



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
School of History, Classics  
and Archaeology

# History Handbook

## 2019–20



## Getting started on your degree

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Welcome to Edinburgh! We hope that you are looking forward to beginning your studies in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. But we also know that starting university can be daunting at first, as you get used to a new place to live and to new ways of studying. This Handbook is intended to help you orientate yourself to your degree programme, its requirements, and the forms of teaching and learning that await you. It introduces you to the basic structure of your degree, outlines some of the major expectations that we have of our students, and tells you what expectations you, in turn, should have of us.

The best way to use this Handbook is to keep it easily accessible and to dip into it periodically as you require it:

- If you're reading this before teaching begins, perhaps start by reading the sections which offer [‘An Overview of Your Degree’](#) (p. 4), an introduction to [‘How You will be Taught’](#) (p. 6), and the [‘Eight Tips to Get You Started’](#) (p. 23).
- As you're about to begin your classes, familiarize yourself with [‘What We Expect from You’](#) (p. 10) and find out more about [‘Your Lecturers and Tutors’](#) (p. 9).
- Once your classes have begun, make sure that you have read the section about [‘Working on Assessments’](#) (p. 14), which contains instructions and advice about the work that you will have to produce for your courses; and perhaps revisit those [‘Eight Tips to Get You Started’](#) (p. 23) to make sure that you're all set up.

If you find that you have questions which are not covered in this Handbook, then there are plenty of places that you can turn. The School's website has [a section for current students](#) which goes into more detail about many of the topics outlined here, and you can find links to other sources of information at the back of this Handbook. Your tutors will also be happy to answer any questions that you have, as will the staff in the Student Support Office on the ground floor of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. We want to make sure that you feel informed and supported throughout your studies, and we look forward to working with you during your time with us.

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## An overview of your degree

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### The structure of the degree

There are a variety of different degrees in History, and your path through your studies will depend on the rules of the specific degree in which you are enrolled. All of them, however, share a basic structure in common.

The first two years of your degree are referred to as **pre-Honours**. These years set the foundations for your subsequent study, by introducing you to broad surveys of periods and places that you might not have studied before, as well as offering you the chance to take some courses from outside the History curriculum. These years allow you to broaden your knowledge at the outset of your degree, and to familiarize yourself with the ways that the discipline of History is studied at an academic level. Two compulsory core courses – ‘The Historian’s Toolkit’ (year 1) and ‘Introduction to Historiography’ (year 2) – will help you reorient yourself from the type of work that you conducted at school to the more rigorous standards of History at university level.

The third and fourth years of the degree comprise **Honours**. The courses which you take in these two years determine the classification which you will be awarded on your final degree certificate (First Class, Upper Second Class, Lower Second Class, etc). Honours courses typically explore a more focused topic or theme than courses which you have previously studied, often connected closely to areas in which your lecturers are engaged in active research. Alongside your taught courses, you will also be engaged in various kinds of independent research, introduced to you in third year through the core courses in ‘Historical Skills and Methods’, and culminating in the writing of a final-year dissertation in which you can bring together all the skills that you have acquired as an historian throughout your studies.

### The rules of your own degree programme

The basic structure outlined above is common to all History degrees. But it is also essential that you familiarize yourself with the specific rules of your own degree programme, whether that is the Single Honours degree (MA in History), a joint degree (e.g. MA in History and Archaeology, MA in History and Politics, etc), or one of our specialized degrees (e.g. MA in Scottish History, MA in Economic History, etc). Depending on which programme you are enrolled in, a different set of courses will be available to you, and a different set of requirements will need to be met in order to attain your final degree.

To find the rules of your own degree programme, you need to consult the ‘Degree Programme Tables’. You can find these on the online Degree Regulations and Programmes of Study (DRPS) website (<http://www.drps.ed.ac.uk/>). Once you are there, open the most current Degree Regulations, and then click ‘Browse Degree Programme Tables’, follow the link to the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, and look for your degree in the list of undergraduate programmes.

Once you have opened your Degree Programme Table, you will see all the options which are available to you in your studies, as well as any requirements which you must fulfil along the way. The following screenshot shows the basic format, using the MA in History as an example: the requirements for each year are listed first, followed by any compulsory courses, followed by your remaining course options:

The screenshot shows the University of Edinburgh website for Degree Regulations & Programmes of Study (DRPS) for the 2019/2020 academic year. The page is titled "Degree Programme Table: History (MA Hons) (UTHISTY)". It includes navigation links for University Homepage, DRPS Homepage, DRPS Search, and DRPS Contact. The page is for the School of History, Classics and Archaeology DPTs. It specifies the academic year as 2019/20, starting in September. A note states that all first-year students should make an appointment with their Personal Tutor during Induction Week. It also mentions that the credits for courses should total 120 in each year. Under "Compulsory courses", three courses are listed: "The Historian's Toolkit" (HIST08032, 20 credits), "Early Modern History: A Connected World" (HIST08034, 20 credits), and "Medieval Worlds: A Journey through the Middle Ages" (HIST08035, 20 credits). Under "Course options", "Group A" is listed.

### Enrolling onto your courses

When you have consulted the Degree Programme Table for your degree, and read the requirements which you must meet when choosing your courses, then you can begin to think about which of the many available courses you might wish to take. It is worth taking a bit of time over this, to read the descriptions of the courses listed in your Degree Programme Table and to decide which of them hold the greatest appeal for you.

