

Guidelines for the First-Year Research Papers

History Ph.D. Program

The History Ph.D. program requirements reflect the high priority that faculty place on training students to research and write about the past. The sine qua non of preparation for dissertation work is primary-source research, which will be a central element of the first-year curriculum. All students, regardless of field or era of expertise, will complete a research paper in the fall of their first year. They do so by working closely with an individual faculty member, who will supervise a double-credit directed research course (History 300e).

They should contact an advisor at the very start of the semester – if not earlier – to discuss possible research topics and available sources. While students should be guided first and foremost by their research advisors, the program has the following general expectations for first-semester research projects:

The aim of this directed research exercise is to produce written research roughly comparable in scope and style to an article in a scholarly journal such as *American Historical Review*, *Journal of American History*, or *Journal of Modern History*. As such, the paper should include an original interpretation of a substantial base of primary sources, whether those sources are archival or publication, quantitative or qualitative, and in English or other languages. It should also include serious engagement with prior scholarship on the topic, emphasizing the article's contributions by situating them in broader scholarly trends. While there is no fixed length, papers will usually be between 25 and 40 pages long (double-spaced) and include significant documentation and bibliography.

In most cases, students will be expected to complete their projects in the fall semester. While the precise deadline will be set by the research advisor, the general expectation is that the work will be completed and the grade recorded before the start of the spring semester.

In some cases, a student will – with the approval of the advisor – continue the research project into the spring semester. In such circumstances, the student and advisor will define an interim written exercise to be completed in the fall semester; this exercise will be graded. This decision should be reached well before the end of the semester, and the graduate chair notified by the advisor.

Most students will devote the spring semester to a second research paper, different in topic, approach and sources from the fall paper - and normally with a different advisor. Students should speak with their fall advisors about a possible exception to this arrangement, in which case they should propose a spring research plan to their advisor and the graduate chair. In the interests of maintaining maximum flexibility for students with significant research experience, other possibilities include: (a) exemption from further research work; (b) continuation of the fall research project through the spring semester; or (c) a single-credit research paper, smaller and/or narrower than the double-credit paper.

There are many different ways to have a successful first-year experience. In some cases, the first-year research becomes the kernel of a dissertation, or perhaps the basis for a dissertation chapter. In other cases, the exploration is fruitful enough to merit publication in a peer-reviewed journal, even though the student pursues dissertation research on a different topic. Sometimes, the project is an exploration of a method or type of source that does not yield a paper ready for publication – but nevertheless provides a useful opportunity for students to expand their research

horizons. All successful papers, though, should work with a substantial base of relevant primary sources, should offer an original interpretation of those sources, and should situate that interpretation in the context of other scholarship.

Because the semester is so short, with few opportunities to travel for research, first-year papers will face limits on the primary sources available to them. Fortunately, the Boston area is rich in historical sources – and not only for American history. The department is currently preparing guides to key libraries and archives in the Boston area. Students should begin searching for local sources as soon as possible, even in the summer before entering Brandeis.

While the research project is a fundamentally individual one, students in recent years have met informally to compare notes and offer advice. Depending on a group's preferences, these may take place with or without faculty.

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