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
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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 (when you can drop in to talk with me) in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, every Mon 1:10-2:10, Thur 1-2, and by appointment. To meet with me, just show up! You can also reserve a slot ahead of time, if you'd like, here. If my standing times don't work, email me with a few suggested times for me to check 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. As one wise colleague put it, we aren't all in the same boat, but we are confronting the same storm. The pandemic is rough. Public health protocols are rough. Climate change is rough. Racial inequality is rough. Our national politics are rough. It's hard to predict what will happen on any given day. This course engages difficult issues that can at times be actively discouraging. Despite these challenges, let’s try to be kind and patient with one another and with ourselves. Let’s learn and explore and aim as high as we’re able while acknowledging that there are limits on our time, energy, capacity, and attention that external circumstances will dictate. 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:

- Andrew A. Robichaud, Animal City: The Domestication of America
- Melanie A. Kiechle, Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America
- Andrew Needham, Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest
- Anna Clark, The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy

Although all four books are available for purchase in the bookstore, please note two things:

1. Three of the four required texts are available as a free download (requires login) from Macalester's library (Animal City; Smell Detectives; Power Lines). 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.
2. The fourth required book (The Poisoned City) is available on 4-hour reserve at the library.

Helpful Resources

Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. To meet with a writing counselor at the MAX Center, visit WCOnline. 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 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. 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 651-696-6275, 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.
Covid Caveats

Given the uncertain and ongoing nature of the pandemic, everything in this syllabus is subject to change, although I am hopeful that no significant changes will be necessary. In the meantime we will follow Macalester’s well-fitted mask policy and wear face coverings in class through at least Sep. 14 when the college reassesses the policy. I will also poll the class anonymously to assess people’s comfort levels with various options.

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 some class time discussing the conventions of good argumentative writing and honing our skills.

Each of the Class Preparation Assignments focuses on a different skill that historians use every day, including reading carefully, asking questions, understanding arguments, and putting different kinds of evidence and arguments in conversation with one another:

- **Discussion Questions** provide an opportunity to practice framing questions that intentionally target different levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.
- **Reading Outlines** ask you to distill the key arguments and structural features of longer readings into a short outline.
- **Reading Responses** ask you to summarize other scholars’ historical arguments and engage them in a concise, focused way (150-300) and give you a chance to reflect on which elements you find most interesting or important and why.

Other Assignments build toward your final research paper:

*The Book Review*: In roughly 1000 words, summarize the argument and structure of a book related to your tentative research topic and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.

*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* (12-15 pgs) should 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.

*The Peer Review Draft of the Research Paper*: Complete drafts of your research paper—with an emphasis on completeness rather than polish or organization—are due on Tues., Nov. 22 at 9 pm. It is important that you submit a complete draft then so that it does not encroach on Thanksgiving break.

We will discuss all these assignments in class, and Moodle contains fuller details for each assignment.
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 comment 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 in the midst of a pandemic. Be aware that if you miss classes when you aren’t sick, illness could throw you wildly off contract. 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. **Complete at least two of each of the following** assignments over the course of the semester—including at least one of each before Fall Break and one of each after Fall Break. Otherwise you may complete these assignments on whatever schedule you choose within the constraints of the late work policy spelled out in #4 of the contract. The only caveat is that you may not complete more than one assignment for any given day.
   - a. **Discussion Questions** (due by 9:15 am on the day the reading is discussed)
   - b. **Reading Outline** (due by the start of class on the day the reading is discussed)
   - c. **Reading Response** (due by the start of class on the day the reading is discussed)

4. **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 all assignments except Discussion Questions, you may use a token to “buy” a 72-hour extension. For Book Reviews, State of the Field Essays, 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 it and offer 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 extend deadlines without a token.

5. **Give honest, constructive feedback on others’ writing** in class and in peer conferences.

6. **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.

7. **Turn in a complete portfolio** of revised, passing-quality work, with cover sheet, via Moodle on Tuesday, Dec. 13 by 9 am.

8. **Meet individually with me for a 30-minute portfolio conference**, chosen from a wide range of available times, between Dec. 13 and Dec. 15. 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.

Your portfolio should include revised versions of the following:

1. Your Book Review OR State of the Field essay
2. Your Final Research Paper
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 1-5 above, but the complete portfolio should not exceed 20 pages total. (Your cover letter will not count toward the 20-page limit.)

Tokens

Sometimes we don’t quite manage to do everything we intend to do, despite our best efforts. If this year is anything remotely like the last two and a half years, I expect this to remain doubly true. 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
- 3 tokens = extension on peer-review draft until Tues 11/29 at start of class

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.