First- and second-year students enrol onto their courses through their Personal Tutor in Welcome Week. For more details about how to arrange a meeting with your Personal Tutor, and further information to help you pick your courses, follow [this link to the page on the School website](#).

Third- and fourth-years students cannot be enrolled onto their courses by their Personal Tutor, but will instead be invited by email to submit a list of preferred courses via an online form. Full information about how and when to do this is sent directly to students through their University email address at the appropriate time.

## How you will be taught

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You will encounter a range of different teaching methods across your studies, each designed to facilitate a particular kind of learning. As you start your studies at pre-Honours level, the bulk of your teaching will be a mixture of **lectures**, which introduce you to a particular subject for the first time, and **tutorials**, in which a tutor leads a small group of students through a discussion of a topic related to those lectures. As you progress to Honours, you will have less need of introductory lectures as you familiarize yourself with a new subject, and instead you will be assigned greater amount of academic reading in preparation for **seminars**, which provide space for an in-depth discussion of the issues that arise from your reading. In courses which require you to conduct independent research, like the core courses in 'Historical Skills and Methods' as well as the final dissertation, you will also work closely with your lecturers in **supervisions**, in which you discuss the progress of your own research and receive advice and support about the direction it is taking.

As this brief summary indicates, the types of teaching that you will encounter are intended to change across the four years, with the aim of helping you to gain greater independence and self-reliance as you progress through your degree. Our hope is that as well as equipping you with a range of historical knowledge, your degree will also therefore allow you to develop your own skills and abilities in intellectual autonomy, in analytical enquiry, and in self-guided research.

### **More about lectures, and how to get the most out of them**

The purpose of lectures is introductory: in 50 minutes, your lecturer will provide you with a point of entry into a particular topic, guide you through key concepts and themes, and offer their own views about issues which would merit your further reflection. They are not, therefore, a way of telling you everything you need to know about any given topic, and you are expected to build on the lecture's content through your own reading. Think of them as a kind of scaffolding for your own thinking, rather than as a place where you will find all the answers for your course, and you will be making use of them in the way that they are intended.

An important skill to learn in lectures is the art of taking useful notes. Since the function of the lecture is to introduce you to a topic for further study, you should not attempt to write down everything that your lecturer says or presents in any accompanying slides (a fruitless task, and often an impossible one!). Instead, you should seek to make a note of key points of analysis, new terms and concepts that your lecturer introduces to you, and observations which you would want to refer back to at a later date. This can be unfamiliar at first, and you may initially find it challenging; but you will find that you do get used to it with practice. The ability to identify and articulate the key themes of an oral presentation in a written record is a valuable transferable skill that will serve you well in a variety of future professions and work situations.

You are permitted to make an audio recording of any lecture for your own personal use, and many lectures in the University are now also being centrally recorded and made available in video format afterwards. Please do not, however, think of these methods as a substitute for taking written notes in a lecture that you yourself have attended. Some studies have suggested that the use of recorded

lectures has a *negative* impact on students' ability to retain and reuse information, and for that reason you may find that some of your courses have elected not to make use of video recordings. Precisely because the purpose of lectures is introductory, it is best to make use of them at the time that they are first delivered, and then build on them through further reading rather than trying to memorize them or revise solely from them.

In summary, lectures serve many useful functions, but they are only a part of your studies and should therefore be approached in that way.

### **More about tutorials, and what they require from you**

Building on the foundations from those introductory lectures, pre-Honours courses use tutorials to deepen your understanding of key themes that your lecturers have introduced to you. Tutorials meet weekly in groups of around 10 to 12 students, and focus on the discussion of a set of readings which relate to one or more of the course's previous lectures. You will be automatically assigned to a 50-minute tutorial group during the first week of the course, and then meet as a group for the remainder of the semester.

Every tutorial group has a tutor, who may be one of the lecturers on the course or another historian who is actively researching an area related to the course. The tutor's role, however, is to facilitate a productive discussion between you and your fellow students, rather than to dictate answers to you.

Because the focus of tutorials is on student discussion and interaction, it is therefore vital that you come to tutorials thoroughly prepared for that discussion. Every tutorial will have a set of required reading for you to work through in advance, which your tutor will expect you to have completed. Using your knowledge from your reading, the tutor will then guide your conversation through a range of issues that arise from the documents under discussion, so as to deepen your understanding of the material and its implications. At first, you may find it daunting to express your views of the material in front of a group of your peers – but it is essential that you participate as fully as you are able in the discussion. By doing so, you will become accustomed to articulating your own ideas, explaining your reasoning, and showing your evidence – all vital parts of historical work! Some courses may also assess you on your participation in tutorials, to encourage you to get used to expressing your views aloud.

### **More about Honours seminars, and how they differ from pre-Honours tuition**

By the time you reach Honours, you will have grown accustomed to expressing your ideas through discussion with your peers. You will also be able to introduce yourself to new topics independently, with less need of preparatory lectures to outline the subject for you first. Honours courses therefore make far less use of lectures, and are instead built around a series of two-hour-long weekly seminars. In these seminars, a slightly larger group of students (between 15 and 25 students) works through more challenging and detailed material with the Course Organiser.

Depending on your course, the two-hour seminar may incorporate a mixture of different activities, including debates, small-group exercises, oral presentations, and other elements appropriate for

the material under discussion. However it is structured, all seminars require you to have completed any preparatory work before you attend, since the activities and discussions that follow will draw directly and closely on that preparatory work.

