

The History Handbook

A Field Guide to the Inhabitants of Swift Hall and Their Policies and Practices for History Majors and Other Students at Vassar College

2026 - 2027

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Welcome to History at Vassar!

If the value of a History major could be summarized in one word, it might be *perspective*. The study of history liberates us from the constraints of the present. It opens our minds and tests our imaginations as we encounter radically different ways of living and thinking. Agreeing with L. P. Hartley that "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," Vassar's history faculty are intent on introducing students to the "otherness" of bygone eras. At the same time we believe in a usable past, one that strengthens our grasp of the dreams and struggles of our own world. Studying history, as a member of the Vassar department has written, is "a way of perceiving past, present, *and future* [italics added]."

Combining aspects of art and science, history not only expands the mind but also provides critical tools to select, organize, and interpret all manner of evidence. The Vassar History faculty invite you not to take multiple-choice tests, but instead to become historians yourselves. We challenge students at all levels to come face to face with the past by wrestling with the original sources upon which all history is based. Our aim is to help students develop capacities for independent research, critical analysis, writing, and imaginative synthesis. We vary widely in our teaching approaches. What we share are the convictions that research, teaching, and learning are inextricably linked, and that teachers and students share in the experience of historical inquiry.

The resources of the World Wide Web are only one of many ways to extend our historical inquiries and conversations beyond the classroom. Independent projects involve frequent consultation with a faculty adviser. Ford Scholars work closely with professors for a summer, while the Clark Fellowship provides stipends for students' off-campus research. Many History majors enrich their education by spending all or part of their junior year in locations ranging from the Philippines to the United Kingdom, South Africa, Morocco, Argentina and China.

The teaching of History has always been an integral part of Vassar College. In the very first course catalogue of 1865-66, the Department of History and Political Economy offered a full curriculum in Ancient, Medieval and Modern history. Past and present Professors in the History Department have continued to insist that students do extensive research in primary sources, the Vassar College Library houses an exceptionally rich treasure trove of historical materials.

The Department's courses extend from the Middle Ages to the present and from the Americas to Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The sources we use are equally wide-ranging, since history encompasses literature and art, philosophy and religion, women and gender studies, environmental and migrations studies, conflict, diplomacy and peacebuilding, scientific debates and discoveries, as well as more conventional topics. History majors not only receive a superb education; they leave Vassar carrying intellectual passports that help them open new realms for a lifetime.

The History Faculty

Vassar History professors are not only dedicated teachers but also noted scholars. They have won awards for articles, books, and websites; they serve on distinguished prize committees and editorial boards of major journals; they have been recognized with fellowships from many sources, including the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The arrival of many new faces in Swift Hall has brought tremendous energy and innovation to the classroom, even as these historians carry on the proud traditions begun by Lucy Maynard Salmon more than a century ago.

BISAHA, Nancy (Ph.D., Cornell 1997; professor) Renaissance Italy, medieval. (**On leave Spring semester**)

BRIGHAM, Robert (Ph.D., University of Kentucky 1994; professor) U.S. foreign relations, Vietnam.

CHANG, Yu-chi (Ph.D. Brown 2021, Assistant Professor), Modern China

CHOUDHURY, Mita (Ph.D., Northwestern University 1997; professor) French Revolution, 18th-century France, early modern Europe, gender (**on leave Fall semester**).

FIELDS, Whitney (Ph.D., Rutgers University-New Brunswick 2025) Postdoctoral Research ASsociate at the Notre Dame Initiative on Race and Resilience.

EUDELL, Demetrius (Ph.D.; Stanford 1997; professor) 19th Century US, Intellectual, Blacks in Americas) (Dean of Faculty).

MENDIOLA, Daniel (Ph.D., University of Houston 2018; assistant professor) Latin America, Conquest, Borderlands, Migration.

MURDOCH, Lydia (Ph.D., Indiana 2000; professor) Victorian Britain, childhood, British Empire, welfare state.

PATKUS, Ron (Ph.D., Boston College 1997; adjunct associate professor) Reformation, history of the book; Associate Director of the Vassar College Libraries for Special Collections.

POHL, Michaela (Ph.D., Indiana 1999; associate professor) modern Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia.

