

## Coursework

Coursework is a standard part of the first 2-3 years of graduate education in history. It is also the entry point to one's professional life as an historian. Its purpose is to help graduate students get a sense of the state of the historical discipline, the state of the field in which a student will work, to learn the conventions, vocabulary, and epistemologies of the discipline, and to hone the research and writing skills necessary to eventually research and write a dissertation. Most courses at the graduate level are conducted with less than 20 students and thus every student is expected to participate orally. Many students starting out in graduate school are surprised to discover that graduate coursework is less oriented toward the facts (who, what, where, why) and more interested in historiography and interpretative debates. If at any point in a course, you feel that your grounding in the facts isn't sufficient, ask your professor to recommend a textbook.

There is currently no consistent terminology for naming graduate courses. What one department calls a colloquium may be called a seminar at another institution. Given this caveat, most graduate courses in history at your institution will resemble one of these categories:

**Field Colloquia:** Field seminars are designed to familiarize students with the key debates and important secondary works written on a given geographic area or historical time period. Given that these courses tend to feature "the greatest hits" in each field, they tend to provide very valuable preparation for general exams.

**Methods Seminars:** Methods seminars introduce students to the various approaches to history. Some methods seminars spend each week on a different approach to history (e.g. political history, social history, cultural history). Other methods seminars might spend a quarter or a semester on just one approach to history (e.g. women's and gender history or microhistory). Courses that discuss how to approach sources also fit in this category.

**Research/Writing Intensive Seminars:** Although the particular format varies, most programs require students to register for one or two courses in which they write an extended paper based on original research. In many cases the product takes the form of either a master's thesis or a journal article. These courses are especially important for introducing graduate students to the worlds of archival research and historical argumentation. They also provide an opportunity for graduate students to test out potential dissertation topics.

**Directed Readings:** These are readings conducted one-on-one with a professor in a field of your interest. Typically these occur in subjects where there are not enough students interested in a topic to merit a field seminar class at that time. Typically, directed readings are arranged by the student with the faculty member with whom they wish to work. Directed readings can be particularly valuable in preparation for comprehensive exams in that they provide a chance to build your own syllabus and discuss readings in depth with a faculty member.

**Lecture-course add-on:** In such courses, a graduate student generally attends an undergraduate lecture but will likely have either separate/additional readings and will usually have different writing assignments than the undergraduates enrolled in the course. If there are enough graduate students taking the course, there may even be a separate discussion section for graduate students.

**Reading/Preparing for Success in Seminars:**

- Read the book or articles' introduction and conclusion carefully. Make sure you can articulate the central argument, structure, and the research method the author used.
- Look carefully at the footnotes and the bibliography; get a sense of the author's research trail and evidentiary base.
- Identify two things that the work does well.
- Identify two shortcomings of the work.
- Identify an item or two that puzzles you – that too, can be a conversation starter.
- If you have had multiple items to read for a given week, think about how the assigned readings relate to one another.
- Think about how the week's readings relate to other works you've read on the topic and the items you have read in the course.
- Come into class with some notes that you can use to ask questions and generate discussion.

#### **Effective Seminar Interaction:**

- Listen really carefully
- Respect what others are saying
- Think before you speak; frame your argument concisely
- Draw on prior comments made by your classmates in order to link strands of the discussion
- Carefully observe the seminar dynamic; it varies from professor to professor

#### **Writing for Success:**

- The coursework phase places a premium on well-argued and polished written work. Be sure each of your papers has a clear thesis statement and a well-organized and well-developed body that leverages evidence appropriately to support your argument.
- Carefully edit and proofread everything you turn in.

#### **Historiography and Historical Methods:**

There are literally hundreds of types of history practiced by contemporary historians and you will no doubt encounter many of them during your graduate studies. Although it would be impossible to cover all of those types of history here, each of them has a historiography and is reliant on either qualitative or quantitative methods.

**Historiography:** A word used in various senses to refer to (a) the history of historical writing; (b) the substantive history of historical interpretations and historical writings about past events and happenings; (c) the art and crafting of historians' texts; and d) sources and methods in the study of history. (Taken from *The History and Narrative Reader*, edited by Geoffrey Roberts, London: Routledge, 2001)

#### **Historians rely on two different methods of analysis in their interpretation of historical documentation:**

**Qualitative** -- the interpretation and analysis of texts to understand history. Be aware that developments other disciplines, particularly in the philosophy of language, have affected the way historians read and interpret texts. Cross fertilization with other disciplines, mainly anthropology

and sociology, but also literary studies have expanded the historian's tool box. Categories of analysis include: class, gender, race, space vs. place, citizenship, bodies, among others.

**Quantitative** -- the use of social science methodology and quantification and statistics to understand history

**To get your bearings with the various types of history, we recommend the following reference books:**

Barzun, Jacques and Henry Graff. "The Modern Researcher" NY: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

Bonnell, Victoria E. and Lynn Hunt, eds. *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1999.

Burke, Peter. *History and Social Theory*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Burke, Peter, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1991

Canning, Kathleen. *Gender History in Practice. Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006

Howell, Martha and Prevenier, Walter *From Reliable Sources. An Introduction to Historical Methods* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. (This book contains a great research bibliography in the back.)

Munslow, Alan. *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, London: Routledge, 2000

Veese, H.A. , ed. *The New Historicism*. London: Routledge, 1991.