### **More about supervision, and its role when undertaking independent research**

In courses which require you to conduct a piece of independent research, you take on greater responsibility for your own learning by choosing the topic or direction of your work, identifying readings for yourself, and managing your own schedule of work. You will, however, be assigned a supervisor as a source of support and advice. Supervision meetings that you have with them are therefore opportunities for your supervisor to check in on your progress, to make recommendations with regard to your plans for completing your work, and to discuss with you any matters which are causing you difficulty. Your supervisor's role is thus to steer you in your independent research, rather than to conduct that research for you by giving you a predetermined path to follow. The result should be that you gain confidence in your own independent skills, while still benefitting from the knowledge and expertise of a more experienced historian.

### **Other formats of learning and teaching that you might encounter**

The four modes of tuition outlined above – lectures, tutorials, seminars, and supervision – are those which you will most commonly encounter during your studies. You may also find that some courses incorporate additional teaching methods, in order to foster additional particular skills suited to the course in question. Some courses incorporate independent study groups (sometimes called 'autonomous learning groups'), in which a small number of students meets outside classes to work through a specific task or set of questions. Others require you to participate in online discussion forums, as an alternative mode of engaging with your fellow students and your tutor. Whatever format your tuition takes, it will have been selected deliberately by your Course Organiser to inculcate particular skills and abilities. You should never, therefore, feel worried about enrolling onto a course which includes unfamiliar teaching elements: your Course Organiser will always be happy to explain their function and requirements to you.

### **Essential online resources: Blackboard Learn**

All your courses at the University are supported outside the classroom by the University's 'Virtual Learning Environment', Blackboard Learn. It is here that your Course Organisers will post details of your classes, store reading lists, and make a variety of other resources available to you. Login to Learn directly at <http://www.learn.ed.ac.uk/>, and when you have enrolled onto your courses, they will appear here for you to explore. When you first begin your studies, it is worth taking a bit of time to familiarize yourself with Learn and how it works, since you will be using it for almost every element of your courses, from accessing preparatory reading to submitting your assignments.

## Your lecturers and tutors

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Because Edinburgh has one of the largest History departments in the UK, you will work with a wide range of different academic historians during your studies. All of them are active researchers in their chosen fields as well as teachers, and you will often find that they build into their classes material on which they themselves are currently working, making you the first recipients of new insights, approaches, and discoveries. This is true regardless of whether your lecturer or tutor is a well-established professor or a postgraduate student in the process of attaining their PhD, and across your studies you can expect to be taught by a wide range of different historians with different specialisms, approaches and experiences.

Your lecturers and tutors are generally the first point of contact for advice about your courses and your work. They hold regular **office hours**, during which you can drop in to discuss your studies or ask other questions. You can always find out when an academic's office hours are (and where their office is!) by looking on their Staff Profile on the University website, via [this link](#). (If your tutor is a current or recent postgraduate student without an office or a staff profile, they will let you know when and where they are available for consultation.) Outside their scheduled office hours, you may find that an academic is not at their desk when you stop by their office, because they are teaching elsewhere in the University, are attending meetings, or are engaged in research elsewhere – so do make sure to see them at their advertised hours.

Your lecturers and tutors are also available via **email**. Their email addresses will be listed again on their Staff Profile or on a course's Learn page. Please do remember, however, that your lecturers and tutors do not have their email open 24 hours a day, and certainly not after weekday working hours. They will always endeavour to answer your emails as soon as possible during working hours, but will obviously be offline for periods of those days when they are conducting teaching on any of their courses or attending to other matters. In general, you should expect a reply to your emails within two working days; and if your query is particularly urgent, you might wish to contact the [Student Support Office](#) instead.

## What we expect from you

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University gives you greater freedom and autonomy than your previous studies at school, but there are certain key expectations which we have of all our students.

### **Attendance**

You are expected to attend all classes scheduled for your courses. In tutorials and seminars, attendance is compulsory and a register is taken by your tutor. In some courses, penalties may be applicable for a failure to maintain a satisfactory level of attendance; and continued non-attendance may lead to you being deemed officially Absent from the University and so withdrawn from your courses and programme. In the case of international students, the University's sponsorship of your entry visa may be revoked. Full details on Attendance and Engagement monitoring, engagement points and Tier 4 visa requirements can be found [on the School website](#). If you are studying on a Tier 4 visa, it is very important that you understand and meet the requirements.

It is vital, then, that you advise your tutor via email if you are compelled to miss a tutorial or seminar for good reasons, ideally in advance of the class. Failure to do will result in you being marked as absent without explanation. You can find your tutor's contact information on the course's Learn page, along with further details about that course's attendance requirements.

In lectures, no register is taken and you are not required to advise your tutor if you are compelled to miss a lecture. But irregular attendance will put you at a significant disadvantage for your understanding, because the schedule of lectures has been drawn up so as to introduce you to material that you will need in future classes or assignments. We therefore expect you to attend all lectures on your courses, and will not be able to make up for any content lost through non-attendance on other occasions.

### **Preparation**

It is not enough just to be physically present in the classroom; you must also come prepared for the work which will be undertaken there. If any preparatory reading or other work has been assigned to your class, you must ensure that you have done it before you attend the class: your tutor will be making direct and continual reference to it, and you may be unable to follow the discussion without having completed the reading.

Good time management is therefore essential here, since you must allow yourself enough time to complete the preparation before your class. Trying to squeeze it into the hour or so before the class is not usually a strategy for success, and you should work out in advance how long it will take you to complete the preparatory work, in order to leave sufficient time to do it.

