

Wisconsin 101: Our History in Objects Example Assignment

Public Object History: Writing a Cluster for Wisconsin 101

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What is the purpose of this lesson? To get students to think of an object as a focal point for historical narratives, asking questions about history, using sources to answer them, and writing about what they found.

What will students produce? One object history and two related stories, see [Wisconsin 101](#) for examples.

Learning Goals:

- Analyze an object as a primary source
- Develop research questions
- Find and analyze primary and secondary sources
- Draw connections between objects and historical events
- Craft historical narratives based on a chosen object
- Communicate historical ideas in a style appropriate to a popular audience

This is a multi-stage assignment that culminates in producing a “cluster”, one object history and two related stories, in the style of Wisconsin 101. If you or your students choose, a final step of this assignment could be submitting these stories for publication on WI 101. For each of these steps, you’ll find materials for students and grading rubrics. The steps of this assignment are as follows:

1. Object History

The first step of this process is writing an object history. A well-chosen object will provide a solid foundation for the cluster and ground the stories in a specific location in Wisconsin. It’s difficult to over-emphasize how important object selection is. Students might be tempted to focus on a historical event or person and work backwards to an object, but the most successful clusters are centered on the object itself. For that reason, students will begin this project by selecting an object and writing a 400-500 word object history.

2. Research Plan

After completing their object histories, students will develop questions for further research and find sources to help answer these questions. These questions and sources will guide students in the process of writing their related stories.

3. Related Stories

Once they’ve completed more research into their objects and questions, students will write two (2) 600-750 word stories related to their object each citing at least three (3) sources. These stories should fill out the readers’ understanding of the object, expand on the object’s connection to a location, and place the object in historical context.

4. Final Polished Cluster

Now that students have written all of the elements of a cluster, they should take some time to polish them making sure they each make a historical claim and clearly connect to each other.

Optional Step 5. Submission to Wisconsin 101

Once students have finished their cluster of three stories, they could submit them to Wisconsin 101 for possible publication. It’s important to make sure students have a sense of the publishing process before they submit. As with most publications, submission is no guarantee that the cluster will be published. The vast majority of submissions to Wisconsin 101 require the author to work with our editor to bring the cluster to the point where it’s publishable, and some submissions never reach that point or are unsuitable for publication. This editorial process can take a fair bit of time and labor even after students have completed a polished cluster for your course. If students do plan to submit to Wisconsin 101, they should ensure that their cluster doesn’t duplicate any material on the site.

Step 1: Object History

The first step of writing an object history is selecting an object. This most important thing about the object you pick is that it be **interesting to you**. The best histories happen when the author is genuinely interested in what they're writing about. Here are a few more important criteria to keep in mind:

- You want to pick an object that has **a clear connection to a location in Wisconsin**. This could be a town or region; the important thing is that the object be strongly rooted in the place and tell you something about the place and its history. For instance, the [Harley V-Twin engine](#) was made and used in Milwaukee, this [rock drill](#) illustrates the importance of mining in the history of southwestern Wisconsin, and this [synagogue window](#) helps us think about communities migrating to and making a life in Sheboygan.
- Be sure to choose a 3-dimensional object you can analyze as a whole thing and not a 2-dimensional image. Photographs, flyers, and other 2-dimensional things rarely make for good object histories unless there's something you want to say about the object the image is printed on. For example the [602 Club t-shirt](#) has an image printed on it, but the author is talking about the meaning of the whole t-shirt and not just the image.
- The object doesn't need to be in your possession, but you should be able to view the object in person. The [Wisconsin Historical Society](#), your local historical society, as well as historical sites and museums can all be good places to find objects.
- Select an object you reasonably think you can learn more about. An object of unknown provenance – one that's origin and early history are unknown – could be difficult to do further research on. Staff at a museum or historical society can help you determine how much information might be available connected to your object.

