1-1-2014

**What History Matters, and Who Decides? Introduction to Archival Research**

Patricia Reeve  
*Suffolk University*, preeve@suffolk.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://dc.suffolk.edu/archive-oer](https://dc.suffolk.edu/archive-oer)

Part of the United States History Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

*Moakley Archive OERs and Assignments*. 5.  
[https://dc.suffolk.edu/archive-oer/5](https://dc.suffolk.edu/archive-oer/5)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Educational Resources at Suffolk University at Digital Collections @ Suffolk. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moakley Archive OERs and Assignments by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Suffolk. For more information, please contact dct@suffolk.edu.
Introduction

At the turn of the century, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, "Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time." The social commentator and author George Orwell concluded similarly, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.

Both Turner and Orwell suggest that history is itself a historical artifact. That is, scholarly explanations of the past are imprinted by the beliefs and cultural values that shape historians’ analyses.

Consider, for example, the “first major scholarly examination of [American] slavery” written by Ulrich B. Phillips (1877-1934), a white Southerner. In American Negro Slavery (1918), Phillips characterized slavery “as an essentially benign institution in which kindly masters looked after submissive and generally contented African Americans.” According to historian Alan Brinkley, “Phillips’s apologia for slavery remained the authoritative work on the subject for nearly thirty years.”1 It was this analysis of slavery that undergraduate history majors learned through the 1930s.

Today, as in the past, history curricula keeps pace with major shifts in scholarly explanations of the past. As a result, you will take classes that did not exist when I was an undergraduate. You will see this for yourself while examining Suffolk University academic catalogs from earlier decades.

---

SUMMARY:
Today you will sign up to visit John Joseph Moakley Archives. There you will spend two hours reading Suffolk University catalogs from a specific decade in the twentieth century. Teams of 4 or 5 students will research one decade which will be assigned to you. Digital copies of the catalogs are also available at: https://dc.suffolk.edu/cassbs-catalogs/

Moakley Archive and Institute Contact
73 Tremont Street, 3rd floor (Rm 3070), Boston, MA 02108-4977
Email: archives@suffolk.edu, (617)-305-6277

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Please note your research date and time: __________________________________________

2. Please note the decade assigned to you: __________________________________________

This week and the next:

1. Before reporting to the Moakley Archives, read the assigned article, Schmidt, “Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research,” 12 pages. This reading will familiarize you with the purposes, services and operation of archives, as well as your responsibility as a researcher using archival materials. Note your questions for discussion.

2. On your assigned date and time, please report to the Moakley Archives and Institute. Please arrive on time! NOTE: If you must cancel your research appointment, please let the Archives know.

3. During the research session:
   ▪ You and your classmates may divide research tasks as you see fit. For example, perhaps your team will decide that everyone should read every catalog from the decade. Or, you might decide to divide up the decade and have each person read 2 to 3 catalogs. Whatever you decide, your goal is to thoroughly read your assigned sources.

   ▪ Instructions
     1. Take written or typed notes on the specific degree requirements for history majors that are posted in catalogs from your decade.
        ▪ Write down changes to course requirements (if any) throughout the decade.
        ▪ If the requirements did not change over the ten-year period, record the repeating set of requirements.
        ▪ If the requirements changed significantly during the decade, record the “before” and “after” particulars in their entirety.

     2. Take written or typed notes on the department’s description of the major (if provided) – a kind of mission statement for the academic program and note changes to it through the decade.
If the description of the department did not change over the ten-year period, record the repeating description.

If the mission changed significantly during the decade, record the “before” and “after” statements in their entirety.

3. Write or type the conclusions that you drew about the breadth, depth, and purposes of undergraduate history education over the ten-year period. (Brief statements are sufficient.) For example:

- Note what struck you as significant and why.
- Identify and comment on information that took you by surprise.
- Etc.

As you take notes, you are likely to have questions and insights about what you are reading. Be sure to keep a list of these for our class debriefing.

Bring your written or typed notes and conclusions to class on the due date. (This deadline is non-negotiable.) During class you will meet with other classmates who researched the same decade and compare notes. Teams will report their findings to the entire class and we will interpret your findings.