

Dead Men Tell No Tales

Larry Cebula's Famous Cemetery Assignment¹

Assignment Description

Using a historic cemetery as your only source of information, write a history of the community that buried their dead in that spot. The steps are simple:

1. Visit a historic cemetery of your choice. [This website lists all the cemeteries](#) in Cincinnati. [Here are all the cemeteries in Hamilton County](#) if you're up for an adventure.
2. Prepare for your visit—dress for the weather, bring sunscreen, water, maybe insect repellent. Choose carefully—you don't want a cemetery that is too large or too small. Have several in mind, in case your first choice is overgrown or inaccessible. It might be fun to do this with a friend.
3. Bring a notebook and a camera—the one on your phone is fine.
4. Once you arrive, explore, with the Big Questions below firmly in mind. Print them out if you need to.
5. Take plenty of photographs, both for research and to illustrate your essay. (Early morning and early evening are the best times for taking pictures.) Take careful notes—the engravings on old headstones are sometimes much easier to read in person than they are in a photograph.

The Big Picture Questions

When was the area settled? What kinds of people settled it—where did they come from, what were their ethnicities (there are websites where you can look up surnames if you are not sure), religious beliefs, occupations? How long did they live? How did they die? Did the town prosper and grow, or stagnate, or even disappear? What differences did they have from one another—in terms of social/economic class, religion, etc. Is the cemetery visibly segregated? Did families stay around, or move away? Is the cemetery cared for, or abandoned? And what does that tell us?

The Big Detail Questions

What interesting stories about individuals are in the cemetery if you only use the cemetery as a text? Who seems to have had notable or interesting lives? What mysteries are you left with? Here you are looking for telling details that will illustrate your answers to the big picture questions and inject some human interest into your paper. [This cemetery symbolism page](#) may be helpful here.

¹ This assignment is inspired by Dr. Larry Cebula (Eastern Washington University). He claims that his students revolt when he tries to get rid of it. We shall take it for a test drive.

Writing Your Essay

Now write a history of the community, using ONLY the cemetery as your source. Do not write about yourself or your visit—write about the community. Use the evidence you gathered, for example: “The early settlers of Mudville had hard lives, as we can see in the information recorded on their headstones. Pa Jones died in 1887 from being “kicked in the hayd by a mule.” The cause of death of Ma Jones, who died in 1862, is not recorded, but the fact that she was 21 years of age may indicate that she died in childbirth.” Insert some pictures into your text, and make sure you caption them and wrap your text around them. No footnotes or bibliography are necessary. Essays should be about 3 pages.