First Library Research Assignment
History 100

In this course I ask that you fulfill two assignments using library resources. You will be introduced to some research methods and familiarized with some materials available at the Lied Library. The library can be an important resource for any of your courses, so this introduction will make a valuable contribution to your education. For this reason, the library assignment is a core element of the course and should be approached with seriousness and diligence. Both the instructor and teaching assistants, as well as members of the library staff, are prepared to help.

The specific goal of this first exercise – upon which the second exercise will build – is to use a library database for the purposes of locating, downloading, and commenting upon a primary source. The exercise will allow you to develop and refine searching skills, which are increasing necessary in light of the “infoglut” (the excess of information) that we encounter each and every day.

A primary source is a piece of information – usually a text – that was produced at a point in the past that interests us. Although such sources may be biased, incomplete, or otherwise problematic, they nonetheless represent the most direct access that we have to events in the past. They are the only basis on which new historical knowledge may be produced. For this exercise we will focus on newspapers, which are an excellent primary source that our library has in the form of searchable databases.

How to Get to Databases:

Go to the library’s history subject guide (http://guides.library.unlv.edu/history). You will see a series of tabs near the top. Choose “Articles and Databases.” Scroll down a page or so to “Primary Source Collections.” Use one of these databases to locate your articles:

- Chicago Tribune (1849-1986)
- Los Angeles Times (1881-1987)
- New York Times (1851-2006)

Use the search tool to find relevant articles. We will offer a tutorial (perhaps several) in class and during section meetings, so don’t feel that you are completely on your own. There are also some ideas below.

What to Look For

In order to have the broadest base of newspapers from which to choose, I ask that you seek material on any one of the four constitutional amendments from the Progressive Era: Numbers 16 (income tax); 17 (direct election of senators); 18 (prohibition); 19 (women’s suffrage). If you feel strongly about doing a different amendment, then talk to either the instructor or your TA, but be sure to obtain approval in such a case and to keep in mind that the earlier you go in time the fewer materials you will have.
In order to search you need first of all to choose an amendment. Then you must determine both the date it was ratified and a relevant period before and after when it would have been discussed. Next you must begin to find articles on it using search terms and dates. It may be tempting to write “18th amendment” and hope for the best. This is probably not a good idea, as the amendment may often have been referred to by its number only after it was approved, while most of the discussion likely preceded it. You would be better off looking closely at the amendment, picking out the key issues that it addresses, and then using those as the basis for your search, perhaps also adding the word “amendment.” Note that in most cases you may also refine your search by particular dates, which can be very useful for limiting the number of results. **The key thing is that you have to have some patience and must try several different combinations of words in order to find the best articles.**

The determination of the right search terms and dates is the most challenging part of the exercise. For this reason, I ask that you keep track of the time you spend doing the search, the combinations of terms and dates that you use, and the number of articles that you view or download. You should spend at least an hour on the search, and should probably try at least five different combinations of words and terms, also using different dates to sharpen your search. Ideally, you should view 7-10 articles at least briefly before determining which one is best for your purposes. Articles come in various sizes, but for this exercise an article should consist of at least four paragraphs. My own searching of articles suggests that only articles of this size will give you enough of a foundation on which to comment.

In terms of the content of the article, the key thing is that the text actually deals substantively with the core issue at stake (taxes, elections, prohibition, etc.) or with the process of the amendment’s approval (articles & editorial for or against, the various stages of the process, etc.).

It is worth emphasizing again that performing a search like this takes patience. Do not expect that an ideal article will emerge immediately. Do not take the first article that seems even remotely relevant. Rather, take some time to immerse yourself in the process. You may even find that doing this kind of research is interesting, as long as you are not prejudiced against such an outcome. And if you find this difficult and challenging, then imagine what I have to work with: handwritten, non-searchable archival registries in Russian. Ask me, and I will show you what this looks like. In the meantime, count your blessings.

**What To Submit**

The written part of the exercise consists of two parts: First, in a solid paragraph you should summarize the process by which you found the article. Indicate the specific combination of terms that you used in your search, how much time you spend searching, and how many articles you consulted before choosing one. Indicate at least briefly why you chose the article that you did – that is, why you thought it was the best from among the ones that you consulted. All of this should take the form of a single paragraph consisting of about half a page (roughly 150-200 words).

Second – and this will be the bottom half of the page – you should provide at least a provisional analysis of the article. This involves providing a brief summary of the content. Then try to draw some conclusions. Is it an editorial that expresses an opinion about the
amendment, or does the article claim merely to report in a neutral fashion? If the latter is true, are there any subtle clues as to how the author of the article or the newspaper as a whole relates to the question? How does the article relate to other portions of the Constitution or to what you have heard in the lectures? What conclusions can you draw about how people related to the issues at the time? For example, was an income tax or extending the vote to women regarded as something very radical? How did people understand the rationale for the direct election of senators? Were there strong arguments against the introduction of prohibition? In other words, try to draw out from your article as much information about the times and about the constitutional process as you can.

What you submit, then, should take the form of a page of text in double spaced and 12-point font. Anything less than ¼ of a page (250 words) or more than 1½ pages (450 words) is not acceptable. It should have a descriptive title – something that speaks to the specific content of your article and your analysis of it. It should emphatically NOT be called “Library Assignment” or “Seventeenth Amendment” or some other boring title that says little about specific content. Finally, you should also print out and attach the article that you are discussing, including a clear indication of where it came from (i.e., New York Times, March 26, 1910).

Final Advice

As you prepare to submit your work, keep in mind the impression that you create about yourself by turning in one essay as opposed to another. If, for example, you turn in a bad essay with a stupid title showing obvious signs of haste, then the instructors will draw the obvious conclusions. A better essay, or at least one that shows clear signs of hard work and effort, will of course create a different impression. This is true in life as well as courses such as this one.

Good luck!