

# History lab: tools, methods and techniques for deciphering the past

GKRMV24003

2024/25 (blocks 2&3; 10 EC)

## Introduction

Methods are important! They are the norms and practices of sound scholarly work. They make research and scholarship more robust and transparent. While large parts of historical scholarship tend to remain very implicit about the methodological choices they are based on, a more confrontational approach towards methods would benefit both scholars and readers of history.

The aim of this course is to do just this. Its goal is to make students more aware of the methodological aspects of historical research, and to enable them to make reasoned choices for a research method that fits the questions and aims of their research. To this end, this course provides the opportunity to become acquainted with a variety of research methods, both proven methods and more experimental ones.

To evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches students read a selection of books, articles, and working papers that employ these methodologies. Most importantly, they will be introduced into the relevance and scope of different historical methods in two hands-on modules. Upon completion of the course students can make an informed decision about the methodological tools and techniques they want to apply in their own historical research.

The program of the Research Master is structured in such a way that students have gone through the whole research cycle at the end of their first year. This means they have learned how to formulate a research question embedded in an historiographical and theoretical status quaestionis (Course: Fundamentals), to make a reasoned choice for a method that fits their question (Course: Methods), to select and analyse source material, to report on it, and to embed their findings within a historiographical and theoretical context (Course: Research seminar), and to write a research design that encompasses all these elements (Course: Research design).

## Learning goals

The learning objectives of this course are:

- To develop an awareness of the methodological aspects of historical research
- To become acquainted with a wide variety of research methods, and to be able to weigh the relevance and scope of particular methods
- To gain hands-on experience in the actual application of at least two methods of historical research
- To be able to make a more reasoned choice for a particular research method, which fits the questions and aims of the envisaged research

## Teachers

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## Schedule

### **Weeks 1-3, Block 2 (November 12 – 26) – *Plenary meetings***

Tuesday 9:00 – 12:45 – Israelslaan 1.02

### **Weeks 4-9, Block 2 (December 2 – January 28) – *Hands-on Modules I***

*Module a (Comparative History - Ido de Haan)*

Tuesday 9:00 – 12:45 – Israelslaan 1.02

*Module b (Quantitative Text Analysis – Pim Huijnen)*

Tuesday 11:00 – 15:00 – Israelslaan 0.07

### **Weeks 1-6, Block 3 (February 4 – March 11) – *Hands-on Modules II***

*Module a (Quantitative Numerical Analysis – Auke Rijpma)*

Tuesday 9:00 – 12:45 – tba

*Module b (Microhistory – Jochen Hung)*

Tuesday 9:00 – 12:45 – tba

### **Weeks 7-8, Block 2 (March 18 – 25) – *Plenary meetings***

Tuesday 9:00 – 12:45 – tba

## Attendance and participation

Attendance at all seminars is mandatory. In each week we tackle and process significant amounts of new material and practice research skills. In case of illness or unavoidable absence (force majeure) contact us as soon as possible. After two absences we will meet with you, or ask you to meet a study advisor, to review your continued inclusion in the class. If you continue, we may ask for written work that shows you have processed the material covered in the relevant classes. This is for your own protection. These courses are intensive and missing more than two sessions jeopardizes your chances of passing. It indicates you may have a situation that is preventing you from being able to succeed in this course at this time.

Every student is expected to be present and engaged. Read the assigned literature, prepare points and questions for class discussion, and contribute to class discussions. As scholars and critical thinkers, we rely on concrete examples and references to readings in our discussions. Please bring annotated copies of your readings to each class. This will enable us to have the rewarding conversation that we expect, enjoy, and that enables you to process the content.

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## Course design and assessment

The course consists of four elements, which will be assessed individually:

- 1) General introduction into methods in historical scholarship (blok 1, week 1-3)
- 2) Hands-on modules I (blok 1, week 4-9)
- 3) Hands-on modules II (blok 2, week 1-6)
- 4) General reflection on methods in historical scholarship (blok 2, week 7-8)

	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>
<b>I</b>	Comparative history	Quantitative text analysis
<b>II</b>	Quantitative numerical analysis	Microhistory

The core of this course consists of two sessions of hands-on modules focusing on one particular method. During the first weeks of the course, students will choose between – and will, eventually, be evenly divided among – modules a and b in both session I and II. Within these modules, students are introduced to a particular method by working on a research paper (max. 4000 words). Depending on the tutorial, students will work on these papers individually, or in groups of 2 (students are allowed to form the same groups in both tutorials). After two modules, students will have written two separate research papers. These papers will be assessed by the following elements:

- Use of literature and formulation of the research question.
- Methodological justification: how this data and type of analysis may answer historical questions
- Use of the method
- Reflection on suitability of data and methodology for the question at hand

Note that the papers are assessed equally on the doing (the quality of the research question, the level of application of the method at hand) as well as on the reflection on what you have been doing. The latter may form a larger part in these papers than you might be used to, and may give your paper the quality of a research report.

The general parts at the start and the end of this course are assessed together in the form of student participation, as well as written and oral assignments.

The final grade will be put together as follows:

Paper I	35%
Paper II	35%
Assignments	30%

### *Deadlines*

Paper I: Friday, January 31, 2025, 11:59pm

Paper II: Friday, March 14, 2025, 11:59pm

Methods section assignment: Friday, March 28, 2025, 11:59pm

### *Passing the Course*

To pass the course the weighted average of all graded assignments must be at least 5.5; both papers need be at least graded with 5. Note that points will be subtracted from the grade if you are late handing in your paper. If the weighted average of all assignments is between 4 and 5.5, you are allowed to rewrite the paper with the lowest grade.

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## **Weekly schedule**

### **a. General considerations about methodology – block 2, weeks 1-3 (3 weeks)**

Three questions are central to this first, introductory, part of the course: First, why do we need an entire course on methods? Second, what methods are there in historical scholarship? And, third, what do these methods entail? Through readings, exercises and discussions, students will develop the ability to recognize the methodological considerations that play a role in historical scholarship. To get there, we will discuss literature arguing for and against method in historical scholarship in general, have a conversation about reproducibility in history, and here students' presentations on the merits of particular methods.

<b>Week</b>	<b>Tuesday 9-12:45</b>	
1	Introduction: why methods?	<i>Modules intro</i>
2	What are methods really?	<i>Module preferences deadline</i>
3	Methods in practice – presentations	<i>Module groups announcement</i>

## 1. Tuesday, November 12 – Introduction: why methods?

In the first seminar of this course we will use the time to get to know one another. We will outline the structure of this 2-block course and we will collectively discuss the question that Gunn and Faire ask in the introductory chapter of their book *Research Methods for History*: why bother with method?

Also, we will introduce the four modules, two of which you will have to do during the course of blocks 2 and 3. Although there is no assurance that you will be able to do the tutorial(s) of your first choice, we want you to be as informed about the modules as possible. As the table above shows, all students have a week to inform us of their modules of preference in blocks 2 and 3. In week 2, we will build the groups for all modules.

### Reading:

- Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire, *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), *Chapter 1: Why Bother with Method?* (N.B. You can read this book online or download it through the UU library on Worldcat: <https://utrechtuniversity.on.worldcat.org/discovery>)
- Anton Howes, 'Age of Invention: Does History Have a Replication Crisis?', <https://www.ageofinvention.xyz/p/age-of-invention-does-history-have> (29 August 2023).

### Further reading:

- Huistra, P., & Huijnen, P. (2022, Jun 30). On the use of replications in history: A white paper. Utrecht University. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7037401>

### Preparation / deadline:

- Take a look at the literature below to get an impression of the methods that each of the four tutorials on offer are about. These readings are not mandatory, but might help you make a choice for a particular tutorial:
  - Peter Baldwin, 'Comparing and Generalizing. Why All History Is Comparative, Yet No History Is Sociology', in: Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (eds.), *Comparison and History. Europe in a Cross-National Perspective* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-22
  - Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', in: Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 93-113; Brodie Waddell, 'Microhistory: size matters', *The many-headed monster blog*,

December 1, 2012 (retrieved August 28, 2020):

<https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2012/12/01/microhistory-size-matters/>.

- Cummins, Neil. 2021. “Where Is the Middle Class? Evidence from 60 Million English Death and Probate Records, 1892–1992.” *The Journal of Economic History* 81 (2): 359–404. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050721000164>.
- Eijnatten, Joris van, and Pim Huijnen. “Something Happened to the Future: Reconstructing Temporalities in Dutch Parliamentary Debate, 1814–2018.” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 16, no. 2 (December 1, 2021): 52–82. <https://doi.org/10.3167/choc.2021.160204>.
- Check the introductory slides for the first two tutorials on Blackboard (Course Content >> Week 1 >> Tutorial Introductions)

## 2. Tuesday, November 19: What are methods really?

We will use this seminar to try and deconstruct this thing called ‘method’ for historians. Based on the readings for today and on your own experiences, we will collectively list the various methods that historians commonly make use of, as well as dissect and define the key terms that belong under the header of ‘method’. What are we really talking about when we talk about method? This exercise will provide the basis for the presentations that you will give, in pairs of two or three, on a single method in week 3.

### *Readings:*

- ‘The Art of History’ series of 11 columns, written by Lynn Hunt, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jane Caplan and others on the various aspects of historical scholarship, published in 2010-11: <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/summer-2011/the-art-of-history>
- Bod, Rens. ‘Who’s Afraid of Patterns?: The Particular versus the Universal and the Meaning of Humanities 3.0.’ *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 128, no. 4 (2013): 171–80.

### *Preparation / deadline:*

- Read the Art of History-blogs on Historians.org (see link above), in which various eminent historians give their take on the field. How to write history? How to *do* history? If you read all blogs, you will find a variety of perspectives on questions like these (and will come across some good advices particularly aimed at RMA- and PhD-students). While reading, try to identify the various methods that the authors talk about and the key terms involved. Now relate this to Rens Bod’s argument for pattern-seeking humanities: do the methods and key terms that you wrote down suffice to do what Bod is arguing for?

### 3. Tuesday, November 26: Methods in practice – presentations

This week we will have student presentations of different methods

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#### b. Introduction in methodologies of historical research I – block 2 weeks 4-9 (6 weeks)

Students make a choice of one out of two methods, on which they focus in methodological tutorials. Based on the in-house expertise of faculty and the frequent use of these methods in the fields of cultural, social and economic, and political history, they are

- a) comparative historical analysis (Ido de Haan)
- b) quantitative text analysis (Pim Huijnen)

Week	Seminar/Lab
4	Introduction + research questions
5	Reflection + hands-on work
6	Reflection + hands-on work
7	Feedback
8	Presentations
9	Deadline paper: <b>Friday, January 31, 11:59pm</b>

*(This is an example. Module teachers may deviate from this schedule.)*

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#### c. Introduction in methodologies of historical research II – block 3 weeks 1-6 (6 weeks)

Students make a choice of one out of two methods, on which they focus in methodological tutorials. They are:

- a) quantitative/digital analysis of structured data (Auke Rijpma)
- b) microhistory (Jochen Hung)

Week	Seminar/Lab
4	Introduction + research questions
5	Reflection + hands-on work
6	Reflection + hands-on work
7	Feedback
8	Presentations
9	Deadline paper: <b>Friday, March 14, 11:59pm</b>

*(This is an example. Module teachers may deviate from this schedule.)*

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#### **d. Reflection and outlook – blok 3 weeks 7-8 (2 weeks)**

The final two weeks of this course are aimed at two things: to reflect on the things that you have learned in the modules and to use your new knowledge and skills to adopt methods in a convincing and conscientious way in your scholarship.

<b>Week</b>	<b>Tuesday 9-12:45</b>
7	Group reflection
8	Methods section assignment

#### **7. Tuesday March 18: Reflection**

We will use this first plenary seminar since the end of September to collectively reflect on the four modules that you have been doing. You are all asked to engage in a discussion about the comparative advantages and limitations of the methods that you have come to know.

#### **8. Thursday March 25: Methods section assignment**

This seminar will be about preparing you for the final assignment of this course. We will go over the requirements and discuss what a good methods section should look like based on two real-life examples of research proposals

*Reading:*

- tba

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#### **Assignments general parts of the Methods course**

##### **Presentation assignment (block 2)**

Our methods course can ‘only’ offer four modules that provide hands-on practice in particular methods. However, historians make use of a much larger variety of methods in their work. The goal of the presentation assignment is to give an idea of what some of the most widely-used methods in historical scholarship – other than those you will be introduced to in the modules – entail.

The presentations have to do two things: first, they have to introduce the method at hand to the class by means of a textbook definition or explanation. Second, they have to present an example of empirical scholarship (e.g. article, book) that is based on the method in an exemplary manner. A good presentation, thus, gives the class an idea of both *what a*



particular method means to do, and *how* it manages to accomplish this. You are free in finding your own form, which may include handing out copies of the analyzed sources and/or a demonstration of the practicalities of using the method at hand. You will be assessed on your ability to make clear what it is that makes the use of the method in the empirical text good/robust/convincing (or, if you wish, the opposite).

You will give the presentation in groups of three. Plan for a presentation of no more than 15 minutes. See below for some suggestions for methodological references. You may use these to help introduce the method and to find inspiration for empirical examples. Your presentation will profit from having a really good (instead of just any) example), so do not underestimate the work that goes into finding it. You may, of course, also draw from your own experience.

The presentation assignment is a graded assignment. It will account for 10 per cent of your final grade for the Methods course.

- Bloomsbury History: Theory & Method (an ongoing series of introductory texts to a wide variety of theories and methods in history, to which many of our Utrecht colleagues contributed: <https://www-bloomsburyhistorytheorymethod-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/home>)
- Peter Claus and John Marriott, *History. An Introduction to Theory, Method and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).
- Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (eds.), *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond the Text. A student's guide to approaching alternative sources* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

### **Methods section assignment (block 3)**

Now that you have reached the end of this course, you are asked to put your methodological knowledge and skills to practice. In this assignment, you will write a methods section of 750 words for a proposal or a paper. You are allowed to write this section however you like and for anything you like. This can be a yet-to-be-written or completely fictional paper or proposal, but the more efficient thing to do is to use this as an opportunity to really think through the methods section of an actual paper or proposal you are writing as part of your RMA's.

Gunn and Faire's definition of methods provide the elements of the methods section you are to write: "Method should be understood broadly here to encompass everything from the original framing of the research hypothesis to the design of the study, the selection of the sources and the manner in which they are analysed" ('Why bother with methods?' in: idem (eds.), *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh 2016) p. 4). This, most importantly, means

that your section should include (1) the research question your paper or proposal is set to answer, (2) the source selection you will use to answer this question, and (3) the approach and techniques that you will use to extract information from your sources. If you envision a theory-heavy proposal or paper, remind yourself of that other definition in Gunn and Faire's paper of methods as representing "an essential intermediate process between 'theory' on the one hand and the sources or raw data on the other" (p. 4). We will discuss some methods sections in real grant applications and papers in the final seminar to prepare this assignment.

Your assignment is assessed by the coherence between the three mentioned elements and by the quality of your elaboration of the method in the narrower sense. Together with the presentations in block 1 this assignment will comprise 30 per cent of the final grade for the Methods course (presentation: 10 per cent, methods assignment: 20 per cent).

Make sure to hand in your methods section assignment on Blackboard on **Friday, March 28, 2025, 11:59pm** at the latest.