

History 1895F

# History for Time Travelers

Fall 2023

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This is a **draft** syllabus, subject to change.  
Please see our course site on OWL for the final version.

**Imagine you could travel back in time:** to ancient China, or medieval Europe, or the Americas before Columbus. What would you see? What would you smell? How should you greet people? And what might they think of you? Historians investigate many complex questions about the past, but another, simpler, question lurks in almost all our minds: *what was it like?*

This new course is an introduction to doing history at the university level, dedicated to reconstructing or imagining what historical times and places would have been like if we were really there. We will draw on the best available research, plus our own careful imaginations, to “visit” a dozen or so destinations in time, from the dawn of humanity to the late twentieth century. Behold the fabled Library of Alexandria, or the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán before the Spanish conquest. March into battle with the Spartans and the Persians, or with Henry V at Agincourt. Visit Vienna’s elegant cafés on the eve of the Great War and wonder: should we do anything about that Hitler character?

Along the way, we’ll learn a great deal about history as a discipline: how it is done, and how it both is and isn’t like a time machine. We’ll learn some practical lessons that will equip you for further study of history. We’ll discuss historical sources and arguments, perspectives, causation, contingency, and more. We’ll even indulge in some counterfactual speculation: What if history had gone differently? Can history tell us about the future? But first and foremost, this is a whistle-stop tour through a few of the most interesting moments in our human past.

**We do not, alas, have a **time machine**.**  
**But history—and this course—are the next best thing.**

## Assignments and Evaluation

This course involves a mix of lectures, discussions, and other activities. Successful **participation** means attending all lectures and tutorial meetings, doing each week's assigned readings, paying close attention in class, and adding real value to class discussions. All these things will be part of your participation grades.

You will need to complete **two writing assignments** in this course, each one an essay or report of 1000-1500 words (approx. 4-6 double-spaced pages). These will ask you to reflect on material we've discussed in class and do some library and internet research. More information on these assignments will be available once term begins.

You will also be asked to complete a number of **small, low-stakes exercises and assignments** throughout the term (about one per week). Most of these are just basic skills every university student should have: taking good notes during lecture, finding books in the library, visiting a professor's office hours, and so on. These will simply be graded as complete or incomplete; complete enough of them and you can earn a perfect 10% of your final grade.

There will be a **final exam** during the December exam period (December 10-22).

Your course grades will be calculated as follows:

<b>Participation</b> in lecture & tutorial, every week	20%
<b>Writing Assignment #1</b> , 1000-1500 words, due October 11	20%
<b>Writing Assignment #2</b> , 1000-1500 words, due November 22	20%
<b>Small, low-stakes assignments</b> , throughout the term	10%
<b>Final exam</b> , during December exam period	30%

Attendance will be taken at all lectures and tutorials. You may miss up to four classes without penalty or explanation; after that, each lecture or tutorial missed will reduce your maximum participation grade (out of 20%) by 1. Please see the Department of History's [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) for procedures involving missed tests and exams. Make-up exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling.

The two writing assignments should be uploaded to our course OWL site. They are due on Wed. Oct. 11 and Wed. Nov. 22 at 5 pm, but both have a built-in extension: they can be submitted up to 2 days after the due date without penalty (so, by Fri. Oct. 13 and Fri. Nov. 24 at 5 pm). Assignments handed in after that but before the following Friday at 5 pm will be penalized 10%. Assignments handed in after that but before the last day of classes will be penalized 20%. No assignments will be accepted after the last day of classes. Note that late assignments may be returned late and receive less feedback.

## Course Materials

No books are required for purchase. All readings and other course materials will be available through OWL, in Western's libraries, or elsewhere online.

## **Itinerary**

Here is a tentative itinerary of our tour through time. It is likely to change; please see our course site on OWL for the most up-to-date information.

### **Week 1      Sept. 13      The Time Machine**

An introduction: to time travel, the study of history, and this course.

### **Week 2      Sept. 20      The Dawn of Everything**

When does history begin? In looking for the dawn of human history, we'll discuss the problem with "pre-history" as a concept, and what we can and can't ever know about our earliest human ancestors.

### **Week 3      Sept. 27      The Lost Libraries**

The Great Library of Alexandria and its alleged destruction, along with the purported burning of books in Qin dynasty China, point us towards history's dependence on sources, written or otherwise.

### **Week 4      Oct. 4      The Bright Ages**

What was life like in the year 1000 A.D.? How dark were the "Dark Ages"? Could parts of the world have been more tolerant, more cosmopolitan, and altogether "brighter" than we've been taught to believe?

### **Week 5      Oct. 11      The Land of Four Quarters**

Visiting the Inka empire at its pre-Colombian height compels us to re-examine what we think we know of the Americas before European colonization, and the reasons some historians have misrepresented this history for so long.

### **Week 6      Oct. 18      The Face of Battle**

We'll march into battle with the Spartans at Cunaxa, the English at Agincourt, maybe Napoleon at Waterloo. What can history, or time travel, tell us about the ground-level experience of war across millennia? (It isn't pretty!)

### **Week 7      Oct. 25      Seven Ways to Spot a Witch**

We'll witness the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, but our real topic is the history of history, illustrated by the ways generations of historians have revised our understanding of this one weird episode, again and again and again.

### **Oct. 30 – Nov. 3      Reading Week (NO CLASS)**

### **Week 8      Nov. 8      Tecumseh Lies Here**

Time for some local history, or nearly local: we'll mourn the death of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames. We'll see why there are at least three sides to every history, and ask what we owe to the past of the land of we're on.

**Week 9      Nov. 15      The Invention of Time Travel**

We'll drop in on Victorian London (where H.G. Wells published *The Time Machine* in 1895) as the discovery of "deep time" makes possible the invention of time travel as an idea—and helped create the historical profession.

**Week 10      Nov. 22      Killing Hitler**

We'll visit Vienna on the eve of the First World War—when Hitler, Stalin, Trotsky, and Freud all happen to live in the same neighborhood—and indulge the question: How might history change if any one of them was removed from the equation?

**Week 11      Nov. 29      The End of History**

The history-changing events of 1989—the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protest and massacre—along with some events that didn't happen, like the nuclear war that hasn't come, confront us with riddles of causation, contingency, and complexity.

**Week 12      Dec. 6      Back to the Future**

If all goes well, we'll make it back to 2023 in time for December holidays, and exams. We'll try to sum up what we've learned and ask what, if anything, history can tell us about the future.

**Additional Statements**

Please review the Department of History's [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) for important information regarding accessibility options, health and wellness, medical accommodations, make-up exams, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.

The use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT is discouraged in this course but may be permitted *only* for activities such as brainstorming or refining your ideas, or checking grammar and style. Beyond that, you should not make use of such tools in class assignments. All writing submitted in this course must be your own. (If in doubt, please ask for clarification.)

Be sure to consult Prof. MacDougall before altering the course of history or otherwise meddling in the timestream.