

The History Handbook

Second Edition

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**What Is History and
Why Is It Important?**

Here you are, in your first college history class, and you might be wondering: What can history do that will help me in my college career—and afterward? We're glad you asked.

First, the study of history sharpens your reading and your writing skills. Many historians are master storytellers and their books are good examples of how to narrate a tale, describe an event, and vividly capture the character of a person so that the reader feels they know that person intimately. These are skills that you will be called on to demonstrate in most of your other courses in college. They are also skills we all wish we had worked on when we are trying to make conversation at a party, sell a product to potential buyers, or write an evaluation of a colleague or employee. Other historians have penetrating, focused minds; they carry us, step by step, through a process of analysis that shows us how a muddle of apparently unconnected information actually has a logical thread. Like good detectives, they demonstrate how to gather clues, create the connections among them, and distinguish cause and consequence from accident and coincidence. Who doesn't want to be more like Sherlock Holmes when they are analyzing stocks, putting together a legal defense, weeding out too much information from the Internet, or even figuring out who stole cookies from the cookie jar? There is no way around it: history books provide models for communicating, analyzing, and organizing ideas and information. This is why many of the best lawyers, judges, corporate executives, and teachers majored in history in college.

Second, doing history yourself—writing book reviews, producing research papers, giving oral reports in class, and writing an essay that compares one event to another or explains why something happened and what results it produced—allows you to test and hone these skills for yourself. Knowing where to find information, how to evaluate it, and how to discern the connections among many pieces of information are essential talents in this era of information revolutions and the Internet. They are also talents that will serve you well as long as you are a person who wants to make independent judgments about important issues in your personal and professional life.

Finally, history is just plain fun—and even the most serious and ambitious college students need some fun. Where else can you find so many zany or heroic characters? Open any history book and you will find con men and philosophers, women's rights advocates and dance hall girls, kings, queens, revolutionaries, and paupers who became millionaires, plus an endless assortment of assassins, murderers, madmen, and poets. Where else is there so much drama and excitement? For sheer

nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat tension, what can compete with the fall of Rome, the decision to drop the atomic bomb, the voyages of Christopher Columbus, or the first humans landing on the moon? Not even the most ambitious movie director can produce the rise and fall of so many nations, bloody battles and secret peace negotiations, inventions, discoveries, horrifying acts of cruelty, and crusades for human rights. Murder, mayhem, romance—history has them all, and more.

Interested? Read on. *The History Handbook* will provide you with a step-by-step guide to developing all the skills you need to succeed in your first college history class. It will allow you to relax, and share in some of the fun.

The History Handbook is a straightforward “how-to” book designed for speedy reference. It is organized so that you can quickly find help for the problem you are facing. Each chapter begins with a preview of what will be covered, called Tips in This Chapter. Throughout each chapter you will see a feature called Helping Hand, in which the authors modestly share their experience and wisdom drawn from many years as students themselves and as professors. At the end of every chapter, you will find a brief section called Recap, which sums up the main topics that the chapter has covered.

Now, you should be ready to begin.

How Can I Succeed in My History Class?

- *What will help me most?*
- *How many notes should I take during the lecture?*
- *Why are class discussions important?*
- *Can I ask the professor for help?*

TIPS IN THIS CHAPTER

- Taking notes in class
- Getting the most from classroom discussions
- Getting help from the professor
- Being a responsible student

What Will Help Me Most?

The following three suggestions may seem obvious, but they are critical nevertheless.

First, go to class. Professors are frustrated when students don't come to class and then arrive at the end of the semester to complain about the heavy workload or ask for an extension. Professors will generally be more responsive to students they know and see on a regular basis.

Second, go to class prepared to participate. Most professors consider classroom participation important. To be part of any class discussion, you need to be caught up on the reading assignments. It will also help if you jot down some questions or observations about the readings or the material covered in the last lecture or class discussion. If you are a naturally shy person, arriving with notes on the reading and a provocative question or two will help you jump into the discussion. Take advantage of online course communication tools like discussion boards to make clear, coherent, and provocative arguments that might otherwise be hard to think up on the spot during regular classroom discussions. Remember, never to try to score points with your professor by making fun of another student's comments. Constructive criticism will be welcome; personal attacks on a classmate will not.

Third, keep up with the work. Don't leave everything until the night before the paper is due or the exam is scheduled. Don't fool yourself into believing the old clichés of "I do better when I'm under pressure" or "I can't write a paper until the night before it's due." If you try to cram at the last moment, you will not do well. Well-written papers don't fly out of the computer printer in the middle of the night. You need to attend class regularly, complete all the readings and assignments, and review all of your notes regularly. Check the course website

regularly for announcements, review any grade book sections for missing homework or quizzes, and take advantage of lecture notes, PowerPoint® slides, videos, or podcasts that might help you review or catch up on any missed classes.

How Many Notes Should I Take During the Lecture?

Unless you have mastered shorthand or are a speed typist, you cannot hope to take down everything your professor or your classmates say. While you are furiously scribbling down or typing the professor's first sentence, you are probably missing something important that he or she is saying in the second sentence. Is it hopeless? Not if you think before you write. Try following these six steps if you're attending a class lecture.

HELPING HAND Should I bring my laptop, tablet, or recorder?

Many students bring a portable computer, recording device, or both into classrooms. Although many of you can type faster than you can write by hand, don't underestimate the memory and learning connections between hearing, seeing, and handwriting a succinct summary of your professor's points. With attention, both manual and electronic methods can result in excellent notes and good information recall, but laptop users may be tempted to try to produce a verbatim transcript with little or no mental engagement. Distractions from Internet-connected laptops, personal digital assistants, and phones are also becoming a classroom epidemic, leading to outright bans of these otherwise useful devices at some schools. Be intentional about the tools and gadgets you bring into the class, and be willing to drop back to tried-and-true pen and paper if you feel any of your gadgets might be distracting you. If other students' web surfing, text messaging, or even headphone use is making it hard to concentrate, move closer to the front of the class and, confidentially, share the experience with the professor so he or she can clarify the classroom policies on electronic devices.

First, if the professor puts an outline for the day's topic on the board, copy it down immediately. (You might even want to get into the habit of arriving early so that you can transfer the outline into your notebook before the lecture begins.) If the professor hands out an outline or posts it on the website, make sure you add it to your notebook immediately.

 **HELPING HAND** Make the most of the professor's outline by adding to it. Fill in examples taken from the lecture, class discussion, and/or the assigned reading that illustrate the main points on that outline. Add your own informed comments and questions. Add relevant dates and names. Define terms used on the outline.

Second, if the professor begins the lecture with a series of questions or interpretive statements to be answered or proven during the course of the lecture, use them as the heading for the day's notes. If you are lucky, the professor will end the day's lecture with a summary of what was covered. If you add this summary to your notes, you will have produced the same format as a textbook chapter.

 **HELPING HAND** Let the professor be your note-taking guide. If her opening question is "What were the main causes of the French Revolution?" then don't take elaborate notes on the execution of Queen Marie Antoinette (even if the gory details are exciting).

Third, listen carefully as the professor develops the day's theme or topic. He or she will probably provide several examples for each point along the way. Don't try to copy all of these examples down. Instead, choose one or two examples that you feel illustrate the point *best for you*.

Fourth, listen closely to any questions asked by classmates during or after the lecture. Record the question and the response if you feel both clarify an issue for you.

Fifth, do you have a question? Is there something you aren't sure you understood or something you are especially curious about that the professor did not cover? Ask—and then record the question and the response in your notes.

Sixth, record your own insights, comments, and questions as they occur to you during the lecture.

Seventh, develop your own catch phrases or codes that will save you time. For example, if you want to remind yourself to compare the issue being discussed in this class with one that was covered a

week before, you might want to write "c/c [compare and contrast] discussion on _____ [enter date]." Or use familiar symbols from other disciplines such as math, e.g., the = sign, or the ≠ sign (the equals sign with a line drawn through it to signify "not the same as"). Or before class, list in the margins all the key people or terms likely to be mentioned often in the day's class and assign abbreviations, such as their initials, to each of them. This way, in a lecture on Progressivism, you won't have to write Theodore Roosevelt a dozen times. Finally, be creative! Make up your own codes. One of the authors of this handbook made it through a class on the U.S. Constitution by writing "Csstus" for "Constitution" at least a million times in her notes!

If the class is a discussion class, steps 1 and 2 still apply. You will still want to jot down the main issues and points raised by your classmates, and you will still want to limit yourself to one or two examples that your classmates may provide in discussing each issue.

Finally, review, review, review. As soon as possible following a day's class, review your notes. Fill in missing verbs and punctuation so that, a month from now, the sentences make sense. Write a summary at the end of the day's notes, recapping the main themes and the most interesting points made. These mini-essays will be valuable when you study for the exam. Who knows? The professor may ask for a short essay on one of these very topics.

Why Are Class Discussions Important?

Some students let their minds drift off once the professor stops lecturing and the class discussion begins. But you're too smart to make that mistake. Class discussions help in at least four ways.

First, in the give and take of discussion, the main points of the day's topic are repeated and clarified.

Second, during the discussion, your classmates will provide analogies and examples that you will find useful.

Third, one of your classmates may raise a question that you are hesitant to raise but want answered.

Fourth, participating in a class discussion tests your ability to present your own views clearly and persuasively.

