Defining Historiography:

Historians do not always agree about how to interpret the events and people that they study; this leads to multiple explanations, which at times, are diametrically opposed to each other. As students progress into upper-level courses in the Department of History, they must move from the mastery of facts and analysis of primary sources encouraged by lower-level courses to a richer and deeper understanding of how history is written and the fact that events and ideas are open to interpretation. Within History 420 (Readings in History), students then move into another level of explanation, where they read intensively on a topic and provide their own historiographical explanations for a series of events/ideas.

Therefore, historiography can be described as “the history of history.” What this means in practice is an exploration of a specific topic, and how historians have explained events or people over time, i.e. how their explanations have changed due to their own worldview and/or ideological bent, due to re-interpretation of previously-viewed sources, due to the availability of new sources, previously unexplored, and/or due to the application of different questions and/or methodologies to sources. Revision of prior interpretations of the past is an implicit and important element of historiography. It requires students to not only be able to explain the different schools of thought or interpretations but also potentially to develop their own explanations, based on their assigned readings. The focus of a historiographical essay is not on the event or person itself; rather, it is on the interpretations of the event or person.

Process:

1. Read and analyze multiple works independently on the same topic (assigned on weekly or bi-weekly basis), including an exploration of the sources that the authors utilize or do not utilize in shaping their arguments.

   a. Make sure that you are not merely summarizing the author’s ideas; rather, you are providing analysis of the work’s argument, sources, and conclusions and of the author’s own interpretation of said topic.

   b. In addition, each author is likely to provide an explanation of the fit of his/her work within the larger historiographical context; take careful note of this as well, particularly when he/she references other assigned works.

   c. Another element of this process is to have a firm understanding of who the author is; be certain to conduct research into previous publications, ideological background and/or current research interests. Are there any parts of his/her background that are directly related to the subject matter and if so, what are the pros and cons of this?
2. Questions to consider as you write your historiographical essay: Individual Works

- What is the “main point” or argument made by each work regarding your specific topic? Think particularly about whether or not the author is trying to reinforce an earlier perception of history or argue for a re-interpretation of the past.
- What kinds of sources are used, how and why? How does the author deal with counter-evidence, i.e. information that seems to weaken or contradict the thesis?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses in terms of argument, analysis and conclusions of the work?
- How does this work relate to earlier readings, i.e. do they present similar or dissimilar ideas and how/why?
- How do these authors or works, as a group, contribute our understanding of this series of historical events and their outcome?

3. Bring these works together in an integrated analysis that incorporates and explains the different arguments, conclusions and evidence of various authors in order to build your own explanation of a central theme. An integrated analysis is one that not only draws on different books/articles but also explains how the works agree and disagree with each other. A particularly strong historiographical essay will do this by considering multiple points of view within discussion of a sub-topic, all in one well-crafted paragraph or series of paragraphs, which is then connected back to the overall argument. Then you would move on to the next connected sub-topic, again linking back to the overall argument. You want to avoid the temptation to simply discuss one work, then the next, and then another, with little explanation or analysis of how they fit together.

4. Questions to consider as you write your historiographical essay: The Big Picture

- How has the historiography of your topic evolved over time? What has changed in terms of interpretation of events and ideas? What was the initial interpretation of this event, idea or person? How has it changed and why?
- How have ideological shifts had an impact on your topic? Are the authors under study wedded to a particular “historical school” i.e. Marxist, Feminist, Neo-Conservative, Liberal, and/or how does the author’s main lens of analysis (cultural, political, military, social, etc.) have an impact on his/her interpretations?
- Have the “discovery” or re-interpretation of sources caused historians to ask new questions or take their research in new directions?
- Have historians used different methodological approaches (e.g. quantitative, linguistic) in their work and how was this had an impact on conclusions?