RASHID, Ismail (Ph.D., McGill 1998; professor and chair) 19th & 20th century Africa

SCHREIER, Joshua (Ph.D., New York University 2003; professor) Middle East/North Africa, modern France.
(On leave Fall semester)

SHIH, Ashanti (Ph.D., Yale 2019; assistant professor) Asian-American, 20th century Pacific, science and environment.

SMYTH, Noel, E. (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2016; assistant professor) Native American/Indigenous; America to 1830.
(On leave Fall semester)

SOLOVY, Anna J. (MA., University of California, Berkeley; instructor), Modern Europe, 20th Century Germany and Austria.

Declaring and Advising

Declaring a History Major

Once you have made your decision to major in History (ordinarily during your sophomore year), follow these three easy steps:

1. Meet with the Department Chair, who will assign a major adviser.
2. Go to the site of the Registrar's Office (https://offices.vassar.edu/registrar/) and fill out the Jotform for Major Declaration.

NOTE: Since it takes some time for the Registrar to process declaration forms, students should inform Karen Perrucci, Administrative Assistant, after they complete the form, so that the Department's mailing list can be updated.

The Adviser

In general, any faculty member in the Department can serve as an adviser for any History major. Students may request a particular faculty member, but the Chair, who must make sure that advising duties are distributed evenly among the faculty, makes the ultimate decision. In your senior year your thesis adviser (see "The Senior Thesis," p. 9) will become your departmental adviser. You must fill out a change-of-adviser form at the start of the senior year, or at any time when you are changing advisers.

Major Declaration Form

When you declare, go to the site of the Registrar's Office: https://offices.vassar.edu/registrar/forms) and fill out a Major Declaration/Change of Major/Change of Major Adviser Form. Once you have filled out the form, the system will generate a jot form that will be sent to your new adviser and chair of the history department for approval.

When to See Your Adviser

You must meet with your adviser before registering for classes and when adding or dropping a course. (Do not wait until the last day of Pre-registration, of the Add Period, or of the Drop Period to do this!) Also, if you are considering spending a semester or a year away from Vassar, be sure to discuss your plans with your adviser early in the process. You will probably find many occasions to see your adviser, since his or her signature is necessary for just about every academic decision you make.

The adviser's job is to work with you to make sure you are completing the necessary course requirements, BUT ultimately it is your responsibility to see that you have fulfilled the College and Department requirements necessary for graduation.

Requirements for a Concentration (Major) in History

Requirements for Concentration: 11 units, to include the following distribution courses above the introductory (100) level:

- **Five distribution area**s: one temporal and four geographical.
    - **o** For historical depth: at least 1 unit of pre-1800 history at the 200 or 300 level (choose from the following courses: History **221**, **225, 226, 229, 230, 242, 263, 274, 275, 315, 326, 366, 382, and MRST 220 w/ Prof. Bisaha or Choudhury).**
    - o In addition to the pre-1800 course, for geographical breadth: at the 200 or 300 level, at least 1 unit in **four** of the following six areas for a total of four units.
        - Africa
        - Middle East
        - Asia
        - Europe
        - Latin America
        - United States

- **Two 300-level seminars**, at least one of which must be taken in senior year. 300-level seminars may also do double duty as pre-1800 or geographical area requirements.

- **Senior Thesis** (History 300 and 301i)*. This year-long project begins in the fall of senior year with History 300 and continues in the spring with History 301i. History 300 is a methods seminar which brings support, structure, and collegiality to the thesis experience; while taking this seminar, students will also meet regularly with their designated thesis advisers and begin work on their projects. Students complete the writing of the thesis under the supervision of their advisers in the spring with History 301i. The end result is a written work of approximately 10,000 words. All History Theses are housed in Special Collections in the College Library.

*For students who need to complete the thesis out of sequence, the following possibilities are available after consultation with the Department Chair, at least two semesters prior to the thesis. The Chair will assign an advisor, and the student and advisor will provide a *written* schedule of the thesis that must be submitted and approved by the Chair.

● Out of sequence - 2 semesters	Spring 300	Fall 302i
● Out of sequence - 1 semester	Fall 300	Fall 303i
● Out of sequence- 1 semester	Spring 300	Spring 303i

Cross-listed courses originating in another department (i.e., taught by faculty who are not in the History Department) may not be used for distribution requirements. No more than two cross-listed courses originating in another department can count toward the history minimum requirement of 11 units.

