

U.S. URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

U.S. Urban Environmental History

Macalester College Prof. Chris Wells

TR 9:40-11:10 Olin-Rice 243

Course Description

In the minds of many Americans, cities are places where nature is absent—places where nature exists only in the crevices and on the margins of spaces dominated by technology, concrete, and human artifice. This course confronts this assumption directly, drawing on scholarship from the relatively young field of urban environmental history to uncover the deep interconnections between urban America and the natural world. Among other things, we will examine how society has

drawn upon nature to build and sustain urban growth, the implications that urban growth has for transforming ecosystems both local and distant, and how social values have guided urbanites as they have built, rearranged, and responded to the world around them. Using the Twin Cities as a backdrop and reference point, we will attempt to understand the constantly changing ways that people, cities, and nature have shaped and reshaped one another throughout American history.



Contact Information

Prof. Chris Wells
wells@macalester.edu
651-696-6803 (office)



You can always reach me by email. I will usually get back to you quickly on weekdays. You can also try texting my office number if you have a short pressing question, though that's new and I make no promises about how that will work!

Call me “Chris” (he/him/his)

Students are sometimes not sure what to call their professors. Like many others at Macalester, I invite you to use my first name, though if you are feeling formal Professor Wells or Dr. Wells are both fine. Please be sure to share what you would like to be called, as well!



Drop-In Hours

I will hold standing office hours (time I hold specifically to talk to students) this semester in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, on Tues 1:20-2:50, Thurs 11:20-11:50, and by appointment. You can reserve a time, if you'd like, [here](#), but you can also just show up! If these standing times don't work for you, plug my name into the 'Meet with' box in Google calendar, identify a few times that appear to work for both of us, and send those to me. I'll send you a calendar invitation for the one that

works best for me. Talking to students is one of my favorite things about being a professor. No question is too small, and no pretext to talk is too flimsy: if you want to talk, we can talk!

Challenging Times

These are challenging times, and this course engages difficult issues that can at times be actively discouraging. I've designed this course with a great deal of flexibility and with your success as a top priority. If things aren't working for you, whatever the reason, please let me know and I'll do what I can to help.

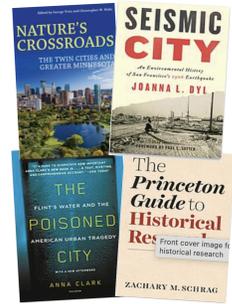


Our Moodle site (moodle.macalester.edu) is not just a crucial resource, but is also our primary point of contact for this class. In addition to hosting this syllabus, it is where you can find our complete daily schedule, as well as links to all of our readings, discussions, activities, and assignments—in short, anything and everything related to the course. Please familiarize yourself with the Moodle site before doing anything else, and let me know promptly if you have any questions or run into any problems! Send me a quick email, subject line Easter Egg, and let me know you've read this!

Required Texts

All of our course texts are available in the college bookstore:

- Vrtis and Wells, eds, *Nature's Crossroads: The Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota*
- Joanna Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake*
- Anna Clark, *The Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy*
- Zachary Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*



The first three books are available for purchase in the bookstore, but please note three things:

1. Three of the four texts are available as a free download (requires login) from Macalester's library ([Nature's Crossroads](#); [Seismic City](#); [Princeton Guide to Historical Research](#)). If you are comfortable reading on a device that you can bring to class and do not want to own a copy, that is fine. The *Princeton Guide* is optional either way.
2. The fourth required book (*The Poisoned City*) is available on 8-hour reserve at the library.
3. All other course readings are available through our course's [Moodle site](#).

Helpful Resources



Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. To meet with a writing counselor at the **MAX Center**, visit [WOnline](#). **Research and instruction librarians** are another great resource for research and writing. Book an appointment with one of them [here](#). **Another useful resource** for writers is Macalester's [Write Well video series](#). **Please also spend some time** perusing Prof. Zachary Schrag's [helpful advice about doing well](#) in history.

Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty erodes the basic foundations of higher education: exchange, debate, and the thoughtful consideration of what we know, how we know it, and why it matters. It has no place at Macalester or in this course. We will be talking, at some length, about the implications of generative AI for how we think about academic honesty. Find Macalester's academic integrity policy [here](#). For help avoiding plagiarism, visit the Library's Academic Integrity materials [here](#). For the Quick Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, the citation system used by historians, visit [here](#) (requires login).

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. If course design ever poses barriers to your ability to access or to demonstrate mastery of course content, please let me know. I will make reasonable academic accommodations in such cases. If you have a known disability and think that you may need formal accommodations, [email](#), call 651-696-6748, or use the [online scheduler](#). Even if you do not need formal accommodations, you may find yourself needing things that you normally would not. In those cases, please let me know that you are struggling (though I don't need to know details about why). I may be able to make reasonable accommodations that will help.



