

Independent Work in  
History: A Guide

2021-2022

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## Portrait of the Discipline

Historians seek to understand changes and continuities in the past and comprehend how the present came to be. The study of history is, by nature, an interdisciplinary enterprise, bringing together the social sciences and the humanities. What distinguishes historical research and writing, however, is that historians seek to understand previous eras and other societies on their own terms rather than from the perspective of our own time. Advised by a large faculty with remarkably diverse interests, our juniors and seniors study a wide range of eras and societies.

Doing independent work in history means carrying out historical research and writing at an advanced level, which may differ significantly from the kinds of papers students write in high school and early undergraduate history courses. History is not simply something one learns, a collection of dates and facts; the historical process is not one of rote memorization, but rather engagement in the production of history as an active pursuit. In the process of doing scholarship in history, our faculty and our students do internalize information concerning other periods and places, but they do so less to acquire the information than as a means to do something with it—i.e., craft and support an argument. In this sense, history is not simply an act of recovery of the past. Rather, research and writing in history involve reasoned explanations of why and how events unfolded, and also why they matter. The questions one asks are determinative of a particular history's shape. Histories have theses; those theses are supported by arguments; both are a factor of the motive of the historian, who is in search of the facts of the past. To prove those facts, historians look for evidence and demonstrate its significance.

Successive generations of historians bring different questions to the past, and in the process they are forced to confront the mutability of “truth” about that past. Yet historians never fully escape the idea that a truth exists. It is in this negotiation between discovering the real events of the past, through rigorous research, and making one's own argument about one's sources—because the past is always being contested—that makes independent work in history the thrilling and important endeavor that it is.

## Overview of Independent Work

All students, regardless of their area of concentration, must complete three pieces of independent work. In each of their two junior semesters, students write a 25-35 page research paper, referred to as the JP (for ‘Junior Paper’). During their senior year, History concentrators write a senior thesis, the length of which is typically 75-100 pages.

As History concentrators begin their independent work in the Department, they receive special instruction in the practices, norms, and conduct of historical research. This begins with the fall-term Junior Seminar, History 400. In addition to being the first course undergraduates take after joining the Department, it is also the forum in which they write their first JP. More fundamentally, the course serves as students’ introduction to *doing* history in the Department.

Though administered as a single course, History 400 in fact consists of a number of different seminars, anywhere from six to ten depending on the size of the junior class, each led by a different faculty member and constructed around a distinct topic. While these topics are important, each seminar is fundamentally designed to train students in the methods and practice of historical research and writing. As they work through the specific materials germane to the topic at hand, students are taught how to conceive of historical problems, to derive questions with which to address them, to employ strategies for doing research, to analyze and interpret, and to organize and present their findings. In addition to producing their JP, students also perform tasks specific to the seminar’s topic. Students receive separate grades for each of these bodies of work.

Unlike the topic of their fall JP, which is tied to the subject of their History 400 seminar, the focus of History concentrators’ spring independent work is largely up to them. While the spring JP must be situated in different era and place as the fall JP, considerable latitude is given to students to explore their interests and to request particular faculty as advisers.

The senior thesis is the capstone to a student’s experience as a History concentrator. The thesis project is the result of a yearlong endeavor on the part of the student who works in close and regular contact with a faculty adviser. The thesis is envisioned as a project that will enable students to develop a range of skills that will serve them well beyond their years at Princeton including the ability:

- to pose articulate questions about the past and identify strategies for answering them.
- to take greater responsibility for their own knowledge and understanding of the past by learning how to use research resources as well as by practicing the skills of reading and writing.

- to respond to primary and secondary material in sophisticated ways as part of the process of elaborating and testing hypotheses.
- to formulate, structure, and defend a historical argument, in part by considering possible objections and acknowledging possible contradictions.
- to write with greater clarity and precision.

## The Process

Writing a senior thesis is an enormous task that will take up a significant portion of the academic work you do over the course of your senior year. That said, thousands of students have written theses before you. Nearly everyone can and will get it done. The above timelines demonstrate how critical the management of time is throughout an independent project of this magnitude. The nature of the project makes it difficult to complete the work successfully in a short and concentrated amount of time. Given the busyness of student life in Princeton, some writers of senior theses try to cram the entire research and writing into the last few weeks before the deadline. The results of such efforts are not usually successful and the Department strongly cautions against doing this.