Intensives can count towards the major but cannot satisfy a distribution or 300-level requirement, except for the thesis intensives (301i, 302i and 303i).

Credits from outside Vassar: majors may apply up to four credits earned from other schools or AP/ IB credit to the major. However, only one AP or IB credit may be used, and none of these credits can satisfy a distribution or 300-level requirement.

Post-matriculation Transfer Credit – Non Majors – From the Catalog pg. 32

Students normally matriculate at Vassar in their first year. Students who matriculate as first-years may transfer a maximum 9.0 units of credit including pre-matriculation credits. Students have a range of options for earning post-matriculation transfer credit. They can take work at another institution over the summer, they can go on a Vassar approved JYA program, or they can take a Vassar approved domestic academic leave. In the case of summer work, pre-approval is recommended. In the case of JYA or domestic academic leaves, pre-approval of proposed course work is required and is built into the application process. Students may not take the same course at another institution which they have already received credit for at Vassar.

The procedure for having summer work done at an institution outside of Vassar pre-approved for credit is for the student to complete a Summer Election Away form. This form can be obtained at the Vassar Registrar's Office. The student must take the form along with an official description of the summer course or program to the chair of the department in which the course would be assigned at Vassar. Both the respective department chair and the student's adviser must sign the form and return it to the Registrar's Office. Once the student has completed the course he/she must request that an official transcript of completed coursework be sent to the Vassar Registrar's Office. When the transcript is received, the credit will be applied automatically to the student's Vassar transcript provided the student achieved a grade of C or better.

A History major who also is pursuing a **double major** or a **Correlate Sequence** in a program or department occasionally counts one or two History units twice. Registrar guidelines are that *two* units may be double counted between majors; *one* unit may double count between a major and a correlate; and *zero* units may double count for two correlates.

You cannot count more than 2 **cross-listed courses** that originate in another department (for example, in Greek and Roman Studies) for your 11 units.

Normally at least 7 of the required 11 units should be earned at Vassar. This is applicable to all History majors**, including students who study away from Vassar** for all or part of their junior year. A student seeking exemption from these requirements must petition the Department through the Chair; be sure to retain syllabi and other evidence to present with the petition.

No single course can meet two different departmental requirements, except the 300-level courses, which can double to fulfill the 300-level course requirement and a distribution requirement.

One introductory (100-level) course taken under the **NRO** (Non-Recorded Option) may count toward the major if the student received a letter grade. If a student received the

grade of PA in such a course, that course may not count toward the major. No other course for the major may be taken NRO.

*A History major who wishes to complete the B.A. in less than four years should present a proposal for an **accelerated program** to the Department via the Chair. Majors who want to graduate a semester early must request permission from the department at least 12 months prior to the anticipated graduation date. This will give the department time to develop alternative timelines and processes for the student's thesis. Off-cycle thesis students will generally register for HIST 391 (Thesis Prep) and HIST 392 (Thesis).*

Students should consult their advisers about any **petition to the Department**, and should submit a copy to the adviser as well as the Chair. A petition must be submitted at least one week before a Department meeting in order to be considered at that meeting. Students who wish to submit petitions are responsible for obtaining the Department meeting dates.

Exams & Scheduling

Vassar College Policy on Exams - Excerpt taken from the Dean of the College, *College Regulations Handbook*

1. Regularly Scheduled Examination: Departments request that certain courses be included in the schedule prepared by the registrar. The examinations are assigned to one of 14 periods during the examination period. Once a course has been assigned to a period, it may not be changed without the express permission of the registrar or dean of studies. Grades are due in the registrar's office no later than 72 hours after the examination.

2. Self-scheduled Examination: May be taken by the student during any examination period (9:00am-11:00am or 1:00pm-3:00pm) during the study period and the first three days of examination. Specific classrooms are designated by the registrar for this purpose. As in a regular examination, the self-scheduled examination must be completed in one sitting; a student fails the examination if this is not done. Grades are due no later than 72 hours after the fourth day of the examination period.

3. Take-home Examination: May be assigned any time after the last day of classes. It should be recognized as a final examination, not a term paper. It should be due during the examination period at some time prior to the end of the third day and should not be a research paper.

