

## SEMINAR ESSAY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

This guide is intended to provide some thoughts, questions, and examples to help you to develop your thesis statement and essay about the seminar text. No matter which idea you use to develop your essay, be attentive to the “key concepts” from the syllabus that correlate to the text (even if we don’t seem to cover it in seminar!) Remember that you may also connect your thoughts on the text to other readings and program activities. Though the ideas in this guide are by no means meant to limit you, there is such a thing as missing the mark.

### THOUGHTS

\*Understand the role of perspective in the telling of history  
Zinn is using history as a tool with which to tell a certain story. The difference between his manipulation of history and that of others is that he does so openly, explaining his goals, his choices, and, perhaps more importantly, the standards/ideals to which he holds himself. His approach makes a point about perspective, of course: focusing on the perspective of the people who lived the history versus those who controlled it, the first hand accounts reveal (as we learned in Painting By Numbers) something profoundly different from what institutional views can. It also leads us to see the conflicts of interest that have influenced what is omitted as well as what is included

\*Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternatives.

One of Zinn’s central goals is to help people see the connection between history as the “past” and history as it is lived, or seeing our own lives as history in the making; in this way, Zinn says, there is hope for influencing the future. The struggle before us as readers of Zinn is to take what we value of his version of history and weave it into reality, into the present. That history is important is evidenced in the fact that people do become so upset when their belief in a version of events is questioned or lit from a new angle. The challenge of doing so puts me in mind of the Rings of Saturn (from last quarter), in which Sebald’s narrative wanders obsessively through a disastrous past that ultimately seems to weaken him physically. Reading People’s History is most definitely such an overwhelming experience.

\*Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts.

Patterns are everywhere (remember Thomas Browne). But patterns are not truth, nor do they indicate what is natural or otherwise inevitable. Patterns are in many cases the result of our wanting to see them. Patterns emerged everywhere Sebald looked, in part because he was pursuing a certain idea or feeling, though this fact doesn’t make his story any less true. Patterns take hold over powerful institutions and seem secretly at work in cultural trends and changes. Our ability to discern patterns through knowledge of history allows us to not only predict consequences, but to act with informed confidence, merging our sense of history with a desire to do something--that is where our hope for the future rests.

### KEY CONCEPTS

- Understand the role of perspective in the telling of history
- Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternatives
- Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts.

### General QUESTIONS

What patterns emerge throughout Zinn’s telling of history?

What recurring means of domination are revealed in the text?

How does “People’s History” when related to Painting By Numbers give us insight into the challenge of representing “the people”?

In what ways does Zinn’s approach to telling history relate to Lippard’s governing principles for place-responsible art?

Should young children be taught Zinn’s version of the “Discovery of America” / “the freeing of the slaves” / “the ending of the holocaust”?

Where does Zinn’s personal perspective become evident in A People’s History?

How can activists & artists use Zinn’s history?

How do these events parallel current events?