There are probably as many different ways to conduct a research project as there are historians. There are, however, certain general steps that most take as they pursue their research and writing.

### Finding a topic

Finding a topic is the hardest task of all the work that goes into a research project. It is also the first task that faces you. There is no magic bullet and it can be a frustrating process. It is nevertheless important to be proactive and relentless in identifying a research subject. Spend time and energy early on—whether the spring semester of your junior year or the summer between junior and senior years or at the very latest early on in the beginning of your senior year—reading, thinking, talking, and writing possible topics.

One helpful suggestion: Keep a journal. Write down or enter electronically the date and activity you are doing every time you sit down to work on the project. Maintain a list of sources you would like to track down, notes about primary sources, and ideas about your argument.

A research topic is essentially an historical question, a query that can be addressed through an analysis of some aspect of the past. Ultimately, the answer to your question will be your thesis—the central statement of your senior thesis' argument. Just as you cannot know at the beginning of your project what your final answer will be, so, too, will you not know your final question until later on in the research and writing process. Finding a topic and an argument, therefore, takes place in stages. In the beginning, you follow things that hold your interest—an issue, an event, a text, a phenomenon that strikes you as worthy of investigation, study, analysis, and reflection. These will lead you to a question that has not been answered—or, one that has not been answered in a way that you find adequate, satisfying, or persuasive. In looking for a thesis topic, therefore, what you are looking for is an interesting problem.

There are a few common ways to finding such a problem.

- a. Books: examine the types of questions that historians you read are asking, as well as the materials that they draw upon to answer them.
- b. Historiography: think about the debates that historians have engaged in over the years. How might bringing a new body of evidence allow you to intervene in a particular debate?
- c. Primary source collections: locate a body of sources and see what it is that they can tell you.
- d. People: primarily but not only your adviser. Visit your adviser early and often to get advice about ideas, books, and articles. Have conversations with your peers, graduate students in the Department, and other faculty. The history librarian is an important resource. Other librarians in areas such as Classics, Hellenic Studies, and Near Eastern Studies can be helpful, too.

## Prospectus and Working Bibliography

A prospectus is an introduction to your project and a written description of your plan to accomplish it. You are not required to write a prospectus as part of your senior thesis, but doing so can be a very helpful way for you to force yourself to clearly organize your thoughts about the question you want to answer and the evidence you will marshal to do so. A prospectus can be a helpful roadmap, even though the path the road will go, once the journey has begun, may change. It is a statement of aspirations; what you ultimately accomplish may look different.

It is critical to realize that figuring out the subject of your thesis is a dynamic process that involves moving back and forth between your own knowledge, interests, and ideas, and the sources of the past. The entire process of an independent research project involves this back and forth, which is one of the things that makes it both exciting and daunting. In an ideal world, the information in your prospectus would be congruent with an abstract of your project, albeit one differing in verb tense. In reality however, the abstract is a pithy summary of your argument, the prospectus is a projection of the path you'll take to articulate it. Often, we don't truly know our argument until we have finished a draft of the entire work, so while a prospectus looks formally like an abstract, it is likely that the abstract, written after your paper has been completed, will look differently. These changes are part of the process and should be expected.

What goes in a prospectus? A prospectus' components should include a brief layout of the information a reader will need to understand the question you are asking, an articulation of that question, your thesis, a description of the approach you are taking, and the relevance of your findings. Again, in an ideal world, this means that the prospectus

would approximate a kernel-like picture of your thesis' introduction, ready to be expanded into a longer treatment.