 **HELPING HAND** Learning to discuss a topic effectively with a diverse group of peers is a skill that will serve you well throughout your life. Remember: Don't monopolize the floor. Don't interrupt. Don't mumble. Most important, never try to make your point by insulting a classmate who disagrees with you. The same etiquette applies even more so to online postings where your words will not have the benefit of friendly body language and facial expressions. The Internet is replete with "flame-wars" that distract everyone from the topic at hand, so mastering the art of composing constructive criticism and fair dialogue is becoming as important in the world of instant online communication as it is in person.

Can I Ask the Professor for Help?

Some students think of the classroom as an adversarial situation—the professor against the students. Others think that the professor is too busy to be “bothered” by a visit or an email from a student. Still others think that a professor’s office hours are only for students who fail an exam, want to drop out of a course, or have some life-threatening problem to relate that interferes with the course requirements. All these assumptions are wrong.

If you have a question about the assignments, the readings, or the topic of a class lecture or discussion, do talk to the professor. If you are having trouble organizing a paper for the class, ask for your professor’s help. And if you did not do as well on an exam or a paper as you think you are capable of doing, ask your professor’s advice on how to improve your work next time. You will not be imposing if you go during the professor’s scheduled office hours. You can also ask, before or after class, if your professor would mind receiving an email from you.

Of course, there are limits. Don't ask a professor to explain a reading you haven't actually read. Don't expect a professor to reproduce a lecture or discussion class you missed. Don't ask for special treatment, such as getting the length of an assignment shortened or a deadline changed. Many professors offer an email address or a comment form on the course website for student questions outside of office hours. Remember, your professor may receive five, ten, even a hundred email messages from students each day. Although casual punctuation, familiar modes of address, incomplete sentences, and abbreviations are common in electronic communications among peers, treat an email to a professor much as you would a written letter. Address a professor as you would in class or in his or her office, provide a clear subject line so urgent

items are easy to pick out of a sometimes very full inbox, explain in full sentences your question and comment, and sign the note with your full name and, if it has not come up in the body of the message, which of the professor’s classes you are taking. Above all, remember that emails might not be read for several days depending on the professor’s email routines, so bring all urgent matters up in person. And of course, be especially careful to be polite and respectful in your electronic postings as the emotions and motives of email messages are notoriously easy to misinterpret.

 **HELPING HAND** If you have a problem or a question about the class or an assignment, discuss it with the professor immediately. Don't let it fester until after a test or after the assignment has been turned in. As those late-night advertisements on television always say: “Act now, before it's too late.”

RECAP

This chapter provided a strategy for note taking, getting the most out of classroom discussions, and asking your professor for help. The key advice on note taking is to listen carefully for the major themes in the professor’s lecture, don't bury yourself in details, and revise and review those class notes as soon as possible. The secret to getting the most out of classroom discussions is to listen, participate, and incorporate other people’s ideas into your notes. Remember that the rule of thumb in seeking a professor’s help is to ask for constructive advice not special treatment. And, finally, attending class and keeping up with your work are fundamental.

There's So Much Weekly Reading Assigned for the Class . . . How Can I Ever Do It All?

- *Why is this textbook so big?*
- *How can I make this textbook manageable?*
- *What do I highlight in the textbook?*

TIPS IN THIS CHAPTER

- Learning the function of a textbook
- Making the textbook manageable

Why Is This Textbook So Big?

In most courses, the textbook is a student's main study aid. It provides the basic narrative of the historical period you will be studying, and introduces you to the "who," "what," "when," and "why" for the semester's work. Generally, a textbook is bulky, imposing, and bursting with names, dates, and descriptions of events that may be unfamiliar to you. The result is that you may feel overwhelmed.

Why is the textbook so packed with information on so many topics? The authors of the textbook try to be as inclusive as possible, providing a broad portrait of the political, social, economic, military, diplomatic, and intellectual trends and developments of each historical era because they do not know which topics your professor—and the hundreds of other professors across the country—may choose to focus on for the semester. Because the textbook is inclusive rather than selective, your professors can be selective, confident that the textbook will fill in the gaps for each student.

How Can I Make the Textbook Manageable?

First, familiarize yourself with its format. Most textbooks will have a table of contents that previews the topics you are going to encounter in the book, a list of illustrations and special features that appear in the book, and an index at the end of the volume. Every textbook divides the historical material to be covered into manageable chapters, and each chapter is likely to have the following: an introduction, which lays out the major themes of the chapter; a time line and/or a chronological chart, which lists the main events covered in the chapter; the body of the chapter, divided into topical sections; illustrations, including maps, charts, graphs, photographs, or paintings relevant to the era; a summary, which recaps the main points of the chapter; a bibliography, which lists books or websites or films for further study of the period; and finally, one or two special features, such as a biography of a famous or typical person of the era.

Here is a sample table of contents of a chapter on the era following the Civil War, known as Reconstruction, in the textbook, *Making America*. See how many of the "clues" in the list that follows the outline you picked up as you read this table of contents.

