

# Methods of Historical Research (HIST 4301)

Fall Semester 2026  
Tuesdays 5:30 – 7:30 p.m.  
Classroom: CAB 334

Instructor: Dr. Michael J. O'Brien  
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OFFICE HOURS:  
By Appointment



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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Procedures and methods of historical research. Introduction to types of historical data, the analysis of sources, the use of computer techniques in historical research and the methods of historical writing.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course will teach you the research and, especially, writing skills that historians and prehistorians use in their professions. You will be expected to formulate a topic of inquiry and a short thesis and then conduct research to support (or negate) that thesis in a written paper and oral presentation. Class topics will include the identification of source materials, critical evaluation of those materials, proper citation of sources, and the composition of a written narrative using source materials as the evidentiary basis for a thesis-driven essay. In addition, we will spend considerable time on **how** to write, including such seemingly mundane things as grammar, punctuation, developing coherent and logical sentences, and avoiding hyperbole. Regardless of whether you continue on as a historian or find yourself attracted to another occupation, you absolutely need to know how to write. And, despite what others might have told you, there really is only one way to write—and that is “correctly.”

## REQUIRED TEXT

None. Reading and writing assignments on a regular basis.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### • RESEARCH TOPIC

You'll be expected to prepare a **two-page**, double-spaced explanation of your topic, its *historical* significance, and a thesis statement. You'll turn in your prospectus in class on **September 9** (or before, by email).

### • RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

Two-page, double spaced prospectus of your research project. You'll present it in class and turn it in. Be sure and bring enough copies to pass out.

### • RESEARCH PRESENTATION

During the final three class periods (not counting the study day, November 24), each person will give a 20–25-minute PowerPoint presentation of his/her research project, followed by discussion.

### • SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

These will be very short pieces that will be assigned throughout the semester. They will be corrected but won't be graded. Your score is based on submittal (in other words, use loose points if you don't turn them in).

#### • FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

You'll be expected to turn in your 15-page research paper by **May 8**.

#### GRADING SCALE

Attendance—150 points

Class Participation and **Leading** Discussions—100 points

Research Topic Paper—100

Miscellaneous short pieces—50 points

Prospectus and Presentation—150 points

Final Paper—250 points

Class Presentation—200 points

**TOTAL POINTS: 1000**

**A = 1000–900; B = 899–800; C = 799–700; D = 699–600; F = 599 and below.**

#### POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

**Attendance and Participation:** Class attendance is part of your final grade (see above). I guarantee that you will not succeed if you miss class. Please be punctual; don't arrive late and don't leave early. If you know that you will be late or must leave early, please inform me ahead of time. In addition, you **must** participate and engage in classroom discussion of the lectures and readings.

**Extra Credit:** No such thing.

**Late-Work Policy:** No such thing.

**Blackboard:** We have a Blackboard site, which is where your grades will be posted. I'll also use Blackboard for course announcements and readings.

**Classroom Etiquette:** Please be respectful in the classroom. Don't get up and leave early; do turn your cell phone off. Laptops may be used only for taking notes and looking up relevant material.

**Communication:** You may e-mail me at any time regarding questions or concerns. I do my best to respond to email within one day. You may also schedule an appointment to speak with me.

**AI Policy:** No use of Generative AI is permitted *without my express permission*. I assume that all work you submit will have been generated by you, working individually or in groups, and not by a chatbot such as Open AI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, or by any other person. Please don't test me on this; I was a beta tester for both ChatGPT-3 and ChatGPT-4, and I know the tricks and backdoors to catch you.

## WEEKLY SCHEDULE

**Week 1: August 25**

Course introduction & syllabus; research strategies

**Week 2: September 2**

Selecting research topic for the semester; three-page summary will be turned in next class

**Week 3: September 9**

Writing like a pro I

**Week 4: September 16**

Writing like a pro II

**Week 5: September 23**

Writing like a pro III

**Week 6: September 30**

Plagiarism, AI-assisted research and research integrity

**Week 7: October 6**

The difference between primary and secondary sources and how to cite and reference them; preliminary discussion of research topics

**Week 8: October 13**

Differences in organization and design of scholarly articles/books (including figures and tables); preliminary discussion of research topics (con't.)

**Week 9: October 20**

Prospectus for final paper presented in class. Two pages, double spaced, bring copies

**Week 10: October 27**

In-class peer review of each prospectus from last class (have detailed notes ready for the review and discussion)

**Week 11: November 3**

No class; work on drafts and prepare for presentations

**Week 12: November 10**

Presentation of research papers (and feedback) I

**Week 13: November 17**

Presentation of research papers (and feedback) II

**Week 14: November 24**

Study day

**Week 15: December 1**

Presentation of research papers (and feedback) III

**December 10: Turn in Final Research Papers (by email)**