

# Life story writing assignment

HIST1015

Spring 2018

See the syllabus for due dates.

## Instructions

In this assignment, your job is to research the experiences of your team's demographic group in the 19th century, and to create a historically plausible but fictional life story on the basis of that research. Each member of the team will create his/her own life story.<sup>1</sup>

The team's role is to help each member think about what is plausible, to discuss and share good sources of historical information, and to comment on one another's drafts.

The final product for the assignment consists of two equally important parts:

1. the fictional life story itself, and
2. a "historical note" containing a short description of how your character's life story reflects the realities of 19th-century America and explanatory notes on events and historical circumstances.

This is a fairly demanding assignment, and requires you to start thinking and planning early.

## Historical note

The structure of the historical note is as follows:

- A short description (about 2–3 paragraphs, 1–2 pages) of the historical realities that shaped the life of a person in your team's demographic group generally and your chosen character specifically.
- A glossary-style point-by-point explanation that a) offers more information about specific historical events or trends, where relevant, and b) explains why events that happen to your character or the actions he/she takes are plausible. Each specific claim made should get an entry. For each, can you cite similar events happening / similar actions being taken by real people in this demographic group? If not, what evidence can you produce that this is nevertheless plausible?

The historical note is where you show your research chops; citations and a full bibliography are *crucial* in demonstrating that you have done your research.

<sup>1</sup> However, two or more team members **may collaborate** on a single life story, if they all agree and if they get their collaboration **approved ahead of time**. The deadline for petitioning to collaborate is **Thursday 3/22**.

Checklist, life story:

- Font: Times New Roman 12 pt or similar.
- Margins: One inch.
- Double-spaced.
- Page numbers.
- 1,000–1,600 words (3–5 pages).
- Draft accessible on Google Docs.

Checklist, historical note:

- Font: Times New Roman 12 pt or similar.
- Citation style: Chicago.
- Margins: One inch.
- Double-spaced.
- Page numbers.
- Intro **and** "glossary."
- Citations **and** bibliography.
- Minimum 5 reliable, solid sources; minimum 3 **books or academic articles** (i.e., max 2 websites.)
- 700–1,000 words (2–3 pages).
- Draft accessible on Google Docs.

**The final draft submitted on D2L should combine the two documents into one. First the life story, then the historical note. Both should be clearly marked.**

## Life story

The life story will recount the adventures of your chosen character. The character *must*:

- be fictional; you may not write about a real person.
- live during the 19th century, with the bulk of the story happening before the end of the Civil War.
- fit the demographic parameters assigned to your team.
- have a plausible, though not necessarily typical, life.

The question of plausibility is often challenging: what exactly *was* possible for an upper-class woman or for a free African American man? Thinking about this is one of the most important parts of the assignment, and I expect you to engage the question seriously.

That said, you should be using your imagination as well! You don't have to make your character the average representative of the group, as long as you show you understand where your character would fall in the spectrum of that group's experiences. Give your character a soul and a personality as well as a historical context!

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You might think of the of the life story as a work of historical fiction, and of the historical note as the author's note and glossary at the back of the book. For example, Ariana Franklin's *A Murderous Procession* (the second novel in her *Mistress of the Art of Death* series about a female pathologist in early medieval Europe) has an author's note that first contains some notes on the historical plausibility of her main character and some notes on where she's deviated from actual historical chronology, and then provides thumbnail biographies of key (real) characters and of a number of terms important in the story (explaining, for example, who the Cathars were, and providing some notes on premodern surgery.)

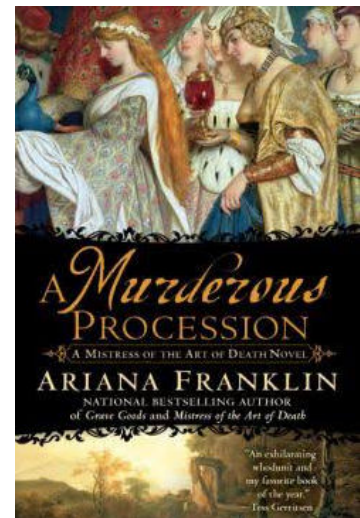
I have posted Franklin's author's note on D2L as a rough model. Yours won't be exactly like that—I want more coherence in the discussion of historical realities, for one, and you are required to provide citations—but perhaps it will be helpful nevertheless.

## Presentation

On the basis of their research, each team will craft a presentation that highlights the experiences of the team's demographic group and the historical parameters that shaped their lives. The presentations may (and should) draw from the life stories as appropriate, though obviously you won't be able to recount each story. We will discuss the presentations more in class. You should aim for about 7 minutes.

Feel free to be creative! Add images, maps, links to video, music; do a drawing; film yourself doing an interpretive dance if you like. If you want to create a substantial non-textual portion of the assignment that will replace part of the text, that may be possible; come discuss it with me.

A tip: Don't get bogged down in detail. It can be VERY difficult to find out exact specifics of how an individual life might unfold. You are only required to do your best to make this plausible within the constraints of available time. However, this is NOT a blank check to not do research.



To help you think about what a good presentation is like and what presentation software you may want to choose, we will have a special presentation on presentations and presentation technology by ASSETT in class sometime around the middle of the semester.

### Example: *The Life and Times of Peter the Pirate*

#### *Life story*

Peter Sewell, or Peter the Pirate as he later became known, was born in 1801 in Ipswich, Massachusetts. He grew up fishing, but he always was an adventurous soul. By the late 1820s, Peter had moved on to whaling ships, where he came into contact with a great variety of people [...*events happening* ...]

After almost dying in a shipwreck, Peter decided to become a landlubber. [...*twists & turns* ...] He ended up in as a laborer in Oberlin, Ohio, where in 1839 he heard the renowned minister Charles Grandison Finney preach about the need to not only repent but also reform one's behavior and take action against moral wrongs. Prompted by Finney's fiery sermon, Peter became an evangelical Christian and got involved in the abolitionist movement. [...*rest of essay* ...]

#### *Historical note*

ON BEING A LABORER IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY [This is the section where you discuss the historical context of the life of someone in Peter's demographic group and explain how his life story is plausible]

FISHING IN MASSACHUSETTS Fishing was an important part of the Massachusetts economy, and employed X number of people in the early 1800s (Smith 2002).

WHALING Whaling was a growth industry in the early 19th century, as whale oil was used in a wide variety of products... Whaling was also a line of work that "drew a multiracial and multiethnic crew"... (Miller 1999, 25).

CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY Finney was a well-known preacher of the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept the United States in the first decades of the 19th century. Like many preachers of the Second Great Awakening, Finney emphasized that everyone can be saved and that it is a Christian's responsibility to also try to make the earthly world more like the Kingdom of God by working against injustices and suffering. Finney was most famous for the revivals he held in the eastern United States, especially in New York, the late 1820s and early 1830s; in 1835 he accepted a position at Oberlin College, where he continued to advocate against slavery and for other reform causes (Doe 2012).

... MORE (More historical explanations can only make your essay better. Keep them concise and to the point, though.)

#### **Bibliography**

- Doe, Jane. 2012. "Charles Grandison Finney." In *The Best Encyclopedia Ever*, vol. 3, 30–32. Gale Publishing. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.
- Miller, Mary. 1999. *Whaling with Pirates*. New York: Pirate Press.
- Smith, John. 2002. "Good Old Times in Massachusetts." *Massachusetts Journal* 26(1): 26–51.