4. Paper in Lieu of Examination: This exercise should not be confused with the final of a series of papers in a course. It is, rather, a paper that actually replaces a final examination, which is assigned during the last week of classes and due prior to the end of the third day of the examination period. Thus, the assignment should require approximately the same time in preparation and execution as an examination. Students may not be given final examinations apart from the regularly scheduled and execution as an examination.

Note on Language Study

The History Department does not have a formal requirement for language study. We strongly urge, however, that History majors undertake early and serious study of at least one foreign language and continue that study throughout their Vassar careers. Students who are not working toward fluency in a foreign language will discover, as early as their sophomore year,

that their choice of study-abroad programs and research projects is severely constrained. It will be difficult or impossible to undertake Thesis work in many fields without the ability to use sources in their original languages. Conversely, students with strong foreign-language skills have access to travel and study opportunities and to rich, underused research materials.

Fluency in at least one foreign language is an asset to citizens in our global community, and no student can undertake graduate studies in History (or in many other fields) without a solid grasp of at least one language in addition to English. The faculty very strongly urge, for this reason, that all History majors view language study as an essential component of both the major and a well-rounded liberal-arts education.

The Correlate Sequence ("Minor") in History

To declare a Correlate Sequence in History, contact the Department's Correlate Sequence Adviser, Joshua Schreier (joschreier@vassar.edu). Students should declare in their sophomore or junior year, after discussing their plans with their major advisers. No History Correlate Sequence can be declared after the first preregistration period in the fall semester of senior year. The courses selected for the Sequence should form a coherent course of study; discuss this with the Correlate Sequence Adviser.

Requirements for a Correlate Sequence in History
No fewer than six units in History, normally taken at Vassar. Ordinarily, this will include one course at the introductory (100) level, at least three at the intermediate (200) level, and at least one at the advanced (300) level.

Additional Information on the Correlate Sequence

- AP credit will not be accepted for the Correlate Sequence.
- Field Work cannot count towards the Correlate Sequence.
- One unit of Independent Work is accepted towards the Correlate Sequence.

History courses counted toward the Correlate cannot be taken NRO after a student has declared a Correlate Sequence in History. No more than one unit of History work that has been taken NRO—before declaration of the Correlate—can be used toward the Correlate Sequence.

One cross-listed course originating in another department (such as Classics) may count toward the Correlate Sequence.

A student who majors in a multi-disciplinary program may share up to two units of credit in History with the major (for example, up to two History courses that are cross-listed with Africana Studies can count toward both the Correlate Sequence and the major.)

Independent Work in History (298 or 399)

A half-unit of independent work ordinarily involves 2-3 meetings with the professor and 12-15 pages of written work.

A full unit of independent work ordinarily involves at least bi-weekly meetings with the professor and 20-25 pages of written work.

Independent work is not to be offered in lieu of materials taught in a regular course (i.e., when a student cannot fit the course into their schedule).

Independent work counts toward the 11 units required to major in History, or the six units required for a Correlate, but not toward distribution requirements for the major.

Community Engaged Learning in History (290)

The Office of Community Engaged Learning has specific requirements for a half unit and a full unit of field work, and an extensive list of organizations interested in sponsoring projects with Vassar students. Arrangements, including transportation, are worked out with the Office of Community Engaged, which also makes the initial contact with the sponsoring agency outside Vassar.

It is the responsibility of the student to contact a History faculty member to discuss working with her or him. History professors have supervised a variety of projects, including:

- Archival work at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library;
- Assistance at the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Center;
- Research for the Dutchess County Historical Society;
- Historical restoration at the Vanderbilt estate and other Hudson Valley mansions;
- Internships at battered women's services and family courts;
- A Research Assistantship at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The academic component of Field Work ordinarily involves readings agreed upon by the student and professor; journal-keeping; regular meetings with the professor; and a history paper on a topic relevant to the internship.

Recommended Reading on the Craft of Writing History

History is a lifelong enterprise. The faculty recommend the following for your consideration. Your adviser or professor may suggest additional works. Happy reading!

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* The standard reference for citations in history, along with the much, MUCH longer and more expensive (but comprehensive) *Chicago Manual of Style*. The 7th edition of Turabian's classic, revised and expanded by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, is particularly rich. It contains not only a full citation guide but a fourteen-chapter introduction to "Research and Writing: From Planning to Production," as well as a seven-chapter style manual. Highly recommended for all history students.

