



## **HISTORY 710: WRITING THE PAST: HOW HISTORIANS TELL STORIES**

<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/501760>

### **Instructor Details:**

**Prof. Kathryn Ciancia (she/her)**

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**Office hours:** Tuesdays, 1-3pm, or by appointment

**Prof. Steve Kantrowitz (he/him)**

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**Office number:** 5119 Humanities Building

**Office hours:** Tuesdays, 1:30-3:30pm

Both of us will generally hold our office hours in-person. If there is a reason for office hours to be held on zoom, we can meet in our virtual zoom rooms (links on Canvas).

### **Course Details:**

**Semester**

Spring 2026

**Course Designations and Attributes**

Counts toward 50% graduate coursework requirement

**Requisites**

Graduate/professional standing and consent of instructors

**Student Workload and Credit Information**

This is a three-credit course. The credit standard is met by an expectation of at least 45 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities for each credit (3 credits = at least 135 hours). For all students, these activities will include group seminar meetings of 115 minutes per week, as well as other course activities and assignments (reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, etc.). To fulfill College requirements for this three-credit class, all students must meet with either Professor Ciancia or Professor Kantrowitz at least once during the semester.

## **Meeting Time and Place**

Wednesdays, 11am-12:55pm, 5257 Mosse Humanities Building

## **Instructional Modality**

This is an in-person class.

## **Course description:**

Historians are storytellers. But there is no single way to tell a story. This class demystifies the act of historical storytelling by engaging with an array of texts that experiment with narrative in different ways. We'll pay attention to questions such as: Where do we begin—and end—the story? How do we gain the trust of our readers? How do we balance narrative and analysis? What genres (e.g., the murder mystery) might we borrow from? And where is the line between fiction and history? It is our hope—as two instructors who continue to wrestle with the joys and challenges of writing stories—that students will leave the class both excited about the possible pathways forward for their own work and more prepared about how to navigate them.

## **Learning Outcomes:**

1. To recognize and analyze the various decisions that historians make in crafting narratives.
2. To apply the techniques learned in the class to one's own work.
3. To work collaboratively and through peer review to evaluate pros and cons of making various decisions about how to write narrative history.
4. To improve communication skills in both a) oral, and b) written presentation with a keen sense of the audience to whom we are presenting.

## **Methods of Assessment:**

### **1. ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS (40% of total grade)**

**a) Class participation (30%):** You should come to each seminar meeting prepared to participate regularly and enthusiastically in the discussions, listening to your peers and articulating your own ideas as clearly as possible. Your comments should demonstrate that you have prepared carefully and are thinking independently. Inconsistent performance in one or more of these areas will reduce your participation grade.

**b) Discussion leading (5%):** You will work in pairs to lead discussion for one week of the semester (between weeks 4 and 12). Look at the syllabus and consider the week in which you would like to lead discussion.

**c) Presentations (5%):** You will give short presentations in class based on your work for assignments #2 and #3 (see details below).

### **2. WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS (60% of total grade)**

#### **Assignment #1 (10% of total grade):**

**Learning outcome:** Recognize and analyze the various decisions that historians make in crafting narratives.

**Assignment instructions:** Analyze a section (a chapter or substantial sub-section of a chapter) of one of the books for weeks 3 (Demuth) or 4 (Zemon Davis). In your short essay (750 words), you

should identify and evaluate the effectiveness of the decisions that the author made to construct a narrative.

**Submission details:** The assignment will be due on Canvas at the beginning of the class in which the text will be discussed.

**Assignment #2 (20% of total grade):**

**Learning outcome:** Recognize and analyze the various decisions that historians make in crafting narratives and apply the techniques learned in the class to one's own work.

**Assignment instructions:** Select one of the texts we read for weeks 5-10 (but if you choose to write on week 4 for Assignment #1, consider that you will want to wait for feedback on that assignment before writing this one).

In about 2,000 words total, you should:

- a) Describe and evaluate at least one of the techniques that the writer has used, as you did on Assignment #1 (around 750 words);
- b) create a short narrative piece in your voice as the author in which you use a similar technique (or techniques) in relation to your own writing. This may be an original narrative based on your own research, a synthesis based on existing scholarship, or some combination of these (around 750 words);
- c) Evaluate what this technique (or techniques) adds to the effectiveness of your narrative (around 500 words).

**Submission details:** The full assignment is due on Canvas at the beginning of the class in which the text will be discussed. In addition, 24 hours prior to the seminar meeting (i.e., Tuesday at 11am), you should cut and paste **part b** to the course discussion board for the relevant week and come prepared with a five-minute discussion of your purposes and methods. All students should carefully read what is on the discussion board prior to the beginning of the seminar and come prepared with questions and comments.

**Assignment #3 (30% of total grade):**

**Learning outcome:** Apply the techniques learned in the class to one's own work and reflect on their effectiveness.

**Assignment instructions:** In consultation with the instructors, select several primary and/or secondary sources in your own field and write two related pieces of work:

- a) A narrative piece in which you tell a story using those documents. You can either create one narrative (max. 1000 words) or experiment with two different ways of telling the story (total 1000-1250 words).
- b) An accompanying piece in which you reflect on why you made certain decisions about how to tell the story/apply certain techniques. Explain these choices and the pros and cons of making them and discuss how you were influenced by 3-5 class readings. How might the story have been different had you made other choices? If you choose to write two variations, how is the story different in the two versions? (1000-1250 words)

**Submission details:** The assignment is due on Canvas by no later than 5pm on Tuesday, May 5.

### **Grading Scale:**

A = 92.5-100  
AB = 87.5-92.4  
B = 82.5-87.4  
BC = 77.5-82.4  
C = 70-77.4  
D = 60-69.9  
F = below 60

### **Weekly Reading Assignments**

Note that all texts are available as books (on reserve at College Library) or as scans on Canvas.

#### **Week 1, January 21: Introductions**

*Preparation for class:*

- Everyone should submit a section (maximum five pages, but do not feel obligated to find a five-page section!) of their favorite work of scholarly narrative history to the shared Google drive and add the citation/instructions to the Google doc (see email instructions) by noon the day before class (i.e., Tuesday, January 20).
- We should all read everyone's section ahead of class. Please come to class prepared to discuss what makes this a compelling piece of narrative and to ask questions about the sections chosen by others.

*Readings:*

- No assigned readings.

#### **Week 2, January 28: Telling the Story and Reflecting on the Story**

*Readings:*

- Sylvia Sellers-Garcia, *The Woman on the Windowsill: A Tale of Mystery in Several Parts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).
- Sarah Balakrishnan, "Colonizing Accra: Experiments in Storytelling," *American Historical Review* 130, no. 4 (2025): 1677–1689.

### **PART I: SCALES AND PERSPECTIVES**

#### **Week 3, February 4: Environments**

*Readings:*

- Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).
- Listen to Bathsheba Demuth talk about writing the book on the *Drafting the Past* podcast: <https://draftingthepast.com/podcast-episodes/episode-3-bathsheba-demuth-evokes-a-place/>
- William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 4 (1992): 1347-1376.

#### **Week 4, February 11: Microhistories**

##### *Readings:*

- Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 553–571.
- Natalie Zemon Davis, “On the Lame,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 572–603.
- Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1984): 1–33.

#### **Week 5, February 18: Biography**

##### *Readings:*

- Anthony Kaye and Greg Downs, *Nat Turner, Black Prophet: A Visionary History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).
- Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129–44.

#### **Week 6, February 25: In-Between People and Places**

##### *Readings:*

- Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
- Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): Introduction and Chapter 1: “Inventory” (pp. 1–51).
- Paul Lawrence, “Nationalism and Historical Writing,” in John Breuilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2013).

### **PART II: THE HISTORIAN IN AND OUT OF THE STORY**

#### **Week 7, March 4: The Historian in the Story**

##### *Readings:*

- Joe Moran, “The Death of an Irishman: A Speculative Biography,” *History Workshop Journal* 98 (Autumn 2024): 209–233.
- Ariel Mae Lambe, “Seeing Madness in the Archives,” *American Historical Review* 127, no. 3 (2022): 1381–1391.
- Marius Kothor, “‘The Rooster Says There Is Life in Fear’: State Terror, Open Silences, and Historical Memory in Togo,” *American Historical Review* 130, no. 3 (2025): 1134–1145.
- Listen to: “History in Focus Podcast: Mistakes I have Made:”  
<https://www.historians.org/podcast/mistakes-i-have-made/>

#### **Week 8, March 11: Who Can Tell the Story?**

##### *Readings:*

- Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Wild Men: Ishi and Kroeber in the Wilderness of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- William Bauer, “Stop Hunting Ishi,” *Boom: A Journal of California* 4, no. 3 (2014): 46–50.

- William Bauer, Dmitri Brown, Keith L Camacho, Elizabeth Ellis, Katrina M Phillips, Joshua L Reid, “Methodologies in Indigenous History,” *American Historical Review* 130, no. 4 (2025): 1587–1614.

### **Week 9, March 18: The Historian Writing Violence**

#### *Readings:*

- J. P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2023).
- Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): Chapter 5 (pp. 124-43).

## **PART III: STORIES OF MATERIALS**

### **Week 10, March 25: Global Stories: Transnational v. Comparative**

#### *Readings:*

- Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- Kate Brown, “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17–48.

## **\*\*SPRING BREAK\*\***

### **Week 11, April 8: The History of a Singular Object**

#### *Readings:*

- Tiya Miles, *All that She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021).

## **PART IV: BREAKING THE FRAME**

### **Week 12, April 15: Beyond the Monograph**

#### *Readings:*

- Kate Masur and Liz Clarke, *Freedom Was in Sight: A Graphic History of Reconstruction in the Washington, D.C. Region* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2024).
- Rachel Cockerell, *Melting Point: Family, Memory, and the Search for a Promised Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025): Author’s Note, Preface, Chapters 1-5, Acknowledgements, Selected Bibliography, and Notes (xi, 1-66, 353-370).

### **Week 13, April 22: What We Can (and Cannot) Know**

#### *Readings:*

- Ian McEwan, *What we Can Know: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 2025).

### **Week 14, April 29: Final Presentations/Wrap-Up Discussion**

#### *Readings:*

- “The Writing of History” (1926), AHA Committee Report:  
<https://www.historians.org/resource/the-writing-of-history/>

## Appendix A: An Inclusive Classroom

We seek to create an inclusive classroom in which all can thrive and in which everyone's well-being is supported and fostered. Please read the following information on how we can work together to ensure that everyone is welcome and that you know the resources that can help you gain help outside of our classroom setting.

### Students with Disabilities

The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. We will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA. (See: McBurney Disability Resource Center).

### Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals.

As a class community, we should work together in order to create a supportive space for everyone. None of us should tolerate racism. We also ask that we all commit to listening to feedback and to reflecting on our own attitudes and actions.

### Pronouns

Pronouns matter—they say a lot about who we are and how we want others to treat us. Using gendered language conscientiously is one small way we can show respect to each other as individuals and make UW a warm, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all members of the campus community. A feature is available in Canvas that enables all students, faculty and staff (with Canvas accounts) to indicate their gender pronouns in use.

### Mental Health and Wellbeing

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others.

Students are encouraged to learn about and utilize UW-Madison's mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Visit [uhs.wisc.edu](http://uhs.wisc.edu) or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.

### Violence Prevention

All students deserve to be safe and respected at UW-Madison. Unfortunately, we know that sexual and relationship violence do happen here. Free, confidential resources are available on and off campus for students impacted by sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, and stalking (regardless of when the violence occurred). You don't have to label your experience to seek help.

Friends of survivors can reach out for support too. A list of resources can be found at <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/survivor-resources/>.