Once you've examined your object and learned a bit about it, you'll write a 400-500 word object history. This history should include:

- A description of the object and its use
- At least one specific connection to a place in Wisconsin
- At least one specific connection to a broader theme in Wisconsin history

Interrogating an Object

1. What is the object made of?
2. How big is the object? How much does it weigh?
3. Are there any inscriptions or identifying marks?
4. Is the object made up of any significant parts? Or is it a part of a larger object?
5. Who made the object? In what context?
6. Where was the object made and used?

7. When was the object made and used?

8. Who used the object? What was it used for?

9. How does the object relate to individual or group identity?

10. How does the object relate to sets of beliefs or ideologies?

11. Do people still use objects like this today? How are they similar or different?

Object History Rubric

	EXCELLENT	COMPETENT	IN DEVELOPMENT	
DESCRIPTION OF OBJECT	Fully describes object with specific details.	Description of object is incomplete or vague.	Description of object is absent or inaccurate.	/3
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	Clearly and correctly connects object to broader themes in Wisconsin history.	Includes some connection to Wisconsin history but connection lacks specificity/support.	Object is not grounded in historical context.	/2
CONNECTION TO PLACE	Object is clearly connected to a specific location in Wisconsin.	Object is somewhat connected to place, but lacking specificity.	Object is not grounded in a location in Wisconsin.	/3
MECHANICS	Clear, concise writing without errors in spelling or grammar.	A few errors or lapses in clarity but not enough to hinder the reader.	Mechanical or clarity issues that hinder reading comprehension.	/2
				/10

Step 2: Research Plan

Now that you're familiar with your object, you can build a plan for further research. Think about what you know about your object already and what you'd like to learn more about. You might consider investigating topics such as:

- People and organizations connected with creating or using the object.
- Places in Wisconsin the object has been used.
- Historical events connected to the object.
- How the object illustrates change over time in Wisconsin life.

Your research plan should include five (5) historical research questions and three (3) sources you can use to start investigating these questions.

Good historical questions are...

- Clear. Be mindful of the language you use in questions; it could be loaded with assumptions. Make sure the words you use are really getting at the question you're trying to ask. For example, "why was mining important in Wisconsin" is a fairly broad question that includes the assumption that mining was important in Wisconsin. Asking "how did lead mining shape communities in southwestern Wisconsin" is more specific while creating more space for analysis.
- Open-ended. Questions should have more than a yes/no or one-word answer. We want to get at questions that aren't just asking to clarify facts but are analyzing the past. An excellent question can be legitimately answered in more than one way, that is, reasonable people could have different answers to it. Questions like "when did Scandinavian immigrants first come to Wisconsin" have finite answers while questions like "how did Scandinavian immigrants bring their food ways to life in Wisconsin" could have lots of reasonable answers.
- Answerable. While you want open-ended questions, you also want historical questions that can be answered. For this assignment, you needn't know exactly how to answer your questions, but avoid questions that are simply unanswerable. This would include fictional questions such as "what would have happened if Gov. Nelson had never lived?" It might be an interesting question, but there is no evidence to support any answer since it didn't happen. Be sure to think about what kinds of sources might exist as you pose questions.
- Extend beyond the specific situation they investigate. Think about historical issues broadly. What does your object say about Wisconsin life? The communities that live here? The ways people interact with their environment?
- Interest you. The best research questions are the ones that connect to your interests not least of all because you're unlikely to spend a lot of time researching something you find dull. Think about what stands out to you about your object and build questions from there.

Research Plan Rubric

	EXCELLENT	COMPETENT	IN DEVELOPMENT	
SOURCES	Three appropriate sources listed.	Three sources listed but one or more are inappropriate.	Insufficient number of sources.	/2
SOURCE-QUESTION CONNECTION	All sources clearly connect to at least one question.	Some sources have tenuous connections to questions.	Sources seem disconnected from questions.	/3
OPEN-ENDED ANSWERABILITY	Questions provoke complex answers. All questions could be answered using historical sources.	Some questions only have one reasonable answer or focus on facts, but most require critical engagement. Some questions may be unanswerable.	Most questions can be answered with one or two words. Multiple questions are unanswerable	/3
HISTORICAL BREADTH	Questions engage broadly and substantively with historical themes and issues.	Some questions have narrow historical impact or invoke historical themes without engaging with them.	Questions do not engage with broader historical issues	/2
				/10

Step 3: Related Stories

Once you've investigated your research questions, select two of these threads to develop into stories related to your object. Each of these stories should meet the following requirements:

- Cite at least three (3) sources.
- Be 600-750 words.
- Clearly connect to your object.
- Clearly connect to Wisconsin.
- Make a clear, historical claim.

