

TTP 220 Transportation Policy and Planning

Assignment 1: Research Paper on Historical Topic

Memo due Monday 4/9

Paper due Monday 4/23

Purpose

To critically examine an interesting or important topic in the history of urban transportation, and to construct a persuasive argument, in writing, in support of a thesis on that topic.

Products

In this assignment, you will complete a 10-page double-spaced research paper on a topic of your choosing related to the history of urban transportation. This paper should clearly articulate a thesis, build an argument to support this thesis, use research and evidence as appropriate in developing this argument (with appropriate use of citations), and otherwise be a clear, convincing, and interesting paper. Your one-page memo, on which you will get initial feedback, should describe your topic, some preliminary ideas about a thesis, and 4-5 initial references. The paper, including the memo, will be worth 30% of your final grade.

Process

The process of writing a research paper is never completely linear. And no one goes about the process exactly the same way. Nevertheless, it helps to approach the assignment in a systematic way. In outlining the following tasks, I've drawn on several good guides to writing research papers, listed in Appendix A. If you are stuck, try consulting these sites for general strategies. If you are still stuck, particularly with respect to your thesis, come see me.

Task 1: Select your topic

What truly interests you? Try writing a list of ideas. Talk to classmates or friends about possible topics. Do a little looking around on the web. Here is just a small sample of the countless interesting topics possible for this paper:

- Streetcar suburbs: the role of land speculation
- The early importance of the automobile in rural America
- The impact of the Model T on American society
- The rationale for the Interstate Highway System
- The role of GM in the demise of streetcar systems
- Roadside architecture
- The emergence of environmental concerns in federal transportation policy
- The freeway revolts of the 1960s
- The evolution of emissions control technologies
- The role of the US oil industry in shaping federal transportation policy
- Evolving concepts of modern highway design
- Differences between the US and other parts of the world with respect to the evolution of the automobile as a part of daily life

Task 2: Gather your sources

Appendix B gives you lots of suggestions for how to go about gathering sources. The challenge is stay both focused and flexible. You don't want to get distracted by irrelevant material, yet you want to be open to the possibility that you need to expand search terms or shift the focus of your search. You don't have a lot of time for this assignment, so you need to be efficient. Remember that the quality of your sources is important. A simple internet search is not sufficient!

Task 3: Read your sources

With limited time, you will have to be strategic in your reading. This means doing an initial skim of the material to assess its usefulness, then reading in more depth the items or parts of items that are most related to your topic. For these items, it is also a good idea to take notes. Be sure to build a bibliography as you go (ideally using EndNote or some similar program) so that you don't have to go back and construct the bibliography after the fact.

Task 4: Develop a thesis

As the Dartmouth website (cited below) notes, "the thesis sentence is typically that ONE sentence in the paper that asserts, controls, and structures the entire argument." Put some initial thesis statements to these tests:

- Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- Is the point I'm making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?
- Does my thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of my personal feelings?
- Does my thesis indicate the direction of my argument? Does it suggest a structure for my paper?

Task 5: Prepare an outline

A good outline reflects the structure of your argument and guides the writing of your paper. Think about logic flow. Start with your thesis, in one sentence. What comes next? How does that point lead to the next? Start with general points, then flesh in the subpoints within each. Be sure to build your essay around the points you want to make rather than letting your sources organize your paper. In fact, don't even look at your sources while you're working on your outline.

Task 6: Write

Think about three pieces of your paper – introduction, body, conclusions. Your introduction should "set up" your thesis. Provide enough background that when you get to the thesis, the reader knows what you're talking about and is convinced it's interesting. The body of the paper is where you build your argument. Everything in the body of your paper should relate to your thesis. When using sources, be sure to summarize, analyze, explain, and evaluate the material rather than merely reporting on it. Your conclusions should come back to your thesis and summarize your argument, adding additional insights that emerge through the course of the paper (things are rarely as simple as they seem at the start).

Task 7: Revise

Be sure to leave enough time that you can put a complete draft of your paper aside and then return to it after some period of time (a day or two, for example). Read it through critically first for logic flow and use of evidence. Is the argument still convincing? What weak spots do you sense – points that aren't very clear or for which you don't have good evidence? Fix what you can. Then read it

through finally for language, grammar, and typos. Make sure that you have included all appropriate and necessary citations, and that your citations are in an approved format (see Appendix C).

Appendix A: Helpful websites on writing a research paper

UC Davis: <http://cai.ucdavis.edu/trc/trcgrid.html>

Wisconsin: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/PlanResearchPaper.html>

Dartmouth: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml>

Purdue: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/index.html>

Appendix B: How to find articles and information:

Although the Internet provides access to oodles of information these days, the library is still your primary source for academic research. The library's website links you to several important databases that enable you to search for books or articles on your specific topic. These databases now include electronic versions of a large share of academic articles – but not all of them. Start with these databases to search for academic articles. If the database does not provide you with “full text,” then go to the Harvest Library Catalog and search for the journal the article is in. With luck, it will be available either electronically or in old-fashioned print in the library. You might also try www.sciencedirect.com for electronic versions of articles.

UCD Library Electronic Databases to try:

- TRIS Online – the best place to go for transportation research, including academic articles and research reports
- Expanded Academic ASAP – a multidisciplinary database that includes academic articles and articles from the popular magazines.
- PAIS Archive and PAIS International Database – indexes all types of materials in the area of public affairs
- Web of Science (run by ISI Web of Knowledge) – multidisciplinary database that links articles by citations; if you find one good article, you can use this database to search for later articles that cite this article or to find all articles by the same author.

A really useful trick: If you find a really good article, especially a recent one, take a look at the articles it cites. Be sure to consider what the article says about the articles it cites, though – you want to focus on the ones they talk about in positive terms! Then use the Web of Science database for newer articles that cited your reference. (To actually do this type of search, click "connect" to get to the database, click "full search", and then click "cited ref search". Enter the information about the older article (or book), and the search engine will find newer articles for you that referenced that one.)

Books, research reports, and government reports are also acceptable sources and may be particularly useful for this assignment. But they are often harder to use than a succinct article. They also generally go through a more limited peer-review process (if any) than academic articles, so that quality may be more of an issue. Books are most easily found through the Harvest Library Catalog; you'll have to go to the library to get them. Research reports and government reports may turn up in some of the electronic databases (e.g. PAIS or TRIS) but are often most easily found through a Google search.

Google searches are a good way to find background information on your topic, but you have to use this tool carefully. Not all information on the web is to be trusted! Use the following questions in evaluating what you find on the web:

- Who or what is the author of the website?
- Is the site advocating a particular point of view?
- Does the web site give accurate and complete references?
- Are the data up-to-date?
- Are the data official?
- Is it a university research site?
- Do the data seem consistent with data from other sites?

Appendix C: A few words about citations

Citation format is getting more complicated as more materials become available on-line. The author-date format is used most widely in planning journals (i.e. (author year) in the text, with a list of references at the end of the paper) but other formats are acceptable if used correctly and consistently. My general rule of thumb is that you need to provide enough information that the reader could find the item herself. For things like government reports, this includes the agency, the report number, the date, and, if possible, a phone number or email address for the agency. I suggest using the Chicago, APA, or MLA manuals of style, available through the library (<http://www.lib.ucdavis.edu/instruc/citing/>). You can also take a look at the reading list for the course for an example of an acceptable bibliographic format.