Writing a Public History Project

In general: your final project will exist in 3 parts. The first part is an original work of research. It investigates a historical topic using primary research materials and scholarly books and articles. The second part should discuss trends in Public History—the scholarly research and literature which justifies the approach you will take in part 3. The third part is the application of the trends in public history to the material you uncovered in part 1. This is the “project” portion of your work. It is the centerpiece of your project. It is where you can create an exhibit, design a public history website, devise a script, discuss the use of historical imagination as it relates to section 1, etc. Be creative and inventive in this. Feel free to go tech-heavy or tech-light. Whatever you do, make sure it showcases the best of your work.

Getting Started:
Step 1: Find someone to agree to chair your project committee. This means you'll need to have a few preliminary talks with various faculty members to help you decide on a topic. Once you’ve done this, you will need to make a formal appointment with the faculty member you would like to serve as your chair—bringing along a rough outline. This must be someone well-versed in Public History. They’ll want to know what you plan to do and why before they’ll take you on. It doesn’t have to be fully formed, but you'll need to come with enough background so that the faculty member can decide if they're a good fit for you, or not.

Step 2: Though your Public History Expert ultimately directs your project as your chair, you need to ask 2 other faculty members to serve on your committee. One of these must serve as a Content Expert and drive section 1. The third member is of your choice and may be an external expert provided you complete the required documentation required by the graduate school. In instances in which the Public History Expert and the Content Expert are the same person, students will need to find another faculty member to serve on the committee, for a minimum of 3 people.

Step 3: Write the proposal. You need to consult with your project director about his/her expectations for a proposal. However, your PROPOSAL should generally contain and label each of the following, in order:

1. An abstract
2. Table of contents
3. Introduction: What is the context and what do you propose to study? What’s your research question and what is your working argument?
4. Section on scholarly importance
5. Section on sources for part 1 of what will be your project (Remember, part 1 should focus on your original work of research. It investigates a historical topic using primary research materials and scholarly books and articles.)
6. Section on historiographical literature review for part 1
7. Section on sources for part 2. (Part 2 of what will be your project should discuss trends in Public History—the scholarly research and literature which justifies the approach you will take in part 3.)
8. Section on historiography for part 2
9. Section explaining precisely your plan of action for part 3, noting the outcomes sought. This is the real project portion of your work.
10. An outline, complete with proposed timetable for completion of your project and dates when each portion of your written work will be submitted.
11. A working bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

Remember: your proposal becomes the groundwork for your project. Much of the information you’ll re-use in some form or other in the project itself, so you want to do your best work. Make sure you and your project director have a very clear understanding about what you are proposing before you actually begin working on the formal proposal itself, this way you can potentially avoid research dead-ends, etc.
Proposal lengths can vary. It’s usually a good framework for what's going to happen in the project. So this isn’t a herculean effort; it’s just designed to be a way for everyone to get on the same page and make sure you get started in the right direction. The recommended length is 5-7 pages.

Step 4: Once your project director approves your proposal, you may distribute it for review to the rest of your committee members. Please submit to them the signature form which indicates their approval of your proposal. Once all three committee members have approved your proposal, you’ll be able to begin work on your project in earnest.

Step 5: The final project. As your project director has the final say in the ultimate creation of your project, you should check with him or her about their expectations before you begin.

**Guidelines for Public History Projects**

1. Abstract

2. Table of contents *(required only in final draft)*

3. Introduction: What did you set out to accomplish with your public history project? Why is this particular goal important or meaningful to you? What unfilled niche does this fill in public history? *(Approx. 5 pages)*

   **Part I: Literature Review**

4. What scholarly sources were required for you research the content of this project? What debates in both the historiographical and public history literature, respectively, were important for you to understand? Which facts or interpretations are generally well-established? Which one are still in dispute? Cite peer-reviewed, scholarly research to substantiate these claims. *(25-30 pages, or approximately the length of a peer-reviewed journal article.)*

   **Part II: Trends in Public History**

5. Why is the particular approach to your project appropriate for what you are trying to convey? Cite peer-reviewed, scholarly research on public history to substantiate your claims. *(Approx. 15 pages)*

   **Part III: Project**

6. What resources were required for an effective project? How did you obtain these resources? What sources did you use to ensure that these materials are historically accurate? This section of your project requires a foundation based upon original sources. It also requires the citation of accepted standards for the proper use, care, and interpretation of original source materials and artifacts, such as those established by the National Council on Public History. *(Approx. 15-20 pages)*

7. Document the project. What did you do and how did you do it? Artifacts, recordings, and photographs, along with text, are acceptable for this section, but they should include explanatory captions and a narrative explaining their significance to the project. This section has no page limit due to the nature of public history, but bear in mind that it is the centerpiece of your entire project.

8. Write a reflective essay on the project. What went well? What went poorly? What changes would you make if you were to do it again? *(Approx. 10 pages)*

9. Discuss the significance of your project experience to the discipline of history. How does it help advance the discipline? What questions arise for further research? *(Approx. 15 pages)*

10. Bibliography