When you come to your classes, bring any notes from your preparatory work with you. If your class is going to be based around the discussion of a particular source or piece of reading, try to bring a

copy of it with you too. The basic principle is that you should come ready to participate in an informed discussion of material that you have taken the time to digest fully, in order to make the class itself a meaningful and useful event.

### **Meeting your deadlines**

At the start of the course, you should identify all the upcoming deadlines for assessments and other activities across the semester or year ahead. We expect you to meet these deadlines; and in the case of coursework, late submission of work will incur a penalty (a deduction of 5 marks for every calendar day missed, or a mark of zero if more than seven days late).

This is another area in which good time management is essential for success. Your classes have been scheduled in order to leave you plenty of time for study towards your assignments, but it is up to you to put that time to best use. If you find that you have multiple assignments due in the same week or month, then decide in advance how you will divide your time in order to meet all these deadlines. It goes without saying that managing simultaneous priorities like this is an essential skill to attain for subsequent employment in any profession.

If circumstances beyond your control arise which affect your ability to meet the agreed deadline, you must make a written record of those circumstances to seek an extension of up to 7 days. Late submission beyond that time requires a formal application for consideration by the Special Circumstances committee. You can find out more about late penalties, extensions and Special Circumstances [on the School's website](#).

### **Reading and acting on feedback**

Every time a piece of assessed coursework is returned to you, your marker will have supplied detailed feedback as well as an overall mark. This feedback is offered precisely so as to enable you to improve in future work, and it is therefore not only courteous but also in your own interests to take the time to read your marker's comments in full. In many ways, the comments are more valuable to you than the mark – especially at pre-Honours level, when the marks do not count towards your eventual degree classification.

You should therefore seek to address any areas which your markers have identified for improvement, as well as maintaining any habits which they single out for particular praise. If any aspects of their comments are unclear to you, please do get in touch with the marker during their office hours. They will be very happy to explain their suggestions to you, and to offer further advice for your future work.

As you progress through your studies, you will find that different tutors mark in different ways. This can seem confusing at first, but it is not a sign of inconsistency. It is often instead because different topics and types of history require different approaches; and tutors may seek to prioritize certain aspects of feedback in their comments rather than overwhelm you by listing every possible comment at once. Improvement is a constant goal, so the aim is not to submit assignments that

receive *no* comments at all, but rather to submit work that builds on previous feedback and elicits new types of comments from your markers.

### **How we ensure that all courses are graded fairly**

You can have confidence that all your courses will be graded fairly, according to consistent principles of assessment. All assignments and examinations are ‘moderated’ after they are marked. This means that a second member of academic staff takes responsibility for checking a representative sample of those assignments, to ensure that all marks and feedback are in line with the agreed standards across the School and the University.

In addition to internal moderation, the School appoints External Examiners who provide a further level of scrutiny. External Examiners are academics who are based in other UK universities, who inspect our courses, assignments and procedures to ensure that high standards are maintained across all degree programmes. They provide the School with regular reports about the material that they have surveyed, which are available to students upon request. If you wish to access these reports, please contact the Undergraduate Manager, [Eilein Fraser](#). At present, the External Examiners in History are:

- Prof. D’Maris Coffman (Professor in Economics and Finance of the Built Environment, University College London)
- Dr Stacey Hynd (Senior Lecturer in History, University of Exeter)
- Prof. Jonathan Phillips (Professor of the History of the Crusades, Royal Holloway, University of London)
- Dr James Shaw (Senior Lecturer in History, University of Sheffield)

Please note that these details are provided for information only. Students **MUST NOT** make direct contact with External Examiners. If you have queries about the assessment process, please contact your Personal Tutor or the Lead Administrator in History, [Lorna Berridge](#).

## The Learning Contract

A 'Learning Contract' has been drawn up by the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, to distil these expectations and to state clearly the expectations which you, in turn, can have of us:

The History curriculum aims to enable students to develop both intellectual and personal skills. Students will have the opportunity, in their written work and their tutorial discussions, to participate in intellectual debate – comparing conflicting arguments and theoretical positions, weighing up evidence and reaching conclusions. In the process, we hope that students will be able to develop their research, analytical, and interpretative abilities. Equally important, we hope that, in both their written work and the oral discussions, students will develop their capacity to express arguments cogently and confidently. More generally, we want to use the discipline of history to give a humane education within the tradition of the broad-based Scottish arts degree; to encourage active learning and habits of critical and independent thought, profiting from the close association of research and teaching; and to foster intellectual and communication skills which will equip students for high personal and professional achievement.

The achievements of these aims and objective depends on the collaborative effort of teachers and students.

### **The teachers of each course undertake:**

- to give full information on the aims, structure, organization and assessment methods of the course;
- to provide adequate bibliographical advice for all written and oral exercises;
- to be available during term time to advise students individually, and to discuss their academic progress and provide guidance and advice within reasonable limits;
- to mark work promptly, and return it with written or oral comments;
- to carry out all assessments fairly, and to ensure the highest possible assessment standards;
- to seek student feedback, through questionnaires, student representatives and other means, and to be responsive to the views which students express.

### **On the other hand, we hope that students on the course will accept the obligation:**

- to attend all tutorials and seminars unless unavoidably prevented;
- to work diligently throughout the academic year, and to present all written work by the date prescribed;
- to work independently, and to avoid any form of plagiarism;
- to prepare all tasks which are set for tutorials and seminars, to make a fair contribution to general discussions, and to prepare oral presentations with care and thoroughness;
- to give serious attention to the improvement of their English style and presentation where weaknesses have been identified;
- to familiarize themselves with the use of computers, and to use the skills of word processing for presenting their written work;
- to inform their tutors or Personal Tutors promptly of any circumstances which may affect their attendance, performance or punctuality.

