

## Rocky Mountain Interdisciplinary History Conference

### GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING AND PRESENTING A COMMENTARY

By Professor Martha Hanna

As a commentator, your responsibility is to tie together the overarching themes of the panel's papers. We realize that this creates an extraordinary challenge within the context of a conference that provides no connecting theme and is interdisciplinary by design. The title of the panel will hopefully be helpful along with the abstracts and the papers themselves.

1. Limit yourself to no more than 10-15 minutes. With three papers per session, at least an hour will be taken up with those presentations. The commentator should not absorb the remaining time, because this makes it impossible for members of the audience to ask questions. We will also be asking the panel chairs to take an active role in the discussion as well.
2. Think of the commentary first as an act of synthesis. Identify overarching and unifying themes that draw the three papers together. Perhaps think of them as separate chapters or essays in a book that you might be asked to review: what is the big picture that emerges from the papers when read collectively? How does each paper help us understand the big picture better?
3. Emphasize the positive. When you turn to each individual paper (which is the next logical step after identifying overarching themes), start by drawing the audience's attention to the strongest points of the paper. Nobody likes to be humiliated in public, so frame your comments in a positive light. And remember that these papers are works-in-progress; they are not manuscripts about to be submitted to the *American Historical Review*. Don't expect them to be perfect or even to turn the discipline on its ear. That being said, the papers will have interesting and new contributions to make and stress this dimension of each paper. If the paper explicitly challenges or goes beyond existing historiographical interpretations, then draw that out and assess the importance of such an undertaking.
4. Conclude by suggesting—in a very friendly manner—ways in which the papers might be fruitfully revised and strengthened. Is there a methodology appropriate to the theme or approach of the paper that might be employed to good advantage? Is there a book (or two) that you are familiar with whose arguments and evidence the author might use to good effect? Is there a part of the argument that remains underdeveloped or unpersuasive, perhaps because of inadequate evidence or some flaw in logical analysis, and how might it be strengthened? But while preparing (and presenting) this part of the commentary, think of how you would feel if this were your paper being critiqued. It is fine to present criticisms—that is how we all improve our work—but the tone and tenor of the criticism can make an enormous difference. After all, if your paper presenter is so mortified by what you are saying that she/he tunes you out, all your clever suggestions will fall on deaf ears.
5. What NOT to do: Don't critique grammar, sentence structure, footnoting style, etc. Focus on content more than organization unless it interferes with the argument and you're able to make a constructive comment.