

The Writing Process and Student Learning Goals
Essay Assignment #3

The Writing Process

You can begin your writing and research process in one of two ways: by locating either an image or a topic that interests you. Here we will begin with an image; but, your process could just as well begin with the exploration of secondary sources. In the end, both approaches require interaction between your secondary and primary sources. The more you learn about your topic, the better you will be able to interpret your image.

Finding an Image:

Start your search by browsing the [HCC Image Gallery](#). Notice that when you click on an image, the source material for the image appears, often with a link to the digital collection that houses your image. Extend your search by exploring this digital collection so that you find an image that most interests you. You might peruse digital collections at The Library of Congress ([Civil War Prints and Photographs Collection](#)), Smithsonian American Art Museum ([The Civil War and American Art](#)), [Harper's Weekly](#), etc., which are linked to the images in the HCC Image Gallery; or you might discover new digital collections through your search.

Once you have selected an image that interests you, make a note of its bibliographic information. You will find that reliable electronic archives offer you the information you need to cite the source. Imagine that you have chosen the following photograph:

Gardner, Alexander. *Antietam, Maryland. Bodies in front of the Dunker Church*. Sept. 1862. Photograph. Lib. of Cong., Washington D.C. Web. 5 Jan. 2015.



You see from the citation that this photograph represents the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam. Take a moment to write down your first impressions. What do you notice first? The pile of bodies? The cannon? The church (the title of the image tells me this is a church, as opposed to a farmhouse)? The fence cutting through the landscape? What details do you notice about these objects? How are these objects organized in the space of the picture? Review your online *Writer's Handbook* chapter, ["Analyzing Visual Sources"](#) for additional suggestions on the methods of image analysis, apply some of these approaches to your selected image, and save your notes as you proceed.

Finding Secondary Sources

To begin researching the historical contexts of the photograph, you might be inclined to conduct a basic Google search on "Antietam," "Dunker Church," and "Alexander Gardner." This might give you some context: for example, the fact that while photographing the Battle of Antietam, Gardner served as a staff photographer for the Army of the Potomac under General George McClellan; that Gardner sometimes manipulated the scenes in his photographs to place bodies in more dramatic positions; that the corpses in the image are those of both Union and Confederate soldiers; and that this particular photograph was exhibited alongside others in a New York gallery the month following the battle. But while conducting a Google search may raise a number of interesting questions and offer you a set of search terms, a Google search does not satisfy the requirements of an academic essay. It is merely a way into a topic. At a research university, your research must be based on the work of experts in the field you are studying, usually in the form of academic essays and books.

The UCI Libraries make these scholarly resources available to you, often in digital form. One place to start is the Library's ["Subject and Course Guide,"](#) which allows you to narrow your search by discipline. For this assignment, you need to search for historical sources, many of which are outlined on the Library's ["History"](#) subject guide page. One relevant database is [America History & Life](#) (your instructor may also direct you to other databases). You can access this database on campus automatically or from home with a VPN connection. Search this database for articles on "Alexander Gardner."

Pick the articles that look most relevant to your first impressions of the photograph. If your first impressions focused on the pile of corpses in the foreground, you might print out Emily Godbey's ["Terrible Fascination': Civil War Stereographs of the Dead."](#) Why? Because an article centering on "stereographs of the dead" promises to address your interest in the photographic representation of death. As you read each article, make notes of relevant secondary sources whose titles address some of the questions you are considering. Print or bookmark one or two of these sources.

Now, return to your original notes on the image. How does your scholarly article contextualize your understanding of the image? Does it complicate your understanding of the camera's perspective? Of the audience for whom this image was taken? Of Gardner's purposes in chronicling the battle?

As you can see, the more secondary sources you read, the better you will understand your image. And there is no "right" way of starting this process. Though this prompt suggests starting this process with an image, you could just as well begin by reading secondary sources on a topic of interest (e.g., sketches of contrabands, images of hospitalized soldiers, depictions of African American women, cartoons caricaturing African American contrabands, images of Union officers, etc.), and those, in turn, might lead you to images that represent your topic of interest. Allow your curiosity to lead you.

Student Learning Goals:

- Reinforce skills learned in Essay Assignments 1 and 2: make specific, complex and arguable claims; produce cohesive paragraphs; present well-selected and well-contextualized evidence; develop strong warrants; develop organic transitions that show the progress of ideas over time; write rhetorically persuasive introductions and conclusions.
- Develop strategic depictions of evidence in the process of visual analysis that anticipate and reinforce claims.
- Understand and participate in the assumptions and methods of historical analysis and visual analysis.
- Evaluate and integrate secondary materials into writing through careful evaluation and contextualization.
- Demonstrate intermediate-level information literacy skills (locating information, evaluating sources, placing sources in conversation, integrating and complicating source material in own writing).
- Practice active revision, whereby the final submitted drafts exhibit the generation of ideas, careful reflection and working through of numerous revisions, editing and proof-reading, and reflection on the process of writing itself.