## Working on assessments

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Over the course of your studies, you will experience a wide range of different types of assessment. Each allows you to develop and demonstrate different sorts of skills, and most courses will feature a mixture of different assessments. Here is a short summary of some of the main forms which you might encounter:

- **Essays.** Developing a sustained argument in response to a specific question is central feature of historical writing. Although you will have written essays at school, the expectations at University level are different, with a greater emphasis on independence of thought and analytical argumentation, rather than merely describing or narrating a standard set of 'facts'.
- **Source analyses.** A more focused form of writing, in which the objective is to demonstrate an understanding of a piece of historical source material, to unpack its meaning, and to use your contextual knowledge to comment on matters of significance contained within it.
- **Oral presentations.** These allow you to develop not only your understanding of the subject being presented, but also your skills of delivery and communication. The best presentations ought to be useful and illuminating for your fellow students, and you will benefit similarly from hearing theirs. Sometimes these will be delivered in the classroom; at other times the presentation might take the form of a podcast or video.
- **Group projects.** Some courses encourage you to work with others on a specific project, delivered either in written form or orally. These sorts of projects require cooperation and planning in addition to the usual skills of historical work.
- **Assessed participation.** Some courses assess the quality of your contributions to tutorial or seminar discussions, as a way of encouraging participation in group discussions and of rewarding preparation and the ability to work through historical problems as part of a group.
- **Examinations.** You are of course familiar with exams, and will have developed your own methods of preparing for them already at school. At University level, you are rewarded not for memorizing a predetermined set of material, but instead for showing your analytical abilities in response to questions that arise out of the themes you have covered in the course. You should use your whole knowledge of the course to answer the questions, rather than focusing on learning only a narrow slice of the material in exacting detail.

This list includes only the most common forms of assessment, and some courses may have particularly novel or innovative methods of assessment instead of, or in addition to, these. Your tutors and lecturers will always explain the requirements of any unusual or unfamiliar forms of assessment to you in advance of the submission date.

## Reading for coursework assignments

Whichever form of assessment you encounter, the objective will never be to simply repeat the contents of a related lecture or class which you have had. You will need to extend your understanding through independent reading that builds on, and also takes you beyond, your classes. Put simply, the more time and attention you give to independent academic reading, the better you will understand the topics and themes raised in your classes.

All courses (with the exception of advanced research projects like dissertations) will provide you with reading lists to use in your independent study. These will have been prepared by your Course Organisers, who will have selected the most illuminating, relevant, stimulating and up-to-date reading available on any given topic. You can supplement this reading with other material that you find yourself if you wish – but remember that the recommended material has been chosen for a reason, and your markers will be expecting to see you engaging with the issues contained in it. Be particularly careful when reading additional material on the internet, which as you know contains a great deal of low quality information from unverifiable sources. Learning to tell the difference between trustworthy and untrustworthy material is one of the skills which you should acquire during your studies.

The items listed in your course's reading lists will be a mixture of scholarly publications: not only books, but also articles from academic journals with a more focused theme, or chapters from edited collections of essays by various scholars on related topics. You may also be directed to particular historical sources too – perhaps in translation, if your course deals with periods or places for which the sources were written in languages other than Modern English.

To locate the items listed in your course's reading lists, you must familiarize yourself with the University library and its online catalogue, DiscoverEd. Help and guidance is available [on the Library website](#), and the staff at the Main Library will also be able to offer you advice and assistance in person when you visit. Various introductory events for new users of the Library take place every year too, so keep a look out notices of any upcoming events that would be useful to you.

## Reading critically

Whatever you are reading, always make sure that you are evaluating the author's argument and their use of supporting evidence. Are you convinced by their arguments and satisfied by the evidence that they have provided? Or are there problems either with the evidence that they offer, or with their analysis of that evidence? These are the essential attributes of critical reading: you are no longer just reading to 'find out what happened' in the past, as you may have done at school, but also now to come to your own judgements about how we should interpret the past. If you disagree with what you are reading, or if you see that other historians have disagreed with it, then this is something that you may wish to discuss in your assignment.

## Using what you read, and taking useful notes

Get into the habit of taking notes whenever you are reading for your studies. When you come to write your assignments, your notes will be your guide to what you have found in your reading. Use them to record not only facts and figures, but also to summarize the arguments and approaches that you find in your reading. Be selective: you will not gain much by copying whole pages from your reading, but instead try to summarize the essential aspects of the items that you read. And whenever possible, make sure that your notes are expressed in your own words. Your final assignments will need to be expressed in your own words, and if your notes are ambiguous you might end up unknowingly plagiarizing material from your sources. If you wish to quote something exactly from your sources, you need to indicate that with proper use of quotation marks, so that you can accurately differentiate between your work and that of your sources.

The basic principles of effective notetaking are that the information you have noted should be *retrievable* when you want to use it, and *traceable* to its source. Whenever you read something that is useful for your work, therefore, make sure that it is in a form that you will be easy for you to use later on, and that you always record accurately where it came from as well as what it says. In coursework essays, you will be expected to provide full and accurate references to all the sources you have used, down the specific page that the information came from.

