

Roots Paper Instructions

Overview: In this paper, you will write a narrative of your own family's history in the United States, and analyze various forms of cultural identity that you find expressed in that history. Cultural identity (such as class, gender, or ethnicity) refers to the sense people have of belonging to certain cultural groups. You will focus first on your family history, telling the story (as best you can) of various branches of your family. Then, you will analyze the ways your family members defined themselves over time in terms of race, ethnicity, and nationality, class, gender, and/or other forms of group identity that you feel were significant in their history.

Your Family's "American Experience": The way family trees branch into the past, most of us have a variety of origins, with ancestors who came to the United States from somewhere else within the last few centuries. Where did they come from and why did they come to the United States? Your job is to describe the experiences of past generations or branches of your own family in coming to and making a life in the US, and to narrate and analyse what happened to them in the decades since with regards to such course themes as **assimilation, opportunity, discrimination**, and major events, movements, and trends in US culture.

Everyone has limits about what they can find out, so do the best you can with what you have. Your best sources of information are older family members and friends, old letters, pictures, and other family documents. Feel free to leave out information that you feel is too personal or would make you feel uncomfortable, or come talk to me about this. But note: no one deserves credit or blame for anything done by his or her ancestors, who were often driven—as we also are today—by institutional, systematic and historical forces beyond their control. Indeed, discussing the way your own family was impacted by or participated in America's often troubled past is one way to achieve critical distance so you can see the past and present more clearly. Most families or family trees have their share of people with attitudes that might seem unmodern today: by putting those ancestors in historical perspective, however, you can better understand *why* they acted the way they did, and how their values were shaped by their experiences.

Length: 6 typed, double-spaced pages. **Format:** MLA format, but citations usually not needed.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the formation, over time, of your and your family's current sense of identity by analyzing and reflecting upon their historical "American experience," especially focusing on cultural categories such as class, race, ethnicity, gender and religious identity as crucial aspects of that experience.

Audience: Because many of you will do "Roots Presentations" for the class, the audience for this paper includes your classmates and myself.

ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT

MLA-Style Heading and Header: Using a header, provide your last name and the page number in the upper right-hand corner. In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, NOT in the header, include only the following: your name, your professor's name, the class, and the date in day-month-year format: i.e. "21 February 2009"

Title: Your title should follow from your reflections and discoveries. Be creative, and analytical!

Introduction (first paragraph): A good introduction will:

- grab the reader's attention (usually with the first sentence) by posing a question, beginning with an anecdote, using a striking image, etc.;
- provide some indication of what the paper is about;
- end with a thesis (some argument or truth that is central to your analysis), or at least a statement of focus forecasting what your reader will find in the paper.
- You might wish to wait until you have completed your analysis so you can write a more pertinent opening and thesis. Or you can write a preliminary thesis and then revise it later.

Statement of Scope (1 paragraph): Here discuss the focus and limitations of your paper (scope), explaining what information was available to you, and what was not due to lack of information. For example, you may explain that you have only limited information on your father's family, but a lot of information on your mother's family. Because this class examines your "American Experience," it is best in most cases to limit your narrative to no more than 1-2 generations before your family came to the US. Talk to me if you feel your family's earlier circumstances warrant more space.

Family Histories (about 3-4 pages—don't get carried away!): Here, describe, in separate sections of several paragraphs each, the history of the main branches of your family going back to 1-2 generations before their arrival in the US. Try to identify persons who were the first in your family to come to the U.S. When and why did they come, and from where? Gaps in your history are to be expected, but where possible, speculate based on what you DO know.

- Your histories should each **identify the forms of racial or ethnic identity** in the various branches of your family—meaning how they self-identified in this respect.
- Where possible, describe how specific family members were influenced by or reacted to **major historical events of their time**, for example, the Civil War and Reconstruction, events in Texas history, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the Woman Suffrage movement, the World Wars, the Depression, the Korean War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and events in the 60s like the Civil Rights or women's movement. Did these events help your ancestors assimilate into American culture, or were they further excluded or impoverished? Did historical events impact the way class boundaries, gender roles, or racial or ethnic categories affected your family members? Did they become more free? Less free?

Analysis: (1.5-2 pages) After you tell your family's stories, the final section of the paper analyzes these histories. No paper will receive higher than a C if this section is not completed. All papers must begin with an approx. ½ page Race/Ethnicity analysis. Then you should choose at least TWO areas you feel are most significant and meaningful in your family's history and write at least 1/2 page of description and analysis for each.

- **Race or Ethnicity Analysis: (required)** Describe the way your family's racial or ethnic categories—or *perceived* identity—impacted their history. Was race or ethnicity more pertinent, or both? (Note: you may think of national identity as ethnicity here, since both describe groups with a common culture). Did they experience discrimination as minorities, or were they part of a majority group? Or were they from a minority group that was little exposed to discrimination? How did their minority or majority status affect their opportunities in the US, such as employment or education? How did this status affect their

sense of themselves? Did they feel solidarity with others in the same group, or live in a “parallel society”? Once in the US, was assimilation important, or maintaining the prior cultural identity? In what other ways was race or ethnicity an important factor in their lives?

