The West and America: Research Paper / Prospectus

- Final paper will be around ten pages (or so), and should include substantial consultation of at least three reliable sources (“reliable,” generally = NOT WEBSITES!)
- Research prospectus due Tuesday, November 6
- First draft of research paper due Wednesday, November 21
- Second draft of research paper due Thursday, November 29
- Writing portfolios due to the English Committee Thursday, December 13

The first thing to remember about a research paper is that it’s not really substantively different from the kind of papers you’ve already been writing. It’s longer, usually. And it involves the voices and ideas of other people. But the same basic gestures are involved as in your earlier papers: you’ll still do close readings of texts, you’ll still make critical comparisons, you’ll still structure the paper in sections. The only thing that makes a research paper really different is that in your earlier papers you were only trying to say what you thought: in a research paper, you’re trying to place what you think into a conversation going on among experts. The research paper is the place where you actually join into that larger academic conversation.

Prospectus – due next Tuesday

You will define your research project yourself. But a good way to start is simply by defining what you’re interested in, why you’re interested in it, why you think it matters, and how you want to go about studying it. That’s what the prospectus is for.

To write the prospectus, start by reading the excerpt from The Craft of Research that I’ve left in the box outside my office: these chapters will help you think about the kinds of questions to ask to motivate research, and how to ask them so they yield the most fruit. Read the whole packet – then, pay special attention to the rubric on page 63, the three questions you need to answer in order to define your project initially.

Then, write your prospectus. It doesn’t have to be long – after all, you haven’t done the research yet – but it should contain three sections:

1. In the first section, define your research question following the guidelines on page 63 of Craft. What are you studying, what questions are you asking about it, and why? What do you expect to find out? The harder you push here, now, the easier the research will be later, so think about this for a while.

2. In the second section, try to say, briefly, what you already know about the research question. If you’re going to focus on literature, what primary texts will you be studying – what stories, what books, what chapters, what characters? If you’re going to focus on history, or political theory, or law, what sources will form the backbone of your research? What sources do you already have in hand? What ideas do you already think are applicable to this project?

3. In the third section, try to define what you need to know in order to answer your research question completely. What other sources do you need to consider? What kinds of research do you need to do? Where do you expect to find those sources? It might be a good idea to do a little preliminary research before you write this part. Get on InfoTrac, use the library catalog, check the MLA and JStor databases (all accessible through the library page of the website). Find out what’s out there.

Bring your prospectus with you next Tuesday. But before then – and this is crucial – start doing your research. Start finding articles. Start reading books. Start taking notes. The sooner you start gathering materials, the better. Don’t wait for me to tell you to start.

Oh, wait. I just told you to start. OK, so start.