

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY



MACALESTER



Macalester College Prof. Chris Wells

MWF 2:20-3:20 Theater 205

Course Description

People have always had to contend with the natural world, but only recently have historians begun to explore the changing relationships between people and their environments over time. In this course, we will examine the variety of ways that people in North America have shaped the environment, as well as how they have used, labored in, abused, conserved, protected, rearranged, polluted, cleaned, and thought about it. In addition, we will explore how various characteristics of the natural world have affected the broad patterns of human society, sometimes harming or hindering life and other times enabling rapid development and expansion. By bringing nature into the study of human history, and the human past into the study of nature, we will begin to see the connections and interdependencies between the two that traditional history often overlooks.



Contact Information

Prof. Chris Wells
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651-696-6803 (office)
Olin-Rice 249c



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 (when you can drop in to talk with me) this semester in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, on **Monday 3:30-4:30, Wednesday 1:10-2:10, and by appointment.** To meet with me, just show up! You can also reserve a time, if you'd like, [here](#). If you'd like to meet but the scheduled times don't work, email me with a few times that will work for you and I'll check them against my calendar.

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.



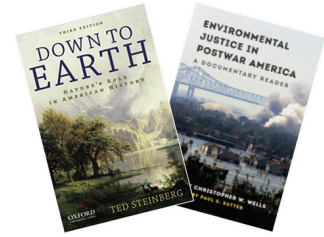
Our Moodle site (moodle.macalester.edu) is not just a crucial resource, but is also our primary point of contact for this class. In addition to hosting this syllabus, it is where you can find our [complete daily schedule](#), as well as links to all of our readings, discussions, activities, and assignments—in 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!

Policy on class recordings: I have no plans to make any recordings of what we do in class. Should that change for any reason, such as to accommodate a documented disability, I will notify you in advance and any recording will be in a manner consistent with [Macalester's classroom recording policy](#). That policy states that no one may record any classroom activity, in whole or part, without the prior written approval of the Office of Disability Services and the knowledge of the instructor, and that any such recordings are limited to personal academic use only, may not be shared, replicated, or published, and must be destroyed or stored by the Office of Disability Services at the end of the semester.

Required Texts

Two books are available in the [college bookstore](#) and [on reserve](#):

- Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth* (4th edition)
- Chris Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America*



Although both are available in the bookstore, please note several things:

1. I have ordered the 4th edition of *Down to Earth*, which is the most recent edition, for the class. It is available through the college bookstore.
2. For reasons I will explain in class, an audio recording of (most of) *Down to Earth*'s third edition (with me as narrator) is also available on our [course Moodle page](#) (requires login).
3. The other book is available as a [free download](#) through the library and is linked in Moodle.

Attendance, Engagement, and Participation



The success of this class hinges on your active engagement with course texts and your participation in class discussions and activities. Our project in class meetings will be to explore connections between events, to answer questions, to clear up any confusion, to discuss the major themes of the course, and above all to engage with the big ideas in the assigned texts. Please remember that we are all in this together and we are all responsible for the success of the course. As eager as I am to share with you what I know, I expect that you will learn at least as much (and probably a lot more!) in conversation with

one another as you will from me. It is vital that we all respect one another's time, space, values, and ideas by coming to class on time and prepared to engage in respectful, intellectually challenging discussions. In practice, this means you should:

1. Answer framing questions regularly before class.
2. Read and engage with assigned texts before class, and show up ready to discuss the day's material and to participate in class activities.
3. Attend class regularly. Since this is a discussion-based class, it is obviously important to be in class in order to discuss the material. If you are ill or are coming down with something, you **SHOULD NOT** come to class. Everyone may miss six classes (two full weeks of class) without explanation or penalty. That is a ton! If you miss more than three classes, however, please consider talking to me privately (without needing to share specifics) so that we can figure out how to accommodate whatever challenges you are facing and develop a plan for you to succeed in the class. If you miss more than six classes it is **essential** that we talk. Together we can try to come up with some reasonable arrangements to help you stay on track.

Helpful Resources

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



Academic dishonesty

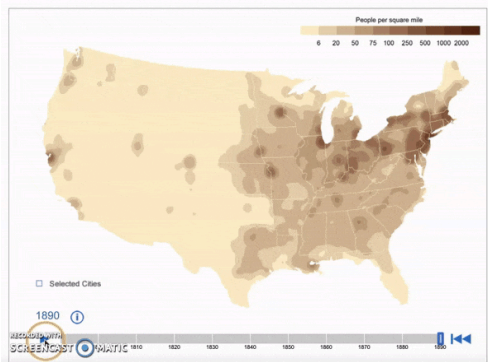
Academic dishonesty erodes the basic foundations of higher education: exchange, debate, and the thoughtful consideration of what we know, how we know it, and why it matters. It has no place at Macalester or in this course. Find Macalester's academic integrity policy [here](#). For help avoiding plagiarism, visit the Library's Academic Integrity materials [here](#); on the ethical use of generative AI tools, visit the Library's guide on AI Literacy and Critical Thinking [here](#). For the Quick Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, the citation system used by historians, visit [here](#).

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. I've designed this course with your success as a top priority, following the principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#), which aim to minimize systemic barriers to learning that come from cultural difference and/or disability. This means that you will have a great deal of flexibility in how you engage with the course. That said, if course design ever poses barriers to your ability to access or to demonstrate mastery of course content, or if things just aren't working for you for some reason, please let me know so that we can explore reasonable solutions together. Whether you have a known disability and have formal accommodations or are just struggling, Disability Resources can help. Reach them by [email](#), phone (651-696-6748), or use the [online scheduler](#).



Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890

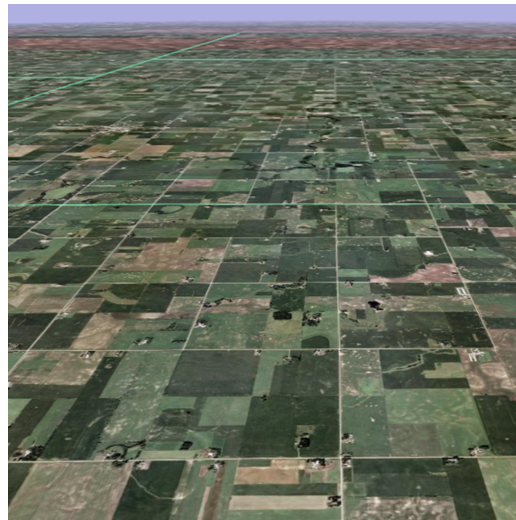


Writing Assignments

This course fulfills Macalester's Writing Practice (WP) General Education requirement. That means the course requires you to engage in [frequent low-stakes opportunities for you to express your ideas in writing](#). The vast majority of these are short critical responses to daily reading assignments (150-300 words). You will also write four short reflection papers (3-5 pages each), and have the option to write a longer research paper (6-10 pages).

Papers

The *Reflection Papers* (3-5 double-spaced pages, due at the end of each unit) will give you a chance to synthesize--and demonstrate a deeper understanding of--the material we discuss together in the first and second halves of the class. Additional details are available in Moodle. The optional *Place Paper* asks you to integrate a small amount of your own historical research with what you have learned about the themes and questions of environmental history. Drawing on course materials and themes, you will select a place in the U.S. that you know well (or can research easily) and write a 6-10 page interpretive essay on it and its environmental history. We will discuss this assignment in class as its due date approaches, and additional details are available in Moodle.



Late Work Policy

For each of the reflection papers, as long as you turn in a complete draft by the due date, you may request--and I will always grant--a penalty-free extension of 72 hours to work on it further. Because there is a great deal of choice in reading engagement assignments, however, I will not accept reading engagement assignments once the class period in which we are discussing the text begins. In the case that you find yourself in unusual circumstances, or find yourself needing extra time to complete your work in a way that demonstrates what you are learning, please let me know what is going on. As in other areas of the course, I may be able to make reasonable accommodations that will help.

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, skill, and critical thinking relative to other students.



The problem is that there is often tension among these three things, which can generate a lot of angst and ambiguity for students and professors alike. If one student displays exceptional effort and improvement, should she get a higher grade in the course 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 make a habit of texting during class—yet somehow manage to perform well on important tests and papers? Send me a quick email, subject line Easter Egg, and let me know you've read this!

Given all of this, **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 giving you maximum flexibility to choose the ways that you engage with the course, explore new paths, and cultivate your own particular interests. 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 “Specifications Grading.”**



Specifications Grading

In a nutshell, here's how it works:

- You will have tremendous flexibility to choose which assignments to do, as well as how many activities and assignments you would like to take on, depending on the ultimate grade you would like to earn in the class.
- In what is definitely the most unusual aspect of this system, everything that is graded--participation, reading engagements, papers, in-class activities--will be evaluated on a credit/no credit basis. "Credit" will be awarded for work that fulfills all of the specifications for an assignment according to a clear rubric (available on Moodle). The specifications for all assignments are set at B+ quality work. If you do B+ quality work or higher, you will get credit. You will not receive credit for work that does not earn at least a B+.
- Every time you earn credit for a graded course component by meeting its specifications, you will earn a point in the appropriate category. Your final grade will be determined by how many points you earn across each of the four main categories of the course:
 - Participation points (from attending and contributing to class discussions--39 possible points)
 - Framing Questions (53 from assigned readings + another 5 from optional readings = 58 possible points)
 - Reading Engagement assignments (53 from assigned readings + another 5 from optional readings = 58 possible points)
 - 4 Reflection Essays (3-5 pgs each), one due at the end of each unit (1 point each)

Discussion points	Framing question points	Reading engagement points	Reflection paper points	Paper points	Final course grade
33 or more	47 or more	47 or more	4	1	A
33 or more	45 or more	45 or more	4	0	A-
33 or more	43 or more	43 or more	3	0	B+
32 or more	42 or more	42 or more	3	0	B
32 or more	40 or more	40 or more	2	0	B-
31 or more	38 or more	38 or more	2	0	C+
31 or more	37 or more	37 or more	2	0	C
31 or more	35 or more	35 or more	2	0	C-
30 or more	32 or more	32 or more	1	0	D

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 = 2 framing question points, 1 reading engagement point
- 2 tokens = 1 discussion point
- 3 tokens = 1 reflection essay point

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.

Course Topics