A prospectus should include the following:

1. A statement of the project's thesis: no matter how tentative, a prospectus should begin with a direct statement of the project's thesis. The statement will likely seek to explain the problem that the thesis will address. This will involve getting the reader up to speed. Provide a basic schema of the events, issues, and ideas that will be central to the story. Supply basic information about your topic's time and place that your reader will need to know in order to understand your question.
2. A brief overview of the secondary sources: Eventually, when you have a more solid handle on the argument you are making, this will include the ways in which your approach interacts with other related histories—how it reflects, refracts, negates, or reinforces those treatments of the topic that have come before. At this stage, however, you simply want to show that there is a literature that touches on the topic and that your paper will interact with prior approaches. These secondary works will be listed in your working bibliography. In the prospectus itself you want to focus on demonstrating which ones you will draw on, and for what.
3. A discussion of the primary sources you will draw on to address and answer your question: this must be more than a simple listing of sources that you plan to examine. It should include the kinds of information you hope to find in each and the kinds of conclusions you hope to draw. At this stage, it is sufficient to show that the materials that can help you address the problem you have posed are extant and can be obtained.
4. Tentative conclusions: what would we know or understand if we had the answer to the question you have posed. Simply put, who cares? Why does your project matter? At this stage, this is highly conjectural and may involve tying your project to some of the larger questions you have laid out.

*What is a working bibliography?*

This is a list of materials you discuss in general terms in the prospectus. At a minimum it should be divided into "primary sources" and "secondary sources." Thinking about further subdivisions may be helpful as can be short abstracts taken in from some of the works. They should be formatted properly and added to as you go along in your research.



## Research

The best sources for information about how to find primary and secondary sources are your adviser and the history librarian. If you are working in certain fields—ancient history or something related to area studies—you may also benefit from speaking to one of the other specialist librarians in Firestone Library. All senior thesis writers should schedule meetings with the history librarian early in the year and should spend considerable time going over the resources highlighted on [this webpage](#).

Princeton University maintains one of the most important research libraries in the world. Not only does Firestone Library constantly acquire new books and materials, but it continues to purchase the rights to the increasing array of research databases put online by various institutions around the globe. As an undergraduate, you have access to all these resources.

Here are some of them:

- For easy access to almost everything Princeton owns, use the library catalog. You can discover books, archival collections, manuscripts, graphic arts, and even music and video at [Princeton University Library Catalog](#) or by using the Books+ tab on the library home page.
- Want to explore the treasures of Princeton's Rare Books and Special Collections? Search the [finding aids](#) or explore the list at [Princeton University Library Collections](#).
- You can discover bibliographic databases and digital collections by searching by subject at the [University Library's Databases by Subject page](#) or by consulting the [History Librarians' primary source guides](#). The guides also list collections that are available only in microfilm.
- For general advice on library research for your senior thesis in history, see [History Senior Thesis Survival Guide](#).
- Finally, investigate the footnotes and bibliographies in everything you read. Old-fashioned footnote chasing is still an excellent research strategy.
- [Primary sources: a guide for historians](#)

## Writing and Revision

Writing is not the final step in this process. Rather, you should write all of the time. Don't let a session of work on your thesis go without putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Writing is thinking. Even if you are simply listing questions, hashing out vague ideas, or forecasting possible outlines, take the time to bring the creative part of your brain to bear on the problem your project is confronting. Doing so not only ensures that you are actively engaging with your topic, it also often allows you to refine your question and thereby increase your efficiency as you continue to research. Ultimately, only a fraction of what you write will become part of your final draft. The thinking that a draft represents, however, is a direct product of the writing you do along the way. Read your prose aloud and be a savage critic. If you can't find clarity (which is also usually elegance and power) that probably means that you aren't clear in what you want to say. Use your writing, therefore, to gauge the merit of your ideas. If you can't convince yourself, you won't be able to convince your reader. For this reason, editing is a vital and continuous process. Thaw your thought and reshape it so its lines are sharper.

## Organization and Structure (The introduction)

Just as the words and sentences that you choose are important, so, too, is the overall shape of the thesis vital. There are only a few hard-and-fast rules here. Some successful theses use sub-headings, for example, others do not. All, however, have excellent introductions.

The introduction should present your thesis. As such, it should introduce the reader to the problem your paper confronts, drawing him/her along by explaining its historical relevance and how your approach fits in with existing historiography on the topic. If appropriate, you may indicate what sources your interpretation will be based on, especially if that is significant to how your argument relates to or is different from those of other historians. Ideally, you will have returned to your prospectus while doing your research and secondary reading, making the introduction something like an expanded version of the statement you made there.

There are a number of services provided by the Writing Center that thesis writers have found useful. For a full listing, and to set up appointments, see [The Writing Center](#).

## Tips for Draft Readers

Having another student read and critique your work is an invaluable step in the writing process. Ultimately, a reader's response tells you how well you have communicated your ideas. Embrace this opportunity (and expect to provide the same service to others).

In reading another student's work, look to be able to comment on the following:

*Thesis*

Is it clearly stated? (What is it? Can you underline the sentence(s) that convey it most directly?) Does the author make a case for its importance/relevance? Is it situated within other literature on the topic?

*Introduction*

Given the thesis, how does the author guide the reader into her/his topic? Is this method effective (what might be more so)? Is it clear what question the thesis answers? Can you tell from the opening how the rest of the essay will be put together? How will the author go about proving or arguing his/her thesis?

*Structure*

How is the argument put together across the essay? Are there headings or subheadings? (Are they effective? Of roughly the same page-length? Can you suggest other, or modified, headings?)

How (and how well) does each section "work"? Is it clear what the author is trying to accomplish? What function does each paragraph perform? (Can you "re-outline" the paper, providing a succinct précis of each paragraph? Can you underline the "point sentence" of each?)

What transitions does the author use to move the reader between sections? (How might they be made more effective?)

*Evidence*

What sources does the author use to prove her/his position? How well does s/he balance information taken directly from those sources with his/her analysis of them? Are there enough quotations? Too many? Is the author's voice clear? Lost? Is the reader given sufficient context so as to understand the evidence clearly?

*Audience*

What information, if any, would be useful in order to make the author's point clearer? What could s/he explain more or better?

*Language*

How clear is the author's prose? Where are sentences too long? What are the key words s/he uses? How are they developed? Are the essay's key ideas sufficiently lucid?

## Revision

The longer any scholarly project is, the more important the process of revision. Once you have completed a draft of a section, your adviser can offer you suggestions for revision, but you should review your own work. In addition to removing errors and inconsistencies, a fundamental aim of revision will be to decide on your answer to the questions posed in your chapter. This will involve transforming the presentation of evidence into an argument about its meaning. You and your adviser can suggest when it will be most productive for you to revise each chapter. As your research develops, you may find it necessary to revise conclusions from earlier chapters.

## Resources

### Adviser

Your relationship with your adviser is one of the most important and rewarding aspects of doing independent work. History has long had a reputation for the individual attention that faculty members give to students, and many of our alumni cite this experience with their advisers as one of the most valuable and memorable experiences in their undergraduate education.

You will be assigned your first adviser on the basis of your preferences and field of interest as part of the process of your spring junior paper. Early in the fall of your senior year, you will be assigned your senior thesis adviser, again on the basis of preferences, field of interest, and faculty availability. If by the end of your junior year, you already have an idea of whom you would like to have as your senior thesis adviser, it would be wise to approach that professor as soon as possible and ask him or her if they would be willing to do so—getting a commitment early can help make sure that you get your first choice for adviser.

Your relationship with your thesis adviser will be most successful if you keep several things in mind. It is important early on in the fall semester to agree upon a schedule, first for the writing of the prospectus and then, once you have sketched the broad outline of the project, for the writing of the thesis itself. The schedule will undoubtedly change as the project develops, but these changes should be the result of conversations between you and your adviser, informed by your progress to date and the direction of your research and writing. There is no single formula for how often you should meet with your adviser. Most important is that you keep the lines of communication open and that you have regular contact. Every couple of weeks during the fall and more often in the spring is a schedule that has worked. It is up to you to stay in communication with your adviser.

Taking responsibility for this aspect of the relationship is part of what makes independent work such valuable training in independence.

## **Firestone Library and the History Librarian**

You will receive instruction in how to use Firestone and other campus and online resources in History 400, the seminar you take in the fall of your junior year.

You should also take full advantage of the librarians available to you, especially the history librarian.

## **Writing Center**

Another important resource on campus is the [Writing Center](#).

Located in Whitman College, the Writing Center offers free one-on-one conferences with experienced fellow writers trained to consult on assignments in any discipline. When working on your JP or thesis, you can schedule 80-minute conferences with a graduate student fellow from History or a related department. The Writing Center also holds 50-minute regular conferences seven days a week and drop-in hours Sunday through Thursday evenings.

## **History Writing Group**

Recognizing the challenges and solitude of independent work, the History Department has a History Writing Group that meets throughout the academic year. The Writing Group is conducted by a History graduate student who has been trained for the task by the Writing Center and who also consults throughout the year with a member of faculty. Regular meetings are held in which thesis writers discuss challenges they are confronting in their work and in which strategies for dealing with various issues and topics related to thesis writing are suggested and evaluated. Needs and concerns of students help determine the direction the Writing Group takes as the year progresses. In the spring, interested Juniors can join. The Writing Group is a wonderful resource for providing guidance and also for helping to create camaraderie among students.

## **Research Support**

There is a range of opportunities to find funding for independent research at both the departmental and university level.

[\*\*The Office of Undergraduate Research \(OUR\) Senior Thesis Research Funding Program\*\*](#) is the main source of funding for thesis research. Students can apply for funds

for travel and other research expenses. OUR invites two rounds of applications, one in the spring for rising seniors to conduct summer research, the other in the fall for academic research.

At the departmental level, there are several endowed funds that offer support to students conducting thesis research in the US or abroad. Funding is also available to thesis writers who are affiliated with different programs throughout the university such as the Program in Judaic Studies, the Program in Latin American Studies, or the Program in Hellenic Studies.

You should also be aware of the [Student Activities Funding Engine \(SAFE\)](#), which contains information about funding sources all over campus.

## Standards and Grading

The Department grades all independent work according to the following rubric, which is made part of every undergraduate course syllabus and which is published on the Department's website.

### Standards for Assessment

An **A** or **A minus** Junior Paper or thesis is one that is good enough to be read aloud before the Department. It is clearly written and well organized. It demonstrates that the writer has conducted a close and critical reading of the relevant texts, grappled with the issues raised across them, synthesized relevant readings, discussions, and lectures, and formulated a perceptive, compelling, independent argument. The argument shows intellectual originality and creativity, is sensitive to historical context, is supported by a well-chosen variety of specific examples, and is built on a critical reading of primary material.

A **B plus** or **B** Junior Paper or thesis demonstrates many aspects of A-level work but falls short of it in either the organization or clarity of its writing, the formulation and presentation of its argument, or the quality of research. Some papers in this category are solid works containing flashes of insight. Others give evidence of independent thought, but the argument is not presented clearly or convincingly.

A **B minus** Junior Paper or thesis demonstrates a command of content-related and research material and understanding of historical context, but provides a less than thorough defense of the writer's argument because of weaknesses in writing, argument, organization, or use of evidence.

A **C plus**, **C**, or **C minus** Junior Paper or thesis offers little more than a summary of ideas and information having to do with the chosen topic, is insensitive to historical context, suffers from frequent factual or compositional errors, is written in an unclear manner, or is poorly organized (or some combination of these problems). It often demonstrates an inadequate amount of primary research.

Whereas the grading standards for written work between **A** and **C minus** are concerned with the presentation of argument and evidence, a Junior Paper or thesis that belongs to the **D** or **F** categories demonstrates inadequate command of seminar material.

A **D** Junior Paper demonstrates serious deficiencies or severe flaws in the student's command of course or research material.

A Junior Paper or thesis receiving an **F** demonstrates no competence in the seminar or research materials. It indicates a student's neglect of the research process as taught in the Junior Seminar.

In addition to a grade, each JP is accompanied by a detailed evaluation of the project's merits written by the student's adviser. These reports become part of the student's Departmental file and are used by spring JP advisers and senior thesis advisers to identify students' strengths and weaknesses as they move through the program. *For this reason, we ask that all advisers submit their comments electronically so that they can be kept on file.*

### **Who evaluates your work?**

The grading of independent work in the Department is undertaken primarily by the adviser of the project. The comments provided by the adviser will aim to clarify the rationale behind the grade, offer feedback about the central aims of the paper, and indicate areas of particular promise as well as areas for improvement.

The senior thesis is also graded by a second reader, who also provides a report.