- Becker, Howard S. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Benjamin, Jules R. *A Student's Guide to History.* 10th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.
- Brundage, Anthony. *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing.* 3rd ed. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2002.
- Ivers, Mitchell. *The Random House Guide to Good Writing*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1991.
- Howell, Martha and Walter Prevenier. *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to History Methods*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Hunt, Lynn. *Writing History in the Global Era*. W W Norton, 2014.
- Storey, William Kelleher. *Writing History: A Guide for Students*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Strunk, Jr., William, E. B. White, and Roger Angell. *The Elements of Style.* 4th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1999.
- Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Evalyn Clark Memorial Travel Fellowship

The Clark Travel Fellowship was established by friends and former students of Evalyn A. Clark (1903-2001), a 1924 Vassar graduate who taught in the Vassar History Department from 1939 to 1968. Professor Clark twice served as department chair. She

was a quiet but determined advocate for women in the historical profession who served, along with her Vassar colleague Mildred Campbell, as an early leader of the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians.

Professor Clark was a Classics major and received her Ph.D. in Classical Studies from Johns Hopkins in 1927. But her outlook changed profoundly when she studied in Europe during the summers between 1927 and 1937. Watching the menacing rise of fascism and the threat of impending war, Professor Clark was driven to study the roots of these catastrophes. Transformed by her experiences abroad, she re-trained herself as a modern European historian.

Professor Clark captivated generations of students with her energy, strong moral convictions, and passion for history. In doing so she drew directly on her experiences overseas. In teaching a course on contemporary European History amid the Second World War, Professor Clark later wrote that she "jettisoned any orthodox chronological approach ... and began with 1939 and the *New York Times*, constantly working backward to trace the roots of the conflict." Professor Clark's experiences in Europe also gave her a lifelong abhorrence of propaganda and rigid ideologies.

The Clark Travel Fellowship honors Professor Clark's legacy by helping selected History majors undertake their own off-campus studies, both in the archives and beyond them. Awards are restricted to students who are History majors at Vassar and are intended to support travel, both domestic and international, for students to conduct archival or other forms of historical research.

The due dates for Clark Travel Fellowship applications are announced each fall and spring through flyers posted in Swift Hall and through an email to History majors. Interested majors are encouraged to discuss the Clark Travel Fellowship with their advisers and submit a proposal, according to the guidelines that accompany the announcement.

For more information contact the Department Chair, Ismail Rashid, or the Chair of the Clark Award Committee, Lydia Murdoch.

The Senior Thesis

The culminating experience of the History major is the Senior Thesis, a year-long project that calls upon the research, analytical, and writing skills students have honed through their years working with history faculty. The focus of the Thesis is developed through faculty guidance, but the project is very much of the student's own devising. Indeed, one of the pleasures of Thesis work (for both student and advisor) is that the student can become an expert on their topic. The Thesis can be the most challenging and rewarding experience of a student's Vassar career. Alumni History majors often speak of the thesis as one of the most memorable and valuable aspects of their education.

Among a diverse array of recent theses have been the following:

- *A Greater Supremacy': William Walker's Filibustering Expedition to Nicaragua and Antebellum Views of Overseas Expansion.*
- *A Special Relationship: The American Presidency and the Search for Peace in Northern Ireland.*
- *Crimes against the Race: Legacies of Political Confinement of Omnosuali in Fascist Italy.*
- *China Captured: Nineteenth-Century China as Seen through the Lenses of Felice Beato, John Thomson, James Ricalton, and Father Leone Nani.*
- *Colonial Anxiety and the Railway Journey to the Hills in 19th Century India.*
- *Culture and Transition in Post-Colonial Ghana: The Traditional Music of Bernard Woma*
- *Cure the Malady: Bodily Health and Kennedy's Modernization Aid in Central America.*
- *Resisting Control, Negotiating Authority: Black Midwives in Contest with State Power in US South, 1900-1940.*
- *Fancy Astronomy for Bosnia: Sovereignty and Violence in Yugoslavia, 1991-1992.*
- *France Noir: Universality, Race, and Haiti in the Writings of Louis Joseph Janvier.*
- *From Fagging to Friendship: Gay Identity Formation in Victorian Public Schools.*
- *Giving Voice to the Voiceless: "Illegal" Mexican Migration as told by Migrants of the 1980's.*
- *Holy War, Jihad, and Patterns of Exclusion: Jerusalem and the First Crusade.*
- *Industrial Democracy on the Hudson: The Partnership Plan at the Dutchess Bleachery in Wappingers Falls, New York.*
- *Restoring the Balance: The Great Iroquois War for Survival, 1634-1701.*
- *Seeing is Believing: Pilgrimage in the High Middle Ages and its Institutionalization by the Roman Church.*
- *Brewing Empire: Andres Soriano, the San Miguel Brewery, and the United States, 1924-1964.*
- *A Study of the Cross-Cultural Impact of the Conquest of Siberia on Metropolitan Russia and Siberia, 1553-1682.*
- *'Unfortunately, My Jew Came Back': The Transformation of Identity and Belonging among Prague's Jews, 1930 to 1950.*
- *You will say 'We Do Not Live in Teepees': Emma C. Sickels and the Campaign Against Assimilation.*

The Thesis Adviser

Thesis advisers are assigned by the Department. To help the Department assign advisers, second-semester juniors are asked to identify several possible fields of research that they find engaging and intriguing. In considering possible topics, students are encouraged to think broadly across the globe and across the centuries about times and places that they might like to investigate further. The Department reviews the students' thesis possibilities and pairs the students with the appropriate faculty adviser based on thesis topic.

Double Majors and the Thesis

History majors who also major in another department or program (i.e., double majors) may write either a 1-unit Thesis in History or, with the agreement of advisers in both disciplines, write one double-length Thesis applicable to both majors in which the student is registered for 1 unit in each of the two majors. The maximum length for the double-length Thesis shall be 20,000 words (about 80 pages).

Unconventional Theses
Advisers may entertain proposals for theses in unconventional forms (for example, diary annotations or works of fiction). With the adviser's agreement, a student may petition the Department to write a thesis in such a form.

The Thesis Calendar

Specific dates will be distributed at the start of the thesis process, but the general outline of the process below, with approximate dates, may help you to plan ahead.

In B semester, all junior majors receive a form (electronically) to be returned to the chair, on which they are asked to list potential areas of interest for thesis research. Advisers are assigned at this time. One meeting with the adviser is recommended in May, before leaving campus for the summer. Students studying abroad are asked, by email, to list areas of interest and are notified electronically of their adviser assignment.

Seniors have a general thesis meeting with the History faculty in residence in early September. At this meeting, students hear about areas of faculty research and past thesis topics. Seniors are free to contact their advisers and begin consultation before this meeting; those who have not done so are strongly advised to begin work during the week following the meeting.

In early October, students submit a thesis proposal and preliminary bibliography. This marks the end of the first formal thesis course (HIST 300); the student will receive a formal grade for this, which will appear on the student's transcript.

In mid-November, students submit a thesis outline and expanded bibliography.
By mid-December students submit a substantially revised proposal and ten pages of the thesis. Work submitted in December receives a final grade that reflects the quality of the work submitted during the second half of the semester (see *Vassar College Catalogue, p. 56, "Provisional Grades").*

- The first draft of the thesis is due prior to spring break.
- Advisers' comments are due back to students during the third week in March.
- Final thesis drafts are due in mid April.
- Graded theses with comments are returned to students before final exams.

Thesis Presentations

Presentations are an integral part of the thesis writing process, and students are expected to do a short presentation of their work in the Fall or Spring semester.

Thesis Evaluation

The student receives a letter grade on the Thesis, based on its quality of research, analysis of primary evidence, content, argument, form, and style.

'A' range theses excel in every category.
Research reflects a clear understanding of the sources that exist on the topic and makes the most of what is obtainable (in a language the writer can read).
Availability of sources will vary according to topic and period. Excellent theses have been written using relatively few primary sources, and poor theses with a wealth of sources. The effort in finding the sources and the way they are used are more important than number. An 'A' range thesis adapts its focus to the riches or limits of the sources, showing that the writer is careful in defining their topic and approach.
The writer shows a careful and critical reading of the sources.

