

Biography of a Book

| ASSIGNMENT EXAMPLE |

In your first paper for this course, you analyzed a primary source about books and media, and in your second paper you evaluated the work of a scholar on the study of the book. In this paper, you are asked to shift the analysis from words to *things*. Following our visit to the Rare Book Room, select a book and write a paper about it. You do not need to be able to read the contents of the book, and so you are free to choose a book in any language and in any form (although more knowledge is always better); this exercise is a study in observation about physical properties and the history of the production of the book in question.

Instructions:

1. Attend the class visit to the Rare Book Room (Butler Library, 6th Floor)
2. Select a book held by the Rare Book Room—this does not necessarily have to be an old or ancient book.
3. Return to the Rare Book Room and produce a paper based on careful examination of the physical properties of the book.
4. Write a 4-5-page paper by placing this book in context with the people and places that produced it by researching for information about the author, publisher, editor, copyist, etc., as well as the afterlife of the book and its ownership.

Detailed Instructions:

I. Context: research *about* the production of the book

Once you have decided on your book, go to the library and try to discover what you can about the circumstances of its production. Questions might include (but are not limited to):

- When was it first printed? Was it reprinted?
- Where was it printed? Was it printed in more than once place?
- Who printed it? At whose request?
- What other books did its author write and its publishers publish?

This will require moving beyond the text into asking questions that will require independent research.

II. “Reading” the Object

Schedule an appointment to return to the research room and explore the item you have selected first-hand. Questions you ask might include (but again, are not limited to):

- How big is the book?
- What is it made of?
- What does the binding look like?
- Is it illustrated?
- Can you tell who has owned it?
- Can you tell if it has ever been read?

As above, this may also require work beyond the text. If you find, for example, a signature of Jacob Emden, you may need to look him up. If you see a signature of a censor, you might need to figure out who it is. A useful research for this is to search the database - Footprints: Jewish Books through Time and Place (<https://footprints.ctl.columbia.edu>) - to discover other activities of these individuals, places they were active, and different books they might have touched.

III. The Write-Up

Bring context and artifact into dialogue with each other by revealing to your reader what it is you have learned about this book. Perhaps you might structure your essay as a “biblio-biography”—as if you are writing a biography of this book. Even biographies have arguments. Can you tell the life story of this object?

IV. Citation

You must provide references to the source you are using by appropriately citing your source. This is an important habit to cultivate. Please use the “Chicago” style of citation. Include a “bibliography” as well as footnotes for your work.
