

History 1895F : History For Time Travelers

Fall 2025

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Office Hours: **Thursdays 2-4 pm** (no appointment required)

This is a **draft** outline.

Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for the most up-to-date information.

History 1895F : History for Time Travelers

Imagine you could travel back in time: to ancient Egypt, 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 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. We’ll see the fabled Library of Alexandria and the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán before the Spanish conquest. We’ll travel with Marco Polo to the court of Kublai Khan and we’ll investigate the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. We’ll visit Vienna on the eve of two world wars 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? And we’ll make a whirlwind tour through just 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, paying close attention in class, doing each week's assigned readings, 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 after 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: visiting a professor's office hours, finding books in the library, 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 9-22).

Your course grades will be calculated as follows:

Participation in lecture & tutorial, every week	20%
Writing Assignment #1 , 1000-1500 words, due October 23	20%
Writing Assignment #2 , 1000-1500 words, due November 27	20%
Small, low-stakes assignments , throughout the term	10%
Final exam , during December exam period	30%

Learning Outcomes

Students in History 1895F will learn to:

- Identify and explain the significance of key people, events, and ideas from several historical times and places.
- Define, analyze, and employ metahistorical concepts such as causation, contingency, agency, determinism, primacy/secondary sources, and more.
- Articulate and evaluate historical arguments and interpretations, in written texts and in group discussion.
- Engage with history as a discipline, understanding the ways history is constructed from evidence and the reasons historical interpretations change over time.
- Demonstrate student skills—reading, writing, notetaking, studying, navigating university resources—for the successful study of history and other subjects at the university level.

Attendance

Attendance will be taken at all lectures and tutorials, and attendance does count toward your participation grade. You may miss up to two lectures and two tutorial meetings without penalty or explanation. (Given this flexibility, requests for further accommodation may be denied.)

Assignments

Information on the two written assignments will be available after term begins.

Assignment #1 is due on **Thursday, October 23** and **Assignment #2** is due on **Thursday, November 27**, but both have a no-questions-asked grace period of four days: that is, they can be submitted up to four days after the due date without penalty. After the four-day grace period, late assignments will be subject to a 10% late penalty. After an additional four days, late assignments will be subject to a 20% late penalty. (Given this flexibility, requests for further accommodation will generally be denied.) No assignments can be accepted after December 9, the last day of classes for the term.

The use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT is discouraged in this course. You may use AI tools in this course for initial activities, such as researching and refining your ideas, or drafting an outline to organize your thoughts—but **not** for generating prose.

All writing submitted in this course must be your own. If in doubt, please ask me for clarification and advice.

Exam

There will be a final exam during the December exam period. The exam schedule is usually available by mid-to-late October. Make-up exams can only be approved by Academic Advising. Please see the Department of History's [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) for procedures involving missed or make-up exams.

Office Hours

I will hold drop-in office hours every Thursday from 2-4 pm. What I mean by “drop-in office hours” is just that: I should be in my office every Thursday afternoon, and you are welcome to drop in there without making an appointment, sending an email, or even having a good reason. This doesn’t mean we can’t talk at other times! You are always welcome to email me with questions about the class; we can also schedule other meeting times, in person or on Zoom.

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 still subject to change; please see our course site on OWL Brightspace for the most up-to-date information.

Week 1 History for Time Travelers

We'll take our first trip in the time machine, and make a number of introductions: to time travel, to the study of history, to this course, and to each other.

Week 2 The Dawn of Everything

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

Week 3 The Great Library

How do historians know what happened in the past? What sources survive and what sources are lost? We'll visit the Great Library of Alexandria at the time of Queen Cleopatra to explore history's dependence on sources, written and otherwise.

Week 4 The Silk Road

We'll travel with Marco Polo to the fabled court of Kublai Khan. This famous encounter between West and East illustrates the way myth and history are entwined, and how distinct historical traditions interpret the same events in strikingly different ways.

Week 5 The Bright Ages

How far back in time could we go and still talk to people? Even if we did speak the same language, could we really be understood? We'll visit medieval England to wrestle with historical perspective and the ways we are—and are not—like people in the past.

Week 6 The Fifth Sun

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

Week 7 Witch Hunting

We'll investigate 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.

ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23.

Week 8 Tecumseh's Last Stand

Time for some local history, or nearly local: we'll witness the death of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames. We'll ask what we owe the past of the places we live, and try to see the history of this region more clearly.

Nov. 3-7 READING WEEK (No Class)**Week 9 The Time Machine**

We'll drop in on Victorian London, where H.G. Wells published *The Time Machine* in 1895, to see how changes in the understanding of time and history helped create the historical profession, and made possible the invention of time travel as an idea.

Week 10 Killing Hitler

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

Week 11 Butterfly Effects

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

ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 27.**Week 12 Back to the Future**

If all goes well, we'll make it back to 2025 in time for your December exams. We'll ask what history can tell us about the future and try to sum up what we've learned.

Dec. 11-22 DECEMBER EXAM PERIOD

There will be a final exam during the December exam period. The exam schedule is usually available by mid-to-late October.

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.