

The United States, 1848 to the Present

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Spring 2019, MWF 1-1:50, Humanities 118

Welcome to a new semester of HIST 118 at Rice University! You probably have some questions about this course. Below, I'll do my best to answer them. If you have a question that you don't see answered, feel free to email me or stop by my office, preferably during office hours.¹ You can also stop by to chat about anything that comes up in this course; I'd love to meet and get to know you better.

What is Different about This Course?

This will not be a typical history "survey" of the sort you might be accustomed to from high school. It differs in at least three ways:

Big Difference #1 We will not even attempt to "cover" everything; instead, we will "uncover" what historians do.

Many traditional history surveys attempt to cram every person, place, and thing that was important in a given period into students' heads. I disagree with this approach, because I think it's more important in the long run for you to understand what U.S. historians do. So instead of organizing our study around the question of "What happened next?" we will be considering bigger questions, like these:

- What methods do historians use to reach their conclusions?
- How do those methods make the stories that professional historians tell different from many popularly accepted stories about the nation's past?
- Why is it possible for historians to disagree and tell different stories about the same past events, even when the basic facts about many events are already known, and what makes one story better than another?

By seriously pursuing these questions, my hope and expectation is that you will emerge from this course with a much better understanding of American history than you would get from a class where the teacher is determined to "cover" a fixed body of content.

Big Difference #2 We will not begin in 1848 and march through events to the present; instead, we will consider present-day events and questions and work our way back to 1848.

Most history courses you've had probably began at some past Point A and moved through a series of events to Point B. Much of

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Figure 1: The opposite of what I want to do.

this course will be driven, instead, by *questions* about Point B. I have derived most of these questions from recent headlines from the fall of 2018, when disputes over immigration, voting during the midterm elections, and the status of Confederate monuments in public spaces were all in the news. We will turn to the past to try to understand better these present-day events, sometimes (but not always) going all the way back to 1848 in the process.

This approach may seem disorienting at first, but it will allow us to tackle two more big questions:

- How do historical events and institutions still affect how Americans live and think today?
- Can studying the history of the United States since 1848 illuminate or help solve present-day problems? If so, how? What role should historical thinking play in our public life today?

By seriously pursuing these questions, I hope you'll leave the course understanding that historians have a particular way of thinking about things that can be applied to the present moment as much as to 1913 or 1863. Our premise is that if you want to understand why things are the way they are in our world, you can't look just to biology or psychology or contemporary social and economic arrangements—you must also look to the past.

Big Difference #3 We will not simply read our way through a textbook; instead, we will participate in evaluating a collaboratively written textbook.

This semester we will be reading portions of an open-access, online, collaboratively written textbook called the American Yawp.² Its editors started the project while working on their Ph.D degrees in history here at Rice. However, we will not be discussing everything covered by this textbook in class, nor will you be responsible for memorizing everything in it. Instead, you'll be required to read passages from the textbook alongside sources and passages from outside of it, and then you'll be asked to evaluate the textbook account.³

I believe the best way for you to understand what historians do is to try doing it yourself. One of the things historians do is synthesize complex interpretations of the past into concise narratives aimed at undergraduate students. So in this course, we'll do this, too, by revising, reviewing, and even writing chunks of a textbook like the Yawp.

I also have intentionally said that *we* will be doing this, because I will also be doing many of the writing assignments I give to you. Much like your math or chemistry professor tries to demonstrate how to solve problems by working them herself, I'm going to work alongside you and share how I think about our common task.



Figure 2: No DeLorean needed.

² <http://americanyawp.com>

³ On January 22, Stanford University Press is releasing a printed edition of the Yawp; if you prefer to read it this way, you can purchase Volume 2 online, but you are not required to have a hard copy. Electronic versions of all the chapters we will be reading are available for free.

What Should I Be Able to Do by Semester's End?

I want you to focus this semester on mastering the following skills, which are essential to what all historians do. I've given each *learning objective* a shorthand nickname so that you and I can refer to these as we reflect on your progress in the course.⁴

1. **Evidence:** Thoroughly support and revise your claims about the past using critical approaches to the best and most relevant available evidence.
2. **Empathy:** Look for the potential strengths and insights offered by alternative points of view on or in the past, even or especially when they conflict with your own or conventional understandings.
3. **Narrativity:** Craft complex historical narratives that answer a question or solve a problem using sophisticated understandings of causation, continuity, and change over time.
4. **Style:** Communicate your ideas clearly and concisely in writing, with an appropriate level of detail and awareness of audience.
5. **Self-reflection:** Show you can think reflexively and critically about your own ongoing development as a student of history.

These objectives may sound deceptively simple; in reality, each one implies a variety of other habits of thinking that will be spelled out in class. On the other hand, some of these objectives may mystify you, but that is to be expected at the beginning of a course. Your aim this semester should be to learn better what these things mean and how to do them—how to think like a historian.

You may notice that I have not included any statement about the body of content (names, dates, facts) that you should know by the end of the course. But the assignments that I have designed to help you cultivate these skills (and to help us both assess your learning) will require you to learn a lot about U.S. History since 1848. The reverse, in my experience, is not necessarily true: a course designed to cram information about U.S. history into your head would not necessarily teach you the above five skills of *evidence*, *empathy*, *narrativity*, *style*, and *self-reflection*, and those are the ones I consider most important in an introductory course.⁵

What Are We Going to Be Doing, and When?

At the beginning of the semester, I will create a Google Doc for each student and share yours with you, so that both you and I can edit it. All of your assigned work this semester will be added to this individual document, and it is also the place where I will give you feedback on your work.

⁴ These five points are *really* important, and I'll be referring to them below and in class as your learning objectives. Be sure you study and remember where to find them.

⁵ It's worth noting that versions of these skills have also been identified by the American Historical Association, the primary professional organization of historians in the United States, as part of the core competencies that history students should learn. See <http://bit.ly/1DtmaA3> for more details.

Assignment Overview

For homework, you'll be doing two things *every* week:

1. **Completing writing assignments in your Google Doc.** Each week, I will give you one writing assignment to complete outside of class that will be due *every* Monday by the time class begins. You will complete this assignment in your Doc. Length and type of assignments will vary but will typically not exceed 1-2 pages a week. I will sometimes give you writing assignments to do in class; they will also be completed in your Doc, so whenever possible, bring a computer that can edit Docs with you.⁶ Finally, I may sometimes pose a direct question to you when commenting on your writing; consider it part of your assignment to reply to such queries.
2. **Completing reading assignments online.** All of the assigned texts for this class will be delivered to you electronically. Sometimes you will be reading chapters or chunks of chapters from the American Yawp. At other times you may be reading short historical documents, long-form online essays, or scholarly articles by historians. There will be at least some reading to do every week, and within the first three or four weeks you should have a sense of the typical reading load. I pledge to keep the load consistent over time.

⁶ If you do not have a computer or mobile device that you can bring to class, that's okay, but please let me know ASAP so we can make alternate arrangements on days when we work on Docs in class.

Anything that I tell you about in class or give you to read outside of class becomes part of the "available evidence" that you will draw on to complete writing assignments. Note that writing and reading assignments will *always* be related. You will read with the writing assignments in mind, and incorporate what you read in your writing. It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to do the readings *and* to put them to use.

There are no mid-terms; that means you can expect your basic, weekly workload to remain steady throughout the semester. I will announce and explain all writing and reading assignments using our course's Canvas page.

There will be one final assignment, which you will complete by the last day of the final exam period, which differs from these earlier assignments. In it, you will be asked to prepare a formal written statement of your own growth as a historian over the course of the semester, and you will also be asked to comment online on selected portions of the American Yawp. This assignment will not be considerably longer than the earlier ones, but it will be different in kind, in that it will require you to transfer skills learned earlier in the semester to a new setting. Details will be distributed in class.

Schedule Overview

I'm not going to provide a detailed, class-by-class schedule on this syllabus, for reasons directly related to the learning objectives above. I want to be able to tailor our collective readings and assignments based on my sense of which skills the class most needs to improve.

I've observed in my own past experience that detailed schedules often (but not always) go hand-in-hand with an approach to teaching history that is more focused on "coverage" of content than on cultivating a deeper understanding of what historians do. The idea I used to have when planning a course was that there was a set number of topics we had to "get through," and so the task was to slot them into the available 25 or so class sessions. Often, I would include a disclaimer that the schedule was "subject to change," but usually what I meant by that was that we might get behind in trying to cover material, and would have to adjust. The adjustments to the schedule rarely had to do with an in-semester assessment of where the class was in terms of meeting learning goals.

Structure will be provided not by a detailed calendar, but by the regularity of the week-to-week assignments described above: writing on your Google Doc before each Monday class, and completing any assigned readings before all classes.

That said, I do have some broad questions that I'd like to explore with you, and I plan for the semester to unfold according to this rough outline:

Weeks 1-3 We will focus in these weeks on introducing the big questions I've listed at the beginning of this syllabus, and understanding the five objectives—*evidence, empathy, narrativity, style, and self-reflection*—that I want you to focus on. Our main question for these three weeks is: Is there a particular method that historians use to think about the past? What distinguishes it from the methods used by other disciplines, like science or engineering? To answer these questions we will examine primary sources and some case studies of historians at work.

Weeks 4-9 In Part 2, we will turn to three questions that are currently the subjects of active public debate in the United States: (a) is illegal immigration on the rise, requiring an increase in border security? (b) are American elections today more threatened by voter suppression or voter fraud? (c) should Confederate monuments be allowed to remain in public spaces? We will spend about two weeks each on these three questions, working backwards from the present to consider what role historical thinking can play in answering them.



Figure 3: Protests against Confederate monuments like this one at UNC-Chapel Hill have proliferated in the last three years.

Week 10 SPRING BREAK - No class

Weeks 11-15 In the final section of the semester, we will be reading excerpts from three or four different chapters of the *American Yawp* (roughly one chapter per week), alongside primary and secondary sources that relate to each chapter's period (The Great Depression, World War II, The Sixties, The Unraveling, and The Triumph of the Right). Our objective will be to use the historical thinking skills and content knowledge developed in the first part of the course to evaluate passages from the *Yawp*, both to better understand why the textbook covers what it does and to consider what additions or revisions could be made to the textbook in the future.

How will my learning be assessed and graded?

To answer that question, I need to distinguish between *assessments* and *grades*.

Assessments are judgments about how well you are progressing towards mastering the learning objectives of our course. Both you *and* I should constantly be making informal assessments of your learning throughout the semester. I will share my assessments with you in several forms, including informal feedback on your Google Doc and a progress report at the ends of Weeks 3, 5, 9, 12, and 15. These progress reports, based on a holistic review of everything in your Google Doc, will focus exclusively on how far you have progressed to *proficiency* in the five skills I discussed above on page 3. I will also frequently invite you to share your self-assessments with me.

Anything you produce for this class—comments in class, text in your Google Doc, replies to my comments on the Doc, your final assignment—may be relevant to an assessment of your progress as a learner. I pledge to make sure that all assignments relate to the learning objectives. Also note that in this class, all students are “presumed ignorant until proven understanding.” That is, I can only base my assessment of your learning on specific evidence. Work on *showing* that you understand instead of *telling* me that you do.

Grades are formal certifications of your overall performance in a course, represented symbolically with letters that also correspond to numbers that the Registrar uses to calculate your GPA. I will only be giving you one of these, at the end of the semester, as required by the University. If you have demonstrated proficiency in all five of the core learning objectives for the course, you will receive an A; if you demonstrate proficiency in four, you will receive a B; three of the five, C; two of the five, D. If you demonstrate proficiency of one or none of the skills, I will report this as an F.

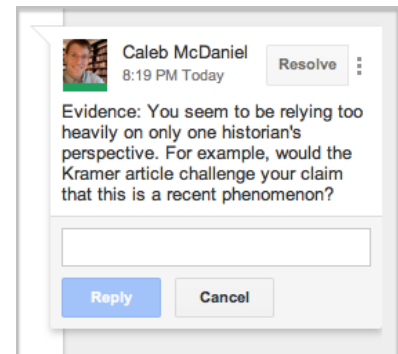


Figure 4: An example of an assessment, which I hope is more informative than “84.7 percent.”