Take a look at this passage from a sample essay, which twice cites its sources in its footnotes. Your essays need to be just as precise about where your material has come from, and your markers will be assessing you on your ability to provide full and accurate references to all the sources you used:

Attempts to reconstruct Aztec religious practice depend in large part on the information contained in the sixteenth-century *Universal History of the Things of New Spain*, written by Bernardino de Sahagún. This text has been prized for its rich depictions of elaborate ritual events, apparently described in all their detail and complexity:

“After having torn their hearts from them and poured the blood into a gourd vessel, which the master of the slain man himself received, [the priests] started the body rolling down the pyramid steps. It came to rest upon a small square below. There some old men, whom they called Quaquacuiltin, laid hold of it and carried it to their tribal temple, where they dismembered it and divided it up in order to eat it.”<sup>1</sup>

Such accounts cannot, however, be accepted uncritically. One difficulty, observed by Inga Clendinnen, is that the scribes who recopied Sahagún’s text had “little respect for a far-away world in ruins before they were born”.<sup>2</sup> They regularly allowed their own expectations and prejudices to intrude upon Sahagún’s account of Aztec culture.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, ed. and trans., *Florentine Codex*, 12 vols. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1952–82), 3:3.

<sup>2</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 395.

In order to be able to provide an equally precise record of your sources, therefore, you must obviously ensure that your notes contain all the necessary details of authors, titles, publication information, page references, quotations, etc. This may feel a little laborious to begin with, but you will soon get into the habit.

## Planning your work and developing an argument

When you feel that you have gained a sufficient understanding of the question or topic that your coursework is meant to address, then you can begin to plan your writing. If you are writing an essay in response to a particular question, then the most important thing is to be clear at the outset about exactly what you think the answer to the question is: the structure of your essay must then enable you to develop an argument which sustains that answer in a developed and logical manner. If you are conducting a different sort of assignment, then you may not have a question to answer, but you will still need to work out how you will organize your thoughts into a structured piece of work.

In order to analyse the topic of your assignment, you will need to identify a line of argument. This is essentially a way of leading your reader through your thought process, outlining your reasoning at every stage and showing how your understanding of the evidence has led you to reach certain conclusions about the topic under discussion. The ability to construct an argument and to support it with evidence is perhaps the key transferable skill that a History degree develops, and your markers will often focus in their feedback on this aspect in particular.

Ensure that your writing has an argument by focusing less on ‘facts’ that you have discovered in your reading, and more on making particular points that relate those facts to the question or prompt that you have been set. As a general rule, try to convey one major point per paragraph. You may previously have used paragraphs just as a way to contain a set of material on a single subject:

### **Example of a weak structure that lacks an argument:**

Paragraph 1: economic factors

Paragraph 2: political factors

Paragraph 3: religious factors

*etc.*

This is not a very effective mode of writing, though, since it prevents you from developing any kind of sustained argument that runs from start to finish. Ensuring that each of the paragraphs in your essay makes a specific point, on the other hand, places the emphasis on argumentation throughout:

### **Example of a strong structure that conveys an argument:**

Paragraph 1: Historians used to think that economic factors were the major cause of the event.

Paragraph 2: More recent research has instead shown that political changes played a far greater role in the event.

Paragraph 3: These political changes were closely tied to the emergence of a new form of religious practice.

*etc.*

Compare these two examples, and notice how you have no idea what the first structure is really saying about anything, while the second makes a series of clear and connected points. When structuring your work, try to make sure that your paragraphs have a point and not just a topic. It will make your writing much more focused and much more analytical – the qualities that are required for the higher marks.

## Preparing your assignment for submission

Make sure that you have followed any specific instructions that you were given for your assignment before you submit it. Written work will have a specified maximum word limit, which you must strictly adhere to. The word count includes footnotes but excludes the bibliography, assignment title, and so on.

You should also aim for a good standard of presentation and layout, which makes your work easy to read:

- The exact font that you use does not matter, provided that it is clear and legible. The main body of your text should at least 12pt size; footnotes should be at least 10pt.
- Leave generous margins around your text, and at least 1.5 line spacing. Your markers will be providing comments on your text, and this leaves enough room for their feedback.
- Use footnotes throughout, following the instructions in the [Guide to Good Academic Conduct](#).
- Make sure that you include a bibliography, listing all the items you used (divided into 'primary sources' and 'secondary sources' if appropriate, and ordered alphabetically by author's surname).
- If you have been given an essay question to answer, remember to include it as the title of your essay.
- Make sure that your exam number (found on your University card) is recorded somewhere in your essay (e.g. in the header), and in the file name (e.g. B012345\_essay.doc).

## Submitting your assignments

Unless otherwise specified, your coursework should be submitted electronically into the assignment dropbox on your course's Learn site. Every Learn site should have a tab on the left-hand side named 'Assessment' (or similar), and it is here that you will find the dropbox into which you submit your work.

You will be prompted to complete a Declaration of Own Work form in order to gain access to the dropbox: this asserts your belief that the work submitted is entirely your own, and has been prepared according to the expected standards of good academic conduct.

Please ensure that you allow enough time for submission. Completing the required forms takes a little time, and the whole submission process can take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete. Trying to do this right on top of the deadline is risky, since it leaves you little extra time in case of a computing error. After all your hard work preparing your assignment, do not let any avoidable problems of this kind affect your mark!

## Receiving feedback

You will be notified when your assignments have been marked, and you can access your feedback electronically through the same system as you used to submit your work. Take the time to read your marker's feedback thoroughly, and get in touch with them if you wish to discuss an aspect of it in greater detail.