- **Social Class Analysis** : Identify the social class (beginning with lifestyle and occupation) of various branches of the family over time. Did your family have servants? Or were they the servants? Did someone make it big? Or hit the skids? Then analyze: how did economic status influence your ancestor’s **opportunities**, and those of later family members? What “**class attitudes**” did they have, such as attitudes toward education, toward work and kinds of work, toward manners and dress, or toward success and status? Was social advancement expected? How else did economic status affect their lives, or the decision to emigrate? How did it come about that you are now attending St. Edwards, an expensive private school? For additional clues, you might analyze the details of old family photographs, looking for signs of affluence or poverty, at details of dress and setting, and for things that closely affect class position like lifestyle (rural or urban), or family size. Every picture does indeed tell a story!
- **Gender Roles**: Compare the experiences of and expectations felt by men and women in your family over time. Did this change over the generations? What were their relative responsibilities, their roles, and their limitations? When, for example, did women first work outside the home in your family? Was your family patriarchal and traditional, or did women have power—or both? Did class affect expectations for women, for example, by forcing women to work outside the home? How else did gender affect your ancestors’ stories? Were there differences in opportunity or expectations, such as the idea that women should not pursue education or a career? Did gender play a limiting role in the choice of occupations? You should especially note how and why attitudes changed over time.
- **Other Forms of Group Cultural or Subcultural Identity**: If you can show how other forms of identity, such as those shared in certain **subcultures**, were significant in your family’s history and American Experience, you may choose this option. These might include group identities based on shared religious views (including those of sects or denominations), identities based on sexuality (such as gay and lesbian communities); those based on vocation or activities, such as military or musical subcultures; identities based on political views or agendas; or identities based in certain regions or localities (such as Southern, or New York). What was the effect of this form of identity? Was it felt to be (or seen as by outsiders) as a marginal one? Was there a sense of exclusion? Solidarity? Was discrimination a problem?

Conclusion (approx. 1/2 page): In this concluding section you should reflect on what you have learned in your analysis and discuss the ways in which elements of your family’s history shaped your own current sense of identity, whether you feel you have a “master status,” or feel identified with various, multiple groups when you are in different contexts. If possible, try to remain analytical and avoid “happy talk” in this section, which should focus on what you have learned in your research.

A FEW TIPS

- Because this paper involves personal narrative and reflection, it is fully appropriate to use the **personal “I”** throughout.

- When forced to speculate, use **conditional (not absolute) language**. For example, if you assume, from looking at pictures, that your family followed conventional gender roles for their era, indicate this with conditional language: “Based on family portraits, *it would seem* (or “*I believe*”) that the women in my family followed 19th century conventions regarding gender roles.”
- **Gaps in your history** are natural and to be expected. You can help your reader over these gaps by specifying what information is missing: i.e. “it is unclear what happened to her children after Granny Moss’s death, but they next appear in a San Antonio orphanage in 1932.”
- In academic writing, **topic sentences** and **clear organization** help your readers follow your ideas. Paragraphs between ½ to ¾ page are the norm in academic writing, and should be **focused** on one major idea. The topic of each paragraph should be announced in a topic sentence. Topic sentences also should include **transition words** to help the reader make the connection between the topic of the new paragraph and the last one. For example: “While my father’s family was involved in that turmoil, however, my mother’s family was enjoying relative prosperity in New Mexico.”
- Use an MLA handbook for help with transitions, and a list of transition words and phrases.

American Experience CULF 1320.50 Dr. Onderdonk – Spring 2012
Roots Paper Grading Rubric

CONTENT & COMPLETENESS (Weight – 40%)

A (36-40)	Essay has well developed sections addressing each requirement, and with well chosen supporting examples. Content addresses course themes explicitly and with keen understanding.
B (32-35)	The essay has sections addressing each paper requirement, and supporting examples. Course concepts are generally understood and addressed but perhaps indirectly or unevenly.
C (28-31)	The essay addresses most of the paper requirements, but sections are missing, or lack supporting examples. Some misunderstanding of course concepts may be evident.
D (24-27)	The essay lacks major requirements of the paper, or displays a serious misunderstanding of the assignment or concepts.

ANALYSIS (Weight – 40%)

A (36-40)	The essay's narrative section focuses tightly on course themes that are examined insightfully in the analysis section, demonstrating keen insight into the concepts of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other forms of identity discussed. The essay reflects rigorously and explicitly on these concepts, and on the changes that the writer's family has undergone over the decades.
B (32-35)	The essay's narrative section focuses on course themes that are examined with some insight in the analysis section, demonstrating understanding of the concepts of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other forms of identity discussed. The analysis reflects explicitly on these concepts, and on the changes that the writer's family has undergone over the decades.
C (28-31)	The essay's narrative section may include some analysis of concepts of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other forms of identity, but may be superficial or lack understanding of those concepts. Analysis sections may be incomplete or with missing parts, or may fail to consider changes the writer's family has undergone over time.
D (24-27)	The essay lacks analysis, or may wholly misunderstand the concepts of identity specified in the assignment.

ORGANIZATION AND EXPRESSION (Weight – 20%)

A (18-20)	Essay powerfully and logically organized, with coherent paragraphs and effective transitions and clear topic sentences. Expression is clear, grammatical, and appropriate for academic writing.
B (16-17)	Essay is logically organized, with generally coherent paragraphs and adequate transitions and topic sentences. Expression is clear and appropriate for academic writing, though with some lapses in clarity or grammar.
C (14-15)	Inconsistent organization or coherence. Essay might have clear components, but other parts remain undeveloped or are disordered. Expression is vague, awkward, ungrammatical, or inappropriate in places.
D (12-13)	Essay lacks organization and/or coherence. Expression and grammar often impair understanding, or are inappropriate for academic writing.

Comments: