



HARTFORD HERITAGE PROJECT

“Research Argument”

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Suggested Partners: Connecticut’s Old State House, the Wadsworth Atheneum, or other museums and historical institutions throughout the city of Hartford.

Overview of Genre:

In *English 101*, students practice reading and writing in different genres, including the **Research Argument**, which is the focus for this genre. A Research Argument formulates a position regarding an issue, making a claim and using evidence from research.

Using the museums as not only the place for our learning, but also as the subject of our learning, provided a large range of inquiry for the Research Argument. Students could choose topics that interested them about museums, ranging from the obligations that museums have to return stolen art and artifacts, to what makes art valuable, to how historic events and peoples should be presented, to the government’s role in funding museums, to issues regarding censorship and controversy.

Link to Hartford Heritage Project:

As part of the **Hartford Heritage Project**, Capital students have access to museums and historical institutions throughout the city of Hartford. We begin the semester by walking to the Wadsworth Atheneum for a guided tour of the art collections, and the students choose a piece of artwork to analyze, as part of the first genre, Textual Analysis. For the second genre, the Research Argument, the students visit the Old State House, which is a history museum.

Approach:

To begin exploring the city’s museums, I ask the students not only to reflect on what they have learned from the content of the museum, but on the museum experience itself. Students journal about their experiences with the museum, reflecting on how they perceive the staff, buildings, and environments that document human existence. They also consider the subjects of the museum, and which stories are told and how they are told. They are asked: Do you see yourself reflected in this museums? What is something that stood out to you as important? What is something that you made you curious? Uncomfortable? Through these reflections, students are involved with the work of the museum, and can find ways to broaden their experiences through argumentation.

Working with the Museums:

The partnerships in the Hartford Heritage Project have been incredibly supportive of student projects, leading engaging and thought-provoking tours, and even meeting with students in their research centers and libraries to assist them in their projects.

In working with the Old State House, our work has been mutually beneficial. Initially, I was hesitant to broach the topic of museum ethics with the staff. I was concerned that they make take offense at the notion of students being asked to critique their practices, particularly concerning diversity and equity, specifically noting that the patrons of these museums who tend to be white, middle to upper middle class, older and coming from the suburbs, are not reflective of the demographics of the city itself. While

this topic is sensitive, the staff was very welcoming of the critique, and welcomed the questions. They even set up a focus group for the students to discuss how they could be more inclusive and equitable, and the director took careful notes and listened to the students' concerns and ideas for marketing, promotion, access, and content.

Gleanings from students:

There have been many different responses from students about these museum experiences, ranging from awe at climbing the marbled steps, to fear of racial profiling, to concerns about mobility and physical access, as well as audio access for those on the tours who are hard of hearing. One student mentioned the pillory and stocks outside the Old State House as making him think of the way that societies treat violence as entertainment, and some students thought that the sharp spiked gates outside the Old State House were menacing to black men, and meant to keep them away. Others thought that the museum should be protected. Students tended to enjoy the Cabinet of Curiosities at the Old State House, especially the two-headed goat, but some were very spooked by the taxidermy. Students had various ideas about how to make the museums more welcoming and marketable for a wider population, such as evening hours for people who work varying shifts. One student visiting the Amistad exhibit at the Old State House noted that the most effective content recording the event was not what was produced by the professional museum staff, but a poster that was created by a black high school student in Hartford on display.

Research Argument:

For the Research Argument, students formulate a position regarding an issue related to museums. Possible topic questions are listed in this module, and the response to one of these topic questions becomes the argument. Students make a claim and use good supporting reasons to back it up, using at least three credible sources. These sources can be taken from the Resources provided, but at least one source must be found by the students. Sources must be documented in MLA format, both in-text and in the Works Cited page. The paper needs a clear thesis. For more information about the key features of the argument genre in the *Norton Field Guide to Writing*, pages 169-170. A thorough guide to writing arguments starts on page 171.

Expected length: 1000-2200 words, plus the Works Cited page

Assessment Criteria:

- * Necessary background information is included
- * Effective, clear thesis statement
- * Essay is organized, well-developed, analyzed and vigorously explores the subject
- * Necessary background information is included
- * Good reasons are provided
- * Clear interpretation and judgment of the visual cues, convincing evidence
- * Appeal to reader's values
- * Trustworthy tone
- * Careful consideration of other positions
- * Research is well incorporated, using proper quoting and paraphrasing and MLA citation in both in-text and Works Cited In

For your Research Argument, you will consider the ethics of museums, and the procurement of artifacts for the document of the human experience.

Possible Topic Questions:

What is the purpose of a museum?

Why do people go to museums?

What purpose do they serve in society?
How should museums be funded? Should museums charge admission or be free to the public?
What should museums do with artifacts that have been stolen from other countries or peoples?
Who do museums cater to (consider social class, race, background, etc)?
How can museums be designed to be more inclusive?
How do museums generally (or, Wadsworth/Old State House/etc specifically) represent people of color?
(focus can be changed to gender, people with disabilities, non-American cultures, etc)
Does the Wadsworth/Old State House accurately reflect the human experience?
Does the Wadsworth/Old State accurately reflect the African-American experience, the experience of indigenous peoples, the experiences of people of color, or other experiences?
What role do smart phones and technology have in museums? Should they be permitted?
How are collections of art by indigenous populations treated in museums, and how should they be handled?
How can museums document the "intangible" cultural history, such as dance, song, stories, oral traditions, etc?
How should museums document violence and war? What is the most appropriate way to document events such as chattel slavery, the Holocaust, racial lynchings, etc?
What experiences may be missing from museums generally (or the Wadsworth/Old State House/etc)?
Should historic buildings be restructured to be fully compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in making their structures accessible and accommodating for people with limited mobility? How do (or should) museums treat the "exotic" or "abnormality"?
When is the provocative artwork in a museum "too provocative"? Is censorship necessary?
What qualifies as art? How should art be appraised, or what gives it value?
How is nature represented in museums?
Do museums have political agendas? Should they?
How should museums handle controversial exhibits (or a particular controversy)?
How are artists treated in society, and how should they be treated?

Resources that may help you in your research, or help you find inspiration for your topic:

The [Incluseum](#) - a collaborative blog for people interested in making museums more inclusive
[Autism in the Museum](#) - a clearinghouse for museum professionals to engage with children with autism
Article for Museum professionals about engaging with the Blank Panther museum scene (for reference: Black Panther Museum Scene)
New York Times article about [America's first slavery museum](#)
Article about the opening of a [lynching memorial in Alabama](#)
Information about the Wadsworth Atheneum's [quest](#) to find artwork stolen by Nazis during the Holocaust
Article about the [horrifying reality of human zoos](#) (please read with caution, extremely upsetting)
Editorial asking [Britain's Museums to return their collections to their owners](#)
Editorial about [decolonizing the museum](#)
Examples of [controversial artwork in 2017](#) - how should they have been handled by museums?
Article about the Wadsworth's [controversial Mapplethorpe exhibit](#), gender bending portraiture opened in 1989
Article from the Hartford Courant about the [Connecticut Old State House re-opening](#) after its funding had been slashed by the state
Controversy about [Stone Field Structure on Main Street in Hartford](#), across from the Wadsworth
Vox article on Museum Hack's [Badass Bitches Museum Tour](#)

Controversy about [Bible Museum funded by Hobby Lobby](#)

Controversy surrounding [Trump's visit to Mississippi Civil Rights Museum](#)

Video about [formula for selling million-dollar art work](#)

Video claiming that the [Mona Lisa painting is overrated](#)

Video about why [all-white paintings are considered art](#)

Article about recent [theft-reversal from European art museums](#)

Fire at [Brazilian museum](#) blamed on lack of funding

[Google Arts and Culture selfie challenge](#) to find a portrait that resembles the viewer, found controversial