## Marking criteria

All assessed work is marked according to an agreed set of marking criteria. Your markers will be looking for you to demonstrate specific qualities and abilities in your work, and these determine the mark you receive. These qualities vary according to the year in which you are studying, and become more exacting as you progress into Honours.

The marking criteria for History assessments are as follows. Depending on the nature of the assignment, it may not be possible for every assignment to exhibit all of the listed points in the same submission; and markers therefore exercise their judgement in determining the appropriate band in which to place any given piece of work:

<b>90–100: EXCELLENT</b>	
Year 1	A highly perceptive, effectively organised and sustained analysis, with a sharp and well-developed argument. It will show consistently excellent command of both primary sources and secondary scholarship as appropriate, and show flair in its handling of complex issues, with the highest standards of presentation and citation.
Year 2	An outstandingly perceptive piece of work, with a sharp and well-developed argument. It will show consistently excellent command of both primary sources and secondary scholarship as appropriate, and show flair in its handling of complex issues, strong evidence of independent judgement throughout, and the highest standards of presentation and citation.
Honours	Exceptional work of a quality comparable to that of published scholarship, that engages in sophisticated and multifaceted argumentation, showing far-reaching insight and independence of thought in addition to an exceptional command of both primary sources and secondary scholarship and the highest standards of presentation and citation.

<b>80–89: EXCELLENT</b>	
Year 1	A sharply focused and well organised response to the question, that addresses the key points that relate to the topic as part of a sustained argument. It will show control of primary sources and/or secondary scholarship as appropriate, and be well expressed, with excellent attention to presentation and referencing.
Year 2	A perceptive, well organised and sustained analysis that addresses all the key considerations that relate to the question as part of a sustained argument. It will show an excellent command of primary sources and secondary scholarship, and exhibit evidence of independent judgement, and the highest standards of citation and referencing.

Honours	An outstandingly perceptive piece of work, with a sharp and well-developed argument. It will handle primary sources and secondary scholarship with acuity, and show strong evidence of independent judgement, and exhibit a professional attitude to presentation, exposition and citation.
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**70-79: EXCELLENT**

Year 1	A focused and generally sustained response to the question, covering the key points that relate to the topic with accuracy. It will marshal its evidence clearly and effectively, be well expressed, and show excellent attention to presentation and referencing.
Year 2	A focused and well organised response to the question, with a sustained and well-expressed argument that addresses the key considerations raised by the question. It will show a good control of evidence and show excellent attention to presentation and referencing.
Honours	A focused and perceptive analysis of the question, with a well-developed argument that addresses all of the key considerations raised by the question. It will show excellent command of primary sources and secondary scholarship as appropriate, an ability to exercise independent judgement, and excellent standards of citation and referencing.

**60-69: VERY GOOD**

Year 1	A generally well-organised and well-written response to the question, which identifies most of the key considerations that relate to the topic, although some aspects of the topic may have been overlooked. It will demonstrate a very good knowledge and understanding of its material, demonstrate an ability to marshal evidence in support of its main points, and show very good standards of referencing.
Year 2	An effective and organised response to the question that covers most of the key considerations raised by the question and addresses most of the key considerations raised by the question, although some additional issues may have been overlooked. It will demonstrate a very good knowledge and understanding of its material, demonstrate an ability to marshal evidence in support of its main points, and show very good standards of presentation and referencing.
Honours	An effective and sustained response to the question that addresses most of the key considerations raised by the question. It will demonstrate a very good knowledge and understanding of its material, a very good engagement with primary sources and secondary scholarship as appropriate, and very good standards of presentation and referencing.

**50-59: GOOD**

Year 1	A satisfactory response to the question, which addresses some of the key considerations that relate to the topic. It will show a generally sound knowledge and understanding of its material, but may be lacking in focus and tending towards description or narrative rather than analysis. It will show a general attention towards the marshalling of evidence, but may also lapse into assertion on some occasions. Its written expression and organisation of material will be generally good, but there may also be sections which are marred by a lack of clarity.
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Year 2	A satisfactory response to the question, which addresses several of the key considerations that relate to the topic. It will show a generally sound knowledge of its material, but may lack focus on the question itself and tend instead towards description or narrative rather than analysis. It will show a general attention towards the marshalling of evidence, but may also lapse into assertion on some occasions. Its written expression and organisation of material will be generally good, but there may also be sections which are marred by a lack of clarity.
Honours	A satisfactory response to the question, which addresses a range of the key considerations that relate to the topic. It will show a sound knowledge of its material, but may lack focus on the question itself and tend instead towards description or narrative rather than analysis. It will show a general ability to handle primary and/or secondary evidence, but there may also be deficiencies in the evidence used to support its observations. Its written expression and organisation of material will be generally good, but there may also be sections which are unclear or of limited relevance to the question.