Writing Assignments

Your written work should present your ideas in polished, carefully edited, thoughtfully considered prose. Because this course meets Macalester's argumentative writing (WA) requirement, we will spend a good deal of class time honing our skills and discussing the conventions of good argumentative writing – a topic that will include very careful attention to documenting our work and our writing processes.

This last point is especially important because, as an upper-level methods course in history, this class will require you to grapple intently with the uses, implications, and ethics of a novel and transformative category of writing tools, alternatively known as large language models (LLMs), artificial intelligence (AI), or generative AI. These tools alter and destabilize the relationship between authors and writing, and mark what is likely to be a paradigm shift in how we understand what it means to write.

So what does this mean for our class? When it comes to AI, the entire world is making it up as we go along right now, and this class will be no different. When it comes to these tools, we will have a chance to play, to experiment, to push some boundaries, and even to try to break some things, all in the name of trying to understand them more fully. We will also try to be thoughtful, curious, and ethical about what we're doing, and will be especially attentive to what AI means for doing scholarly work generally and for the act of writing history in particular.

The class has two major writing assignments, which we will discuss more thoroughly in class:

The "State of the Field" Essay: In a short essay (3-4 pages), critically assess what you think are the 3-4 most important existing scholarly sources that are relevant to your tentative research paper topic. At the end of the essay, include an annotated bibliography with another 6-7 relevant sources.

The Final Research Paper (15-25 pgs) will be on a topic of your choice that deals with some aspect of the historical relationship between people and the U.S. urban environment. It should connect in some clear way to the topics and themes of the class, draw on a range of sources, address historical questions, and represent your best efforts to think through the issues involved in polished, carefully edited, thoughtfully considered prose. You will use AI in various ways during this process, which you will document carefully and reflect on in separate small written assignments.

The Peer Review Draft of the Research Paper: A complete draft of your research paper—with an emphasis on completeness rather than polish or organization—is due on Thurs., April 11 at the start of class. It is important that you submit a complete draft then so that everyone can participate in the in-class writing workshop scheduled for that day's class period.

The class also has a number of smaller writing assignments.

Many of these smaller assignments will involve generative AI, or reflecting on the use of generative AI. Others will simply help you prepare for class discussions. This is all very new, however, so we will have to nail down the details together, and in conversation about what will be most beneficial.

Grades, Grading Philosophy, and Grading System

My grading philosophy is that grades ideally ought to do a few things. First, they ought to **encourage learning**—that is, to give you reasons (whether carrots or sticks) to take advantage of the opportunities for learning that the course provides. Second, they should reflect how much work you have put into the class—that is, how much genuine **effort** you have made to learn the things I have asked you to learn and to do the things I have asked you to do. Third, they should measure how well you have demonstrated mastery of the course’s content—that is, your **performance** on high-stakes assignments that I have designed to measure your knowledge and skill.

The problem is that there is often tension among these three things, which can generate angst and ambiguity for students and professors alike. If one student displays exceptional effort and improvement, should she get a higher grade than her actual performance on high-stakes assessments says she should? What about the brilliant slackers? The ones who miss a bunch of class, rarely contribute to discussions, and text under the table—yet somehow manage to perform well on important tests and papers? And then, of course, we continue to find ourselves caught squarely in the midst of ongoing crises caused by the twin threats of a global pandemic and racial injustice.

Grading in this course will be quite different in some ways—and very similar in others—from norms you have likely experienced in the past. I have structured the grading system, as best I can, to encourage serious learning, reward effort, and acknowledge achievement—while remaining as flexible as possible under the unusual circumstances that define the moment. In an effort to encourage experimentation, reward effort, and provide an honest assessment of your mastery of course content and goals, **I will determine your grade this semester using a system called “Contract for B+”**



Here’s how it works in a nutshell. In this course, your final grade will be based on two separate variables. The **first variable** is your fulfillment of the “Contract for B+,” which is spelled out on the next page. Its focus is your overall effort and engagement with the course across the entire semester. If you fulfill the contract, the worst grade you can get in the course is a B+. The **second variable** is the overall quality of the written work that you have revised and selected to include in your final portfolio. If you fulfill the terms of the contract and turn in a B+ portfolio or lower, your final grade will be a B+; likewise, an A- portfolio will earn an A- for the course, and an A will earn an A. For those who do not fulfill the contract, the best grade you can earn, which will be calculated based on how far you have fallen off contract alongside the quality of your final portfolio, is a B.

I will read and give feedback on your work regularly during the semester, focusing on how you can improve your writing and your mastery of course content. I will not grade any of your written work until the final portfolio, although you should have a good idea of where you stand based on the comments I provide. You will also have ample opportunity to talk to me outside of class about your writing. The purpose of this approach is to remove worries about grades from the equation, allowing us to focus on what you can do to improve as a writer and as a student in this course.