Related Story Plan

Object:

Story Title:

In one or two sentences, what is the main idea of this story?

In one or two sentences, how does this story connect to your object?

In one or two sentences, how does this story connect to Wisconsin?

Sources:

Related Story Rubric

	EXCELLENT	COMPETENT	IN DEVELOPMENT	
MAIN IDEA	Strong, original claim clearly stated early in the story. Claim has significance for Wisconsin history.	Claim is present and clear enough, but may lack in originality or significance.	Claim is absent, unclear, or inappropriate.	/11
OVERALL COHERENCE	Story progresses in a way that the reader can clearly grasp. Each paragraph makes a point bearing out the overall claim.	Story has structure but some paragraphs lack a clear purpose or transitions may jar the reader	Story is unclear and/or unstructured	/11
EVIDENCE	Cites an appropriate number of sources; all points are adequately supported with evidence.	Cites an appropriate number of sources; most points are adequately supported with evidence.	Cites an insufficient number of sources; many points are undersupported. Analysis is frequently lacking.	/11
CONNECTION TO OBJECT	Story clearly connects to and expands readers' understanding of the object.	Some connection to and development beyond the object history.	Connection to object is unclear.	/11
MECHANICS	Clear, concise writing without errors in spelling or grammar. Appropriate citation	A few errors or lapses in clarity but not enough to hinder the reader. Minor errors in citation	Mechanical or clarity issues that hinder reading comprehension. Significant lapses in citation	/8
FORMATTING	Essay is of appropriate length in the format required	Minor deviation from requirements	Essay is significantly too long or too short	/8
				/60

Step 4: Final Polished Cluster

At this point, you've complete all of the elements of a cluster – an object history and two related stories. Now it's time to look back over your essays, polish them up, and make sure they all work together. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you edit:

- Do all of your stories, including the object history, have a clear main idea?
- Do both of your related stories have strong, explicit connections to the object history?
- Does your object history show the object's significance to a specific place in Wisconsin?
- Does each of your stories include three properly cited sources?
- Have you asked someone unfamiliar with the object to read your cluster? (If not, consider doing so. A new reader can help you make sure your stories make sense and find typos you might have missed.)

Polished Cluster Rubric

EXCELLENT

COMPETENT

IN DEVELOPMENT

	EXCELLENT	COMPETENT	IN DEVELOPMENT	
MAIN IDEA	All 3 histories include a strong, original claim with significance for Wisconsin history.	All 3 histories have a main idea, but clarity and significance vary.	One or more stories lack a clear main idea.	/11
LOCATION SIGNIFICANCE	The object has a clear, important connection to a specific place in Wisconsin and at least one related story adds to the history of the place.	Object is connected to a specific location but the connection could be stronger or related story could have more significance for place.	Connection to location is unclear.	/11
OBJECT CENTRALITY	Object history includes a rich description of the object and both related stories have a strong connection to the object.	Some elements of object description or related stories' connection to the object unclear.	Description or role of object in the cluster is unclear.	/11
EVIDENCE	Cites an appropriate number of sources; all points are adequately supported with evidence.	Cites an appropriate number of sources; most points are adequately supported with evidence.	Cites an insufficient number of sources; many points are undersupported. Analysis is frequently lacking.	/11
MECHANICS	Clear, concise writing without errors in spelling or grammar. Appropriate citation	A few errors or lapses in clarity but not enough to hinder the reader. Minor errors in citation	Mechanical or clarity issues that hinder reading comprehension. Significant lapses in citation	/8
FORMATTING	Essay is of appropriate length in the format required	Minor deviation from requirements	Essay is significantly too long or too short	/8
				/60