Content/ Argument. An 'A' thesis goes far beyond the question of "what happened?" It addresses deeper questions such as: Why did it happen? Why is it historically significant? The reader is engaged and is invited to grapple with the subject. In some way, the writer has made this topic their own. Assertions are convincingly supported by primary and secondary source citations.

An 'A' thesis is especially good with *primary source evidence*. Close and careful readings of cited primary source passages appear frequently. The writer does not simply tell the reader what has been said, but how the writer reads it and views its significance. An explanation of each primary source is also important. Who wrote this work? When? Why? For whom? An excellent thesis discusses what other historians have said on the subject, but it also shows the writer in a dialogue with these authorities. The writer questions the historians being used and shows some mastery of the subject. An awareness of historical context is also key. How does an event, person, development fit into the general history of the period?

Style and Form. To quote John Trimble, the expert writer is "socially conscious" or eager to engage and intellectually stimulate the reader. First and foremost, this means writing as clearly and precisely as one can. The 'A' thesis gets the message across without making the reader struggle! By the same token, some readers will be non-specialists. Do not take too much prior knowledge for granted in setting the stage.

Coherent structure is a must. The narrative is usually divided into discrete but related sections. Each section and paragraph flows well from one to another, and smaller

arguments and examples keep coming back to the central thesis. Presentation or the "nuts and bolts" of good style is in order. This means that the final draft is clean and carefully edited. Typographical errors and misspellings have been eliminated. Citations follow a consistent, accepted style (the Vassar History Department uses Turabian). Quotations are woven seamlessly into the narrative.

'B' range theses
Research is competent but not exhaustive. It may rely more heavily on secondary sources than primary sources, or there may be a gross imbalance in the other direction.

Content/Argument. The writer presents a clear argument and succeeds in drawing deeper connections and points from the sources. The text is quoted to support assertions, and quotes are often analyzed or interpreted. 'B' theses usually, however, only scratch the surface of interesting points without probing them in a satisfying way. Primary source is described more than analyzed. Arguments are not always well supported by evidence (textual, oral, visual, etc.). The writer defers too much to secondary sources without venturing their own opinions. There may be insufficient originality or no spark in the arguments.

Style and Form. 'B' theses may be fairly well written in terms of clarity and style; they may also be lacking in this regard and slightly self indulgent, or inattentive to the interests and questions of the reader. Good research and ideas that are not well-organized or presented can also result in a 'B' range thesis. Presentation of 'B' theses may also show more than a handful of typographical errors and problems with citations. The prose may also be clumsy or unclear on more than a few occasions.

'C' range theses
Research tends to be unimpressive. Few up-to-date studies and articles are featured, or few sources of any kind, for that matter. Primary sources are either scarce or are pushed to the background.

Content/Argument. Analysis is superficial, showing only a vague grasp of the sources and few insights into their complexities. Close reading of and engagement in primary sources are lacking. Instead, the writer's approach to the sources is overwhelmingly descriptive. The writer neither exhibits a strong argument nor attempts to put their stamp on the topic. The writer repeats the conclusions of other scholars.

Style and Form are generally deficient, showing signs of haste. There is generally a lack of clarity in presentation and the overall organization is weak. Writing style tends to be lifeless and mechanical. Presentation tends to be sloppy, showing little effort to redraft and edit. Typographical errors, misspellings, grammatical errors, and/or citation problems are frequent. The writer's prose is awkward and unclear.

'D' range theses. These are incomplete on some fundamental level. They show minimal research, little to no analysis, and are wholly or mostly descriptive. Secondary sources

heavily dominate the narrative. The arguments are weak or hard to follow, and the prose is rough and full of errors. There is little to no evidence of redrafting or editing.

Failing theses. Theses usually fail for a combination of reasons: they show little or no comprehension of the sources, the arguments are either missing or ill-conceived, and the writing is poor. In essence, there is minimal effort here. A writer found guilty of plagiarism by the Academic Panel also receives an 'F' on the thesis.

Honors and Prizes

As stated in the *Catalogue*, Vassar policy is that "[departmental] honors will be awarded to those students designated as meeting predetermined standards and so recommended by the departments concerned . . . to the Committee on Students' Records, which oversees the continuity of standards." The History Department has established the following criteria for departmental honors:

We have deliberately not defined our expectations in terms of grades or grade averages, in order not to be tied down by mechanical formulae, and to be free to exercise our collective judgment as to the quality of the total performance of each student. Since we regard the thesis as the most important piece of evidence as to the student's abilities as a historian, we ordinarily give it greater weight than 200- or even 300-level coursework; but it is impossible to anticipate all conceivable combinations of qualities in students.

The Department also bestows the following prizes on graduating senior majors:

The Virginia Swinburne Brownell Prize
In 1913, William C. Brownell established three prizes in memory of his wife, a member of the Class of 1873. Two of the Brownell prizes recognize, respectively, excellence in Biology and Economics. The third Brownell prize is awarded to a senior History major for excellence in the study of History.

The Clyde and Sally Griffen Prize
Established in 1998 by James and Linda Merrell to honor Clyde Griffen, Lucy Maynard Salmon Professor of History Emeritus, and his wife Sally (Vassar Class of 1958), who served the College as Director of the Office of Field Work, this prize, celebrating the Griffens' scholarship and their decades of devoted service to the History Department and the College, is awarded for excellence in American history.

The Sophia H. Chen Zen Memorial Prize
Established in 1979 by a gift from E-Tu Zen Sun, '44 and E-su Cheng, '51 in honor of their mother, this prize is awarded to the student who has written the best Thesis in History.

The Laura Adelina Ward Prize
Established in 1979 to honor Miss Ward, an outstanding scholar in the Class of 1915, this prize is awarded for excellence in English or European history.

The Solomon and Barbara Wank Prize for Excellence in African, Asian or Latin American History
The Prize was established by Vassar alums Jeffrey Lipkowitz '74, Elizabeth Lewine '58 and Elizabeth Bond '71 in appreciation of Professor Maria Höhn. The award honors Solomon Wank, Maria Höhn's undergraduate teacher and mentor. Students, family and friends of Solomon and Barbara Wank contributed to this award.

The Christian Croley Prize in History
In 2021, Professor Maria Höhn and Charles Geiger, along with family and friends, established this prize in memory of their son, Christian Croley. This prize acknowledges an outstanding history major in the graduating class who represents the first generation of their family to attend college, has overcome adversity, or has brought creativity to the study of history.

The College Catalogue has information on General Honors, Phi Beta Kappa, and other College prizes and awards.

Life after Vassar

The Department's tradition of rigorous and broad training continues to pay dividends for our majors once they become our graduates. History majors of past years have gone on to distinguish themselves as professors at such colleges and universities as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Illinois Michigan, CUNY, Toronto, Wellesley, Davidson, University of Maryland, University of Rhode Island, Macalaster—and Vassar! (A member of our History faculty, Lydia Murdoch, is a Vassar graduate.) Others enter careers in teaching, with many majors combining History and teaching certification while at Vassar.

Recent History majors have taken advanced degrees in programs ranging from public policy to divinity school, and they have entered the fields of law, business and finance, journalism, historic preservation, government service, and more. Indeed, Vassar History majors can find their place in any and every profession that requires judgment, imagination, the ability to find and organize disparate information, to write effectively, and to evaluate evidence—in short, to see both the forest and the trees.

In 2003-2004, and again in 2008, the department asked History alums to share their thoughts about how their History major set them on their career paths. Ranging from the class of 1976 to the class of 2007, these History graduates now work for such diverse employers as the United Nations, the U.S. Foreign Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and municipal governments. Some hold positions as college administrators and professors, while others are CEOs, securities analysts, lawyers, web designers, filmmakers, and providers of Internet educational resources. One is an author of children's books and another is even a jewelry designer! For more information, please visit our website (http://history.vassar.edu/) and look for the section "What Can I Do With a History Major?"

Please send your own news after you leave the hallowed halls of Vassar, to inspire those who will stand in your shoes a decade or more from now! Professor of History and Chair of the History Department, Ismail Rashid (israshid@vassar.edu) presently serves as our Alumni Correspondent. To talk more about post-Vassar plans and opportunities, you can also meet with your department adviser or contact Ismail Rashid, Chair, Department of History, Vassar College, Box 711, Poughkeepsie, NY 12604-0711; telephone (845) 437-5674 or 437-5670; FAX (845) 437-7186; email israshid@vassar.edu.