Contract for B+

Every student who does all of the following is guaranteed to earn at least a B+ in this course:

- 1. Attend class regularly.** Everyone may miss four classes (two full weeks of class!) without explanation and remain on contract. Any additional absences must be “purchased” at the cost of two tokens (see “Forgiveness Tokens,” next page). This is a *huge* amount of class to miss, but I’m aiming for maximum flexibility. Please be thoughtful about when and under what circumstances you must miss class.
- 2. Do the reading and participate in class discussions, exercises, and activities.** Be advised that this course has a reading load and frequent short writing assignments that are appropriate for a 300-level history course. I have chosen readings for readability and interest, but please plan ahead. Completing both readings and short writing assignments in a timely way is vital to our collective success. Discussion and short writing assignments are the driving forces in this class, so it is vital that everyone arrive prepared to discuss and engage with the day’s material. Our goal will be to analyze issues, to explore connections between events, to answer questions, to clear up confusion, to discuss major themes, and above all to engage with course readings. If you are uncomfortable speaking in class, be advised that asking a good question can be just as valuable (and at times more valuable!) than delivering a long-winded oration.
- 3. Turn in work that is on time and complete,** even if it is not your best work. All writing assignments should be complete, on time, reflect honest effort, and be of at least passing quality. For the *State of the Field Essay* and the *Peer Review Draft of your Research Paper*, you may request an automatic, no-questions-asked extension of 48 hours for revisions before I read what you have submitted and offer my comments—as long as you turn in a complete, passing-level draft when it is due. (To be considered of “passing-level” quality, your *Peer Review Draft of the Research Paper* must earn at least 80 points according to [this rubric](#).) In addition, you are always invited to discuss known problems with me ahead of deadlines, even on short notice; in some circumstances I will be able to extend deadlines.
- 6. Give honest, constructive feedback on others’ writing** in class and in peer conferences.
7. For your final portfolio, **make substantive, good-faith revisions** that respond to written feedback from me and others. This will most often include extending or refining your thinking by qualifying or sharpening your thesis, reconsidering your evidence and analysis, restructuring of your arguments at the paragraph and sentence level, and/or editing your language for greater clarity and impact.
- 8. Turn in a complete portfolio** of revised, passing-quality work, with cover sheet, via Moodle on Monday, 4/29 by 9 pm.
- 9. Meet individually with me for a 30-minute portfolio conference,** chosen from a wide range of available times, between Tues 4/30 and Fri 5/3. During the conference, I will give your portfolio a grade and discuss it with you. If you are happy with that grade, you can choose to accept it and be done. If you would like to continue revising, you can keep working on it for an additional 48 hours and resubmit it with a new cover letter explaining the changes you have made and how they improve the portfolio. There is no guarantee that revisions will improve your grade, but you cannot earn less than the grade assigned at your conference.

Portfolios of Revised Work

The writing in your final revised portfolio should reflect your best writing, and taken as a whole should demonstrate your ability to:

1. Identify, analyze, and synthesize important course themes by drawing on multiple sources;
2. Identify, summarize, and engage with other scholars' historical arguments;
3. Generate a compelling historical argument that follows the conventions of historical scholarship and is competently framed for an anticipated audience of other bright, engaged Macalester students who do not know the first thing about this course's content;
4. Support an argument by carefully analyzing an appropriate range of well selected evidence drawn from course materials and original research;
5. Express ideas clearly using sentence and paragraph-level structures appropriate for historical scholarship.
6. [Guidelines for demonstrating engagement with AI tools TK in conversation with the class]



Your portfolio should include the following:

1. Your revised Final Research Paper
2. Written work reflecting engagement with AI [GUIDELINES TK]
3. A 2-3 page cover letter that explains how the writing in your portfolio demonstrates each of the skills listed above and provides a short description of the most important revisions you have made to improve each piece of writing.

You may include more pieces of writing than this if you need to in order to demonstrate 1-6 above, but the complete portfolio should not exceed 30 pages total. (Your cover letter will not count toward the 0-page limit.)



Tokens

Sometimes we don't quite manage to do everything we intend to do, despite our best efforts. Tokens are designed to recognize this reality and give you a bit of additional flexibility to meet the goals you set for yourself. Everyone in the class will begin the semester with three tokens, which you may use in whatever combination you want at the following exchange rates:

- 1 token = one 72-hour extension on a single assignment (excludes peer-review draft)
- 2 tokens = 1 class absence or 24-hour extension on final portfolio

If you fall behind and find yourself needing to do extra work to catch back up to where you would like to be, be sure to talk to me. There is likely a reasonable way to earn extra tokens to get back on track.