<b>40-49: PASS</b>	
Year 1	Work which is adequate but limited. It will show a general attempt to engage with the topic in an appropriate manner, and it may discuss some aspects of the topic competently; but other aspects will be ignored or neglected due to factual inaccuracy, or problems in identifying the key issues which pertain to the topic. It may engage only to a limited extent with its evidence, may be poorly expressed, and show a limited understanding of the expectations of scholarly citation and referencing.
Year 2	Work which is adequate but limited. It will show a general attempt to engage with the topic in an appropriate manner, and it may discuss some aspects of the topic competently; but other aspects will be ignored or neglected due to omissions in the reading, factual inaccuracy, or problems in identifying the key issues which pertain to the topic. It may engage only to a limited extent with its evidence, may be poorly expressed, and show a limited understanding of the expectations of scholarly citation and referencing.
Honours	Work which is adequate but limited. It will show a general understanding of the topic, but some aspects of the topic will have been ignored or neglected due to omissions in the reading, factual inaccuracy, or problems in identifying the key issues which pertain to the question. It may show some familiarity with the primary and secondary evidence which relates to the topic, but engage only weakly with it. It is likely also to be poorly expressed and show a lack of attention towards the standards of scholarly presentation and citation.

<b>30-39: MARGINAL FAIL</b>	
Year 1	A poor-quality submission with very limited relevance, or understanding of, the topic. Its discussion may be extremely generalised or show little attempt to engage with relevant material.
Year 2	A poor-quality submission with limited relevance to, or understanding of, the topic. Its discussion may be largely generalised or show little attempt to engage with relevant material.
Honours	A poor-quality submission with limited relevance to, or understanding of, the topic. Its discussion may be extremely generalised and show little attempt to engage with relevant primary or secondary material.

<b>20–29: CLEAR FAIL</b>	
Year 1	A very poor-quality submission with little or no relevance to the topic and little indication of engagement with appropriate material.
Year 2	A very poor-quality submission with little relevance to the topic and little indication of engagement with appropriate material.
Honours	A very poor-quality submission with little relevance to the topic and little awareness of appropriate primary or secondary material.

<b>10–19: BAD FAIL</b>	
Year 1	An incomplete or otherwise very unsatisfactory submission, reflecting very little familiarity with the topic.
Year 2	An incomplete or otherwise very unsatisfactory submission, reflecting little familiarity with the topic.
Honours	A submission of very little academic merit, reflecting little understanding of the topic, and wholly inadequate in its engagement with the evidence.

<b>0–9: BAD FAIL</b>	
Year 1	A largely incomplete submission with absolutely no relevance to the question.
Year 2	A largely incomplete submission with absolutely no relevance to the question.
Honours	A submission which, for whatever reason, shows absolutely no relevance to the question.

## Eight tips to get you started

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1. **Get organised.** Familiarize yourself with [Learn](#) and the [University library](#) early on. Put together a weekly timetable for all your classes (lectures, tutorials, etc) and block out times in which to prepare for each of them. Look up any deadlines at the start of the semester and put them in your diary.
2. **Check your University email at least once a day.** Your University email address is the way that the University of Edinburgh, the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, and your lecturers and tutors will contact you throughout your time here. Information about courses, deadlines and other important matters are all communicated electronically, so make sure that you do not miss out. (You can set up your University email to forward to a personal email address if you prefer; follow [this link](#) for instructions.)
3. **Attend all classes.** Attendance at tutorials and seminars is compulsory, and registers are taken. Any other classes in which registers are not taken (for example lectures) are still essential parts of your courses, which have been designed and scheduled precisely to help you with your assignments and tutorials, so it is in your interests to attend them.
4. **Be prepared!** You are expected to prepare for all your classes, so develop good habits early on. Working in regular, manageable chunks will make it easier to keep on top of things, and will help to reduce stress when your deadlines or exams approach.
5. **Study with other students.** Sharing knowledge and ideas helps everyone! Reach out to your fellow students in your lectures, tutorials, or accommodation, and consider setting up informal study groups or similar to help you support each other in your courses.
6. **Contribute to the discussion.** You will always get more out of your courses when you participate to discussions in tutorials or seminars. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and always take notes too – but remember that getting involved in the conversation is the critical thing. It gives you the first opportunity to try out your ideas and thoughts in a supportive setting, and to build on them with the help of your tutors and fellow students.
7. **Follow the principles of 'Good Academic Conduct'.** All students are expected to adhere to 'good academic conduct' in their submitted work: writing in your own words, with any quotations clearly marked as such; referencing where you are getting your facts, ideas and arguments from; and acknowledging any help that you have got from anyone else. A student-friendly Guide to Good Academic Conduct is [available here](#).
8. **Be proactive in seeking out feedback and advice.** Speak to your tutors – in class, during their office hours, and on any other occasions in which they offer opportunities to discuss your work. On most courses, you can usually show them a plan before your coursework is due to get their comments on it. But make sure that you have given *some* thought to your assignment before seeking them out: it is not your tutor's job to plan your essay for you. If you come well prepared, tutors will always be happy to give advice.

## Where to find more information

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The School's website has a section with [Information for Current Undergraduates](#), which contains a wealth of information related to your studies. This is often the best place to consult first if you have questions about your studies.

All the University's online resources that you will need for your studies can be accessed through [MyEd](#), the University's web portal.

Every undergraduate at the University has a Personal Tutor, who is a member of the teaching staff who provides academic guidance and support. When you have been assigned your Personal Tutor, you can contact them directly whenever you wish; and you can find more information about the Personal Tutor system [via this link](#).

The [Student Support Office](#) can provide further advice and support on a range of matters, and can always serve as a first point of contact in any situation that arises. It is located in Room G.08 on the Ground Floor of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, and you can also reach the team by emailing [hca-ssso@ed.ac.uk](mailto:hca-ssso@ed.ac.uk).

[The Advice Place](#) is part of the Edinburgh University Students' Association, and is another excellent place to seek help and advice outside the School. It is located in Potterrow on Bristo Square, or you can email [advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk](mailto:advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk).