**Writing a Thesis Statement and Developing a Research Plan**

 *Thesis statements accomplish several important tasks. First, they sharpen and focus your area of research. Second, they situate your primary-source research within broader knowledge. Third, they make your research interesting by forcing you to argue a point. Historical research is not about reporting facts; it’s about interpreting evidence. Your thesis statement does not have to change the world. It just has to be analytical. That is, it should force you to think creatively about what your historic recipe book has to teach us in 2015.*

*Complete the questions below to help you think analytically about your recipe book! The questions are just a start as you launch your own research project.*

1. First, make a list of the 3-5 most interesting things about your recipe book—both its material features and content.

For example, does your recipe book have a lot of recipes for a certain kind of food that you find strange or unusual? Does the book have annotations that indicate a woman used it frequently? Does the book have an interesting binding?

1. Review the list above. What do you think is most unique about your book?

For example, perhaps the owner’s annotations make the book most unique. Or maybe the arrangement of recipes seems especially intriguing.

1. Think about broad areas of history and knowledge into which information about your recipe book’s unique feature might fit. Be creative! History is not just about presidents, wars, and acts of Congress. It is also about foodways, family relationships, shopping patterns, geographic distribution of certain dishes...the sky’s the limit.

Some ideas for general areas of knowledge to consider include:

* Foodways – Can you make an argument about a specific dish or genre of recipe?
* Female authorship – Can you learn any information about the author of the book?
* Reading practices – Can you present information about how the owner *used* her text?
* Publication history – Who published the book, and when? Is there any interesting information about the publisher?
1. What analytical point can your recipe book contribute to other people’s understandings of the role of women in America’s past? Try to summarize that point in one sentence...and this sentence will form the basis of your thesis statement, which you can refine and strengthen as you pursue deeper research and interpretation.

Remember, your thesis statement does not need to be earth-shattering and brilliant. (You are only working with one primary source, after all.) Just use your book to shed light on a broader issue in women’s history. Here are a few generic examples:

* “The handwriting found in this historic cookbook demonstrates that the owner actively altered recipes, and personalized her cookbook over time. We can tell which recipes the owner preferred by studying her annotations.”
* “The inclusion of both medicinal recipes and cooking recipes in this book suggests that women in early America were responsible for many aspects of family health and well-being.”
* “The large number of recipes for non-dessert cakes and pies in the recipe book suggests that such dishes were more central to the early American diet than they are today.”
* “The fact that a woman could write and publish a recipe book in Philadelphia in 1830 suggests that some women did have access to the world of print, if only in very limited ways.”
1. Now that you have your analytical idea written down, it’s time to think about what further secondary sources you need to consult to prove your point. For example, if your thesis statement addresses female authorship in the nineteenth century, you should review books and articles about that topic by other scholars.

**Structuring a Written Essay or Oral Presentation about Your Recipe Book**

 **Introduction**

* Open with a general point about the value of studying women’s history, and how recipe books can help
* Give a general sense of how your book of focus fits into that effort; *hint* at thesis statement without giving all the details

**Bibliographic Description**

* Give a basic introduction to your recipe book: who wrote it, where it was published, and maybe one quick comment on contents
* Don’t get bogged down in details here!

**Material Description**

* Give a thorough description of the book *as an object.* This includes measurements, information about binding, the text block, condition, decorative details, etc. Be a connoisseur...show that you know your book very well!

**Details of Authorship and Contents**

* Offer any in-depth information about the author and publisher here.
* Outline what the book contains in terms of recipes, how it is organized, how the recipes are presented, what is included and what is not, etc.

**In-Depth Analysis: Prove Your Thesis**

* Now’s the time to think analytically and broadly. You audience knows the basics about your book. Now grab their interest with what makes your book special.
* Transition elegantly from description (what you did above) to the thesis statement and your analysis. Take this line as an example: “Of course, this is just one of many recipe books published in New England in the 1790s. What makes it especially interesting is that its owner, named Hannah, left us many clues as to her cooking habits...” etc. etc.

**Conclusion: Significance for Us Today**

* Review the main points above and answer the “So what?” question. For example: “The fact that Eliza Winthrop could publish a book like this proves that, before ‘women’s rights’ became a hotly contested political issue, some women did try to negotiate their way into America’s public sphere.”