## **Appendix B: Further Resources and Policies**

### **The Use of Artificial Intelligence**

*Our take:* Some people find that generative AI technology, such as ChatGPT, can be a useful tool in thinking through a question, generating ideas, planning an essay, and even writing. However, there is much that is lost when we rely on AI in these ways—and we need to be aware of the loss, as well as the presumed benefits. Not only is AI prone to “hallucinations” (i.e., the fabrication of information) and liable to reproduce larger societal biases, but it also deprives us of engaging in some of the creative processes that allow us to think for ourselves—not least the process of thinking that is deeply entwined with the process of writing (and not simply editing the writing that a chatbot has created)—in other words, precisely the process that this class is all about!

*Our policy:* While we deem it to be acceptable to bounce ideas off the chatbot or even use it to think about possible structures for your work, if you find this process generative in some way, using a chatbot to produce text *for* you, even as a first draft, will not allow you to achieve the goals for this class, which include becoming an original writer and thinker. If not properly cited, it will also be considered plagiarism, which is a serious form of academic misconduct (see below). If you want to use AI, you need to learn how to cite it (see [here](#) for instructions from the Chicago Manual of Style, which is the citation style to use in all your papers for this class).

### **Academic Integrity Statement**

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

### **Late Work**

If you are facing circumstances that make it difficult to get work in by the stated deadline, please email both Prof. Ciancia and Prof. Kantrowitz as early as possible to discuss whether an extension is permissible. Late work will otherwise be graded down by 2 percentage points a day (see grading scale above).

### **Office Hours**

Our office hours are posted at the top of the syllabus. Please come by! These hours are set aside specifically for students, and we would be happy to discuss any aspect of the class with you. If you are unable to make these times, please send either one of us an email so that we can set up a mutually convenient appointment time.

### **Email Protocol**

If you have questions for Professors Ciancia and/or Kantrowitz, please email one and CC the other. You can expect a response within 24-48 hours on weekdays, depending on the complexity of the question.

### **Technology**

You may, if you wish, use a laptop in this course. If you do, you must turn off the internet connection before class begins. You may not turn it back on until the period is over. Phones and

other devices—watches, tablets, etc.—must be silenced and set not to vibrate or send notifications (on an iPhone, for example, use the “do not disturb” setting). They must be placed out of sight and out of reach. The only exception to this policy is for documented accommodations.

### Timekeeping

We will begin class on time, so please make sure that you arrive a few minutes early. Persistent tardiness (as well as not letting us know if you are going to be absent) leads to a lower participation grade.

### Illness and Absence

If you are unable to attend in-person class meetings for reasons of health or other unavoidable circumstances, you should contact us. Do not come to class if you are sick.

### Privacy of Student Information & Digital Tools

The privacy and security of faculty, staff and students’ personal information is a top priority for UW-Madison. The university carefully reviews and vets all campus-supported digital tools used to support teaching and learning, to help support success through learning analytics, and to enable proctoring capabilities. UW-Madison takes necessary steps to ensure that the providers of such tools prioritize proper handling of sensitive data in alignment with FERPA, industry standards and best practices.

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA which protects the privacy of student education records), student consent is not required for the university to share with school officials those student education records necessary for carrying out those university functions in which they have legitimate educational interest. 34 CFR 99.31(a)(1)(i)(B). FERPA specifically allows universities to designate vendors such as digital tool providers as school officials, and accordingly to share with them personally identifiable information from student education records if they perform appropriate services for the university and are subject to all applicable requirements governing the use, disclosure and protection of student data.

### Students’ Rules, Rights, and Responsibilities

See [here](#) for a useful guide.

### Academic Calendar: Religious Observances and Election Day Observances

Students must notify us within the first two weeks of class of the specific days or dates on which they request relief, either for a religious observance or because of their commitment to work as an election official. We will also provide flexibility to students reporting they may be tardy or absent on the day of an election due to waiting to vote at the polls.

### Course Evaluations

You will be provided with an opportunity to evaluate this course and your learning experience. We really value your feedback—it helps us reflect on what is working and what we might consider changing. As such, it also benefits future groups of students. Note that UW-Madison uses an online course evaluation survey tool, HelioCampus. In most instances, you will receive an official email two weeks prior to the end of the semester when your course evaluation is available. You will receive a link to log into the course evaluation with your NetID where you can complete the evaluation and submit it, anonymously.