spring 2019**

For this assignment, you will write a historical op-ed article similar to those that appear in major newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Arizona Republic*. Your goal in this assignment is to connect an important current event and/or controversy to a historical topic, theme, and/or event covered in this class. How does the past help us better understand today's world? In what ways do past events clarify or help us solve problems we face in the present? Do past events parallel present-day controversies? How might we learn from the triumphs and tragedies of the past?

Your paper must be approximately 300-400 words in length (No more than 500 words), double-spaced, with 12-point font and one-inch margins. Your audience for this essay is not an academic one but the general public. You should write in a way that will engage an average newspaper reader. Because this assignment asks you to simulate a newspaper column, be sure to keep to the word limit!

First, you must select a specific, concrete current event and/or controversy within your community that you believe can be better understood by looking at the past. You should select a current issue that you feel passionately about. Next, you must select a specific, concrete relevant historical topic or theme from the Civil Rights Movement that can help shed light on your present-day issue. The historical topic or theme that you select must be covered in this course either in lecture material, readings, discussions, or films.

Before you begin writing your essay, you must discuss your topic with the teacher to receive final approval. You will do this via Google forms.

\*\* If, after completing this assignment, you would like to submit your article to a newspaper for actual publication, I will give you extra credit when you supply evidence of your publication, such as email correspondence, a letter, or newspaper clipping.

General Outline:

1. What is your argument (thesis)?
2. How is it an issue of Civil Rights (the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality.)?
3. How does this clarify a misunderstanding of History?
4. How does it affect your community (community can be defined in multiple ways)?

## **Contents, Approach, and Form**

1. Set the stage in the first sentence. A striking opening is the key to getting the attention of the person who counts: the editor. So work on it until it's right.
2. Quickly bring in the historical insight, issue, or comparison. Hook the past to the present, and vice versa. But remember that you are trying to strengthen readers' understanding of the present by invoking the past. Therefore, keep your focus on the present.
3. Develop the historical background.
4. Thicken and intensify the historical issue. Provide details.
5. Turn, or return, to the contemporary issue. Use historical examples and quotations whenever possible.
6. Conclude in the final one or two paragraphs. Make or repeat your historical point: things are not as they seem; the real issue is not as presented by so-and-so; the historical analogy that people are using is dangerous and probably wrong; knowing what I have written may help us better understand the present. Then stop.

## **Style and Tone**

1. Simplify. Don't use long words or neologisms. "Jefferson's aim" (not "the Jeffersonian project"), "organizations of men and women" (not "gendered associations"), "contemporary architecture" (not "poststructural bridges," unless they've collapsed). You're writing for your fellow citizens, not your colleagues. No recondite matters, no "hermeneutics."
2. Compress. Except when asked, don't submit more than 500 words of text, including your identifying note. That's the conventional limit--roughly two typewritten pages double spaced. Consequently, re-word everything to shorten it. For example, "the election of Franklin Roosevelt" should be "Roosevelt's election." Even such small changes can create needed impact and provide more room for you to make additional points.
3. Shorten. Keep sentences brief; remember that with narrow column width, even short sentences can take up many lines. Also keep paragraphs short; in newspaper writing, one-sentence paragraphs pass muster. Keep quotations short, too. Don't insert sub-heads or section tabs; the editors will do that if they wish.
4. Explain. In fact, explain everything. Your readers are intelligent, but they may not be informed about what you write. Therefore, on first mention, it's not "the Wagner Act," but "the 1935 Wagner Act, which legalized union organizing and collective bargaining;" not "NOW," but "the National Organization for Women (NOW)." Such brief explanations take up space, but they are essential for comprehensibility.
5. Repeat. Not to the point of boredom, of course, but for impact. Don't be afraid to insinuate the same point a number of times in fresh words.
6. Be direct. Don't pull your punches; instead, fly your own colors, make an argument, take a stand. Show where history may reveal something and what it may reveal.
7. Keep to one subject. Don't develop more than a single thesis or present more than a single argument. Your aim is to convince, and to convince upon a single, brief reading.

8. Be yourself. Even if you are summarizing a body of scholarship (in simple terms), do so in your own words. Make clear why you believe what you are arguing, not why others believe it. The essay is a personal communication.

### **Miscellaneous Considerations**

(for submitting articles to individual newspapers yourself)

1. Phone the op-ed or editorial-page editor in advance if you can. Ask whether he/she is interested in the subject, what slant he/she might suggest. You are not bound by this, for it is your work, not the editor's; but it doesn't hurt to ask, and receiving an early "not interested" may save you time and effort.

2. In your covering letter, fax sheet, or email, provide your phone numbers. Often, a paper will wish to confirm that you are the author of a piece, to check editorial changes, simply to let you know that the piece will run the next day.

3. Don't submit by e-mail unless you learn that a specific publication will accept a piece in that form. Many do not yet do so.

4. If possible, conform your style to that in the Associated Press Stylebook, the guide most widely used by journalists and editors. Saving editors work will make your texts more appealing to them.

5. Ask about copyright. If you are sending your piece to a paper that is part of a chain (like Hearst or Knight-Ridder) or that has its own news wire (like The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal), it may be best to let the paper copyright the text. That way, it will be sent all around the country and may appear in many papers and locations. Some papers won't allow you to copyright your piece; but if they do and you choose that option, your text may then only appear in that single paper. Thus, if you are concerned about the size of your readership, it may be best to let the paper copyright the text.

6. Give your piece a short title, but don't expect the headline writers to respect your requested title. You write titles, they write headlines; these are not the same things, as sometimes you learn to your regret. And you are not likely to be given a chance to review or to "accept or reject" a headline (or an accompanying drawing or cartoon). Neither, by the way, will the editors who have worked with you have the chance to review a headline.

7. Ask to learn (insist upon learning!) 1) whether your piece has been accepted; 2) when it will run; 3) what any and all editorial changes are; and 4) (unlikely, however, to be honored) the headline. Often you won't be told; occasionally three paragraphs of your piece will end up as a letter to the editor; sometimes the headline will embarrass you. There is not much you can do about any of these things except to try to make clear at the outset that it is your piece, to be published as you wish it to appear, and then to complain loudly if it is trifled with. In short, try to maintain some influence over your own work.

8. Don't be discouraged. As historians should know, timing, coincidence, and accident are everything. If your piece is not accepted at one publication, send it to another; if it is not published this year, keep it for next year at the same time or until the issue pops up again; then update it, and start it on its way again.

9. Don't forget weekly and regional newspapers. It's nice to get ink in The New York Times and over its wire, but if your preferred daily paper won't take your work, try a different kind of newspaper. Papers with small circulations may take your work more readily than larger dailies; and some of these, members of chains, may have their texts distributed over the chain's syndicated wire, so that your piece runs elsewhere in the country, too.

10. Above all, don't overestimate the public's knowledge, and don't underestimate its intelligence.