Note that “proficiency” in any skill depends on your completing every assignment I give you this semester; I cannot certify that you have mastered desired skills if you have not attempted to apply them to the full range of work and topics in this class. *If you fail to complete even one of the assignments, I will therefore have to report a failing grade for the course.*

Wait . . . I only get one grade?

Yes, but remember that a *grade* is not the only kind of *assessment*. I will be giving you feedback throughout the semester about how well you are advancing towards proficiency of our learning objectives.

I will also be giving you a detailed rubric that describes, for each of our learning objectives, what *emerging practice*, *developing competence*, and *proficiency* look like. This rubric will be circulated and discussed in the first three weeks of class, and we will return to it throughout the semester.

You should be making self-assessments of your own learning, too. After each of the formal progress reports I give you, I invite you to let me know if you believe that there is some relevant improvement in your work that I have missed. If done in good faith, such a dialogue between us can help clarify my expectations, reveal misunderstandings, and—most importantly—make new learning possible. Throughout the semester, I am willing to read and seriously consider any self-assessment of your work (that is, to include it as part of what I assess) so long as it is guided by the rubric and the learning objectives.

This approach to assessment may feel unfamiliar to you. You are likely more used to grades based on “points,” “averages,” “curves,” and “percentages.” In this course, I’ve broken with that approach to grading because of several frustrations:

- Point-based grading schemes often end up assessing things that are only loosely related to your learning history, such as punctuality or talking a lot in class.
- Course grades based on averages of assignment grades often penalize early poor performance (which is to be expected when you are learning something new) or prematurely reward early good performance (which, as subsequent struggles may prove, often gives only circumstantial evidence of true understanding).⁷
- A big red number or letter grade often distracts students from the more important, substantive feedback that follows.

This semester, let’s work together to see if a different kind of grading and assessing is possible—one centered wholly on communicat-



THE PROBLEM WITH AVERAGING STAR RATINGS

Figure 5: The problem with averaging star ratings is also the problem with averaging grades to assess learning.

⁷ If you proceed to mastery of all learning objectives, shouldn't you get an "A" even if you didn't "get it" early on? Conversely, if you *seem* to "get it" early on, but do not consistently demonstrate proficiency, shouldn't that be reflected in your final grade?

ing with each other about how much you are learning and what you still need to work on.

What happens if I miss a class or turn in something late?

If you miss a class, you will learn less. If you turn in something late, you will receive little or no feedback from me on that assignment, because I have arranged my schedule around the deadlines. If you don't turn things in at all, I won't have any basis on which to assess your progress towards the learning objectives and no evidence that you have mastered them (which, from a grading perspective, is the same as not having achieved proficiency in them).

What if I need special learning accommodations?

If you have a documented disability and would like to seek academic adjustments or accommodations, please speak with me confidentially in the first two weeks of class after registering with the Disability Resource Center in the Allen Center.

Does the Rice Honor Code apply to work in this class?

The Honor Code applies to everything you submit in this course. Plagiarism and other forms of intellectual dishonesty will be reported to the Honor Council; materials used as evidence must be clearly cited using conventions described in class. You should not collaborate with any other students on your Google Doc assignments, unless specifically told otherwise. You may consult the Center for Written, Oral and Visual Communication for help with assignments, but any such help should be acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

This course was inspired by recent research on teaching and learning by Lendol Calder; Sam Wineburg, Abby Reisman and the Stanford History Education Group; Cathy Davidson; Ken Bain; David Voelker; and the authors of the journal *Hybrid Pedagogy*. The design was especially influenced by *Understanding By Design*, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. If you'd like to read more about the rationale behind this class, you can read an essay I wrote about earlier iterations of this course: <http://wcm1.web.rice.edu/looking-back-on-backwards-survey.html>. I also recommend Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago, 2018). *Image credits:* Figure 1 was taken from a blog post written by Bradley Lands (<http://bit.ly/1ACxBUZ>). Figure 3 is a photograph taken by Martin Kraft and published on Wikimedia (<https://bit.ly/2QVbiZU>). Figure 5 is an xkcd cartoon (<https://xkcd.com/937/>). The layout for this syllabus is based on a handout template designed and used by Edward Tufte.