Chapter 16 Reconstruction: High Hopes and Broken Dreams, 1865–1877

Presidential Reconstruction

Republican War Aims

Lincoln's Approach to Reconstruction:

"With Malice Toward None"

Abolishing Slavery Forever: The Thirteenth Amendment

Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction

The Southern Response: Minimal Compliance

Freedom and the Legacy of Slavery

Defining the Meaning of Freedom

Creating Communities

Land and Labor

The White South: Confronting Change

Congressional Reconstruction

Challenging Presidential Reconstruction

The Civil Rights Act of 1866

Defining Citizenship: The Fourteenth Amendment

Radicals in Control: Impeachment of the President

Political Terrorism and the Election of 1868

Voting Rights and Civil Rights

Individual Choices: Frederick Douglass

Black Reconstruction

The Republican Party in the South

Creating an Educational System and Fighting Discrimination

Railroad Development and Corruption

The End of Reconstruction

The "New Departure"

The 1872 Election

Redemption by Terror: The "Mississippi Plan"
The Compromise of 1877
After Reconstruction

Summary

Suggested Readings

How many of these clues did you pick up?

1. The title of the chapter provides the theme: much was expected but there were many failures during Reconstruction.
2. Reconstruction began in 1865 and ended in 1877—it will be important to know what events occurred in these twelve years [the end of the Civil War, 1865; the removal of federal troops from the South, 1877].
3. The table of contents is actually an outline of the Reconstruction era.
4. The textbook covers not only political developments of the era but also social and economic ones, as in the topics "Creating Communities" and "Land and Labor."
5. Key terms that you will want to write down and learn are listed here, such as "Mississippi Plan" and "the Civil Rights Act of 1866."
6. There were three different Reconstruction plans: presidential, congressional, and African American or black.
7. The special feature, "Individual Choices," suggests that individuals shape history by the choices they make.
8. The summary will provide a review of the key points from each of the sections of the chapter.
9. If you are doing a paper on Reconstruction, the "Suggested Readings" is a good place to start for a bibliography.

 **HELPING HAND** Reading the table of contents for the chapter you are assigned makes good sense. The table of contents tells you what you can expect to find in the text; it introduces you to key terms and ideas. It only takes a few moments to read—time that is well spent!

What Do I Highlight in the Textbook?

Now that you know what to expect, you can move on to step two: resist the temptation to barge right in, armed with a highlighter or a pen, ready to underline every name, date, or event mentioned in the chapter.

Turning the whole chapter bright yellow or pink won't help much, even though it may make you feel like you are doing something! Instead, read the assigned chapter's introduction and summary *first*. They will tell you what is important to remember, consider—and highlight. Then, read the body of the chapter.

If, for example, the chapter introduction tells you that the focus will be on the events and policies during Reconstruction, you will want to highlight the names of key political figures during the era, such as President Johnson, and key legislation, such as the Fourteenth Amendment. In this particular textbook, *Making America*, the authors have gone a long way to assist you by including a running glossary on each page, in which key figures, key terms, and key events or legislation are defined for you. Other texts help you by printing these key terms in bold or italic type for you.

The same principle applies no matter what period of history you are studying. If the chapter introduction in a European textbook tells you that the focus will be on the causes of the French Revolution, you will want to highlight the names and descriptions of those acts or political decisions that heightened tensions between the government and the people, as well as any key information on economic problems, radical organizations, or ideological challenges to the monarchical system of government.

 **HELPING HAND** Always review the summary of the chapter to see if you have taken special notice—by highlighting or note taking—of all the main points recapped for you by the author.

Now you are ready for the final step: testing yourself. For example, close the book and write your own short essay on the main themes of the chapter. Afterward, check the textbook introduction and summary to see if you left out anything important. Or list as many of the important people or events from the chapter as you can recall and then define and explain the significance of each item on your list. Save these self-tests. They will make excellent review materials for the professor's tests.

 **HELPING HAND** Never skip words or terms in the text that you don't understand. You know what you should do: look them up!

Many textbooks have companion websites or electronic versions of the book itself. Take full advantage of the quizzes, interactive exercises, videos, maps, and primary sources contained on those websites. Many of these exercises are automatically corrected and can give you instant feedback on what areas you might have missed in your first reading of the chapter. Take special note of primary sources and maps that amplify, complicate, or extend the arguments of the textbook. Your professor will be thrilled when you bring those items up in class discussion as it will mean you are not just learning history as it was written in the textbook but also practicing the art of historical detection.

RECAP

This chapter showed you how to make the textbook a tool for learning, not just a heavy load in your backpack.

How Do I Study for History Tests?

- *What kinds of tests will I take in class?*
- *How can I improve my performance on these in-class tests?*
- *How do I complete the take-home essay exam?*
- *How do I complete online tests?*
- *How do I study for any test?*