

Research Project: Getting Started

Because the semester is a short 16 weeks, I don't want you to take on a research project that requires you to spend a great deal of time just locating primary sources. I want you to spend most of your time analyzing the primary sources. I suggest that you find a research topic related to California or the San Francisco Bay Area after the 1860s, because the primary sources will be more easily available than for more distant places and earlier time periods.

1. Primary Sources/Historical Evidence:

The research paper for this course must be based on primary sources. Primary sources include: government documents; contemporary newspapers and periodicals; contemporary pamphlets and books; the private papers and letters of individuals; collections of organizational papers; property records; corporate records; oral interviews; photographic records; and so forth. These types of materials are available at libraries, archives, and other specialized institutions with research facilities. Some of the most important research archives in the Bay Area are:

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Documentary and published materials dealing with the history of SF

California Historical Society, San Francisco

Archival materials dealing with California history

Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley

US history materials, esp. on California and the American West

Regional Oral History Collection, UC Berkeley

Oral interviews on California and the American West

Labor Archives and Research Center, SFSU

Archival and printed materials dealing with labor and the left in Northern California

Special Collections, SFSU

Rare and archival materials, esp. on SFSU

Sutro Library, 480 Winston Drive

Wide-ranging collection dealing with family history and genealogy, the West, and Mexico

National Archives, Pacific Sierra Branch, San Bruno

Archival materials from federal agencies active in the West.

Microfilm copies of U.S. census manuscripts.

Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University

Archival materials dealing with issues of war, revolution, and peace

Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University
Rare and archival materials, esp. on Stanford University
California State Library, Sacramento
Wide-ranging archival and published materials on history of California

Information on some of these libraries and others are provided on the attached pages. Please note that access to these libraries and archives is often more complicated than at ordinary libraries. You may have to make a special appointment and abide by special rules in order to use these institutions. They also may be open limited hours.

2. Research Topics:

There are two interrelated ways of generating research topics. One strategy is to think of a subject, event, social movement, organization, person, or place you are interested in learning more about. The other method is to identify collections of primary sources that interest you and to think about possible research topics that could be based upon those sources.

Remember that your topic must be broad enough that you'll be able to find information on it, but narrow enough that you'll be able to explore it without being overwhelmed by too much material. Keep in mind that you have a relatively short time to research and write a relatively short paper (12-15 pages).

Possible topics:

1. A local, state, or national election. Think about the issues involved and how candidates or parties or social movements responded to the issues and to the voters. Why did the outcome turn out the way it did? Examples include the 1911 mayoral elections in Los Angeles or San Francisco, the 1911 woman suffrage referendum in California, the 1934 gubernatorial election in California, the passage of Proposition 13 in California in 1978.
2. An event, for example, a strike, a development decision, the response to a natural disaster. What happened and why? Who were the principal groups or individuals involved? What issues of ideology and power arose during the conflicts engendered by the event and its outcome? Examples include the 1901 San Francisco teamsters and waterfront strikes, the expansion of the Southern Pacific Railroad in the 1870s and 1880s, the damming of Hetch Hetchy.
3. Since the 19th century social movements have challenged the main aspects of social inequality in American society – along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Examine some aspect of such a movement in California at a particular moment, for example its constituencies, goals and/or strategies. Ask questions about the political context in which it operated and its contributions to a shift in political ideology or relations of power. Or explore a movement organized to preserve existing power

relations. Examples include the feminist movement of the 1910s or the 1960s, the civil rights movement of the World War II period, the anti-Chinese movement of the 1870s and 1880s.

4. Some aspect of culture, work, and/or community life for an identifiable social group in a particular place and time. What was the nature of that group? How did members of the group live and work? How did the group create a sense of identity, community, and shared values? What was the position of the group in the larger culture and society? Examples include the Chinese community in San Francisco in the 1880s and 1890s, San Francisco working women in 1900, the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles in the 1920s, the Black community in Oakland or Richmond in the 1940s.
5. Cultural ideas and practices change over time. Identify primary sources, perhaps popular magazines, through which you can trace shifting ideas about gender roles, racial difference, sexuality, childrearing, or other important issues. Think about what factors contributed to changing ideas, including the social groups which may have played a role in shaping them and the social groups that might have been affected most by them. What do the ideas expressed in popular culture tell us about larger changes in social relationships? Examples include a comparison of the treatment of divorce in popular magazines in 1900 and 1910, reaction of San Francisco to state efforts to close down brothels in 1914, discussion of birth control in women's movement publications in 1916, discussion of childrearing in popular magazines of the 1950s.