

The History Ph.D. Program: An Overview

When you graduate from the Brandeis History Program with a Ph.D. you will have written and defended an original and substantial contribution to historical knowledge, in the form of a doctoral dissertation. You will also have developed the basis and pedagogical skills to teach college-level history courses, and acquired the aptitude to pursue careers not only in academia but also in government, non-profit organizations, cultural institutions, and related occupations in today's knowledge-based economy. You will, in short, have become professional historians, whether practicing in or out of the academy.

This document describes the essential steps along the way, from the moment we first welcome you to the moment we “hood” you.

The First Two Years

You should begin by working out with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) and your relevant instructors, as needed, a plan for the courses you will take in your first semester, and possibly your second as well. You may begin doing this during the summer before you arrive, but typically you will make these decisions and register shortly after arriving.

Directed research and seminars will fill the first two years, culminating in the comprehensive exams. You will take these preferably at the end of your fourth semester, and if not, at the beginning of your fifth semester the following fall. Normally these courses will amount to a total of sixteen courses (four per semester) or 64 credits, with some exceptions for students arriving with an MA (see below).

Directed Research

This represents the sharpest break with undergraduate study - it is more solitary, self-directed, and original, and as such provides the sine qua non in preparation for your later dissertation work.

It consists of two article-length essays, each about 25-40 pages in length, the first written in the fall semester of your first year and the second during the fall or spring semester of your second year. You should rely on primary sources in each, and normally write each under the guidance of a different instructor. Each will account for two courses (four courses or 16 credits in all).

Courses and Directed Readings

These provide the remaining 12 courses over the first two years. We strongly urge you to take the graduate course offerings rather than upper-level undergraduate electives. Even if these appear far removed from your field of interest, the small seminar format, level of discussion, and intellectual climate will invariably prove more valuable to you.

Typically, the History program offers two or three of these each semester; other programs may also offer relevant seminars, but credit for these requires the advance approval of the Director of Graduate Studies.

The graduate courses begin with Introduction to Doctoral Studies (IDS), which all first-year students take in the fall semester. It introduces students to different kinds of history and different kinds of historians, past and present. It may also provide a forum for students to raise and discuss common questions arising from their directed research on the first article-length essay they will be writing.

The Department is also developing a separate seminar, which it hopes to offer during AY 2021-22, for Ph.D. students who have passed their comprehensive exams (see below), but possibly open to second-year students as well. It will examine the full gamut of the historian's vocation, including professional duties that range from teaching, research, and scholarly writing; to the compelling presentation and collegial evaluation of work-in-progress; the art of writing effective grant proposals and CVs; and the mentoring of students and younger scholars. At the same time, this seminar will engage with the many roles historians play beyond the university campus, whether as educators in non-university settings; as authors of content that delivers the fruits of historical research to diverse audiences; or as guides, consultants and researchers who bring the historian's perspectives and training to bear in jobs reaching from government offices to private industry and the Third Sector.

You can choose the remaining courses in the first and second years from those on offer, subject to the following guidelines:

- First-year students must take at least **two** other graduate (200-level) History courses, and preferably more.
- Second-year students must take at least two graduate (200-level) History courses, and preferably more
- For Americanists, it is the normal expectation that PhD students will take both Hist 200a and Hist 200b, which are offered in alternating years.
- The graduate courses taken should together comprise a mix of regional colloquia, and thematic or methodological seminars, as described in the Bulletin.
- One course must satisfy an “outside field” requirement. Taken outside the History Program offerings, and sometimes outside Brandeis itself from a Consortium of area universities, this graduate-level course should explore a relevant field outside the discipline, perhaps in a social science or in literature or philosophy. The instructor in the outside field sets the requirements and certifies that the student has passed it before the program can grant credit for it.
- Students may fulfill course requirements by undertaking directed readings with individual faculty members. These may be desirable if no existing course offerings satisfy a student's needs or interests, and they are best undertaken when more than a single student is interested.

Teaching Assistance

During your second year, you as a Crown Fellow become a teaching assistant for one course in each semester. Whether in running discussion sections, grading, working with undergraduates on papers or advising them generally, teaching assistants learn as well as assist, and these courses accordingly each fulfill one of the sixteen course requirements.

Teaching assistance continues for Crown Fellows into their third year, but by then no longer meets any requirements other than the tenure of the Fellowship itself.

In both years, the DGS assigns teaching assistants, taking account of course enrolments, the pedagogical requirements of the courses, and the fit between the needs of the course and those of the student. The DGS makes these assignments as enrolments become known, at the end of the previous semester or at the beginning of the semester when the course is offered.

You will also “TA” a fifth course, usually in your fourth year. For this course, you may also apply, with the approval of the Director of Graduate Studies, to teach a University Writing Seminar in place of one History course. If accepted, you will be working within the University Writing Program as the instructor of record, teaching writing through a series of pre-structured assignments and with a theme of your choosing. While not a history course *per se*, teaching a UWS gives you the opportunity to gain valuable pedagogical experience and to develop highly transferable teaching skills. As with other Teaching Assistant positions, teaching a UWS demands up to an average of fourteen (14) hours per week. Thereafter, with the approval of the Director of Graduate Studies, you may teach a UWS while you are still receiving your fellowship, and independently for a separate stipend once you are not, also with the approval of the DGS. As for many other options sketched here, we will discuss the pros and cons of the this with you

Language Requirement

Students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in at least one foreign **language relevant to their studies** by the end of their second year. Many specializations require proficiency in two or more foreign languages. Proficiency is normally tested by a written translation exam, offered each semester. Students may use alternative means of demonstrating proficiency on petition to the Director of Graduate Studies.

Exceptions

Students arriving with an MA may petition, with the support of one of their instructors, for exemptions from some course requirements. Typically, this happens after the first year, usually as a request to drop two course requirements in the second year, accompanied by a transcript and an indication of the courses that justify the exemptions. The Director of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Committee administering the program then rule on the request. The program expects that students receiving such transfer credit would move more quickly toward the comprehensive exam and hence the dissertation.

The Comprehensive Examination

Once you meet all the requirements outlined above – preferably by the end of your fourth but, in any case, by the beginning of your fifth semester - you will need to take and pass a comprehensive oral examination.

The exam consists of two linked fields – one closest to your area of interest, another in a related or more broadly relevant field. An example for a Soviet specialist would be a field in “Soviet history” or “Russian and Soviet history” and another in “modern European history.” Over the previous months, you will have worked with a faculty member- examiner in each field to draw up a reading list, each usually consisting of 75-100 books or articles. Students normally prepare for the comprehensives with their examiners for weeks beforehand, meeting to discuss the works on their reading lists and sometimes submitting written questions beforehand. At the exam, each faculty member will raise questions and ask you to discuss major problems in the field on the basis of the reading list. Each field lasts 30-45 minutes.

At least one examiner must be a voting member* of the History Department; the other may be an affiliate of the graduate Program from another department. With your instructors and the DGS if needed, you work out these details in advance. We advise you to start thinking about this by your third semester.

The Dissertation

The Prospectus

After passing the comprehensive exam, you are set to begin research on your dissertation. Of all the stages in your Ph.D. career, this is likely to be the most solitary, as well as the most creative. You will spend long periods of time in archival or other research, or in the writing process itself. Although there will be many opportunities in the program to share your work with others, the self-reliance required during the later phase of the Ph.D. career explains in part the importance placed on the essays at its beginning.

Much of your previous work will have laid the groundwork, and you will already know what you will be working on, if not its precise contours. The first step is to settle upon an advisor, who may but need not be the faculty member with whom you have worked most closely until now. With your advisor you should define the dissertation – the why (the questions it will answer or the problems it will resolve), the how (the sources and the methods you will employ), the who (the historians and others to whom your work will matter) and the when (the timing you want to follow). This should take the form of a 15-30-page prospectus, presented publicly to the faculty and graduate students in the History Department some time during your third year.

At least two faculty members, including your advisor, from the program must be present to pass the prospectus; one must be a voting member* of the History Department. Once the proposal is presented and accepted, you would advance to candidacy (all-but-the-dissertation or “ABD” status).

With your course work behind you and your residency requirement (three years) almost met, you can begin traveling physically and mentally wherever your dissertation research takes you. We expect, however, that you and other Ph.D. students continue while in residence to attend and participate actively in Department events, including workshops, guest lectures, and other gatherings.

The Dissertation Committee

After passing the comprehensive exam you will form a dissertation committee consisting of an advisor, a second reader from among the History Program faculty and affiliates, and eventually an outside reader from another institution. The advisor and second reader normally attend the prospectus presentation, while the entire committee, including the outside reader, will attend the dissertation defense.

As with the comprehensive and prospectus exam, at least one member of the committee must be a voting member* of the History Department. With the approval of their committees, students arrange a public dissertation defense.

Dissertations should be completed, defended, and deposited in accordance to the rules and procedures established by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences:

<https://www.brandeis.edu/gsas/current/dissertation-guide/dissertation-timeline.html>

**A voting member of the History Department is a tenure-line member whose appointment is at least 1/4 in the Department.*