

Are you ready for Graduate School?

While there are many rewards to be gained through a graduate education, it also takes a great deal of commitment, and many students start graduate studies without taking stock of what is entailed. Therefore, you should ask yourself some of the following questions:

Do I have a solid enough grounding in the field to do well in graduate school?

The critical difference between undergraduate education and graduate work is the transition from being a “consumer” of research produced by others and becoming a trained professional ready to produce their own work and research. Graduate classes assume that students have had the basics and are ready to build on them. Instructors assume that students are familiar with the basics of topics covered in 100-level courses such as U.S. History, World History, and/or Western Civilization. If you have not had those courses recently, you will do yourself a great favor by taking them or retaking them prior to coming to graduate studies. At the graduate level, the faculty take little interest in remedial education. It is assumed that you have a strong grounding in the material covered in survey courses, as well as a familiarity with proper citation/bibliographic techniques. For historians, that means following the Chicago Manual of Style/Turabian format for notes and bibliographies. Another critical characteristic of successful candidates is motivation. Completing a graduate degree is a long and arduous process, and ‘self-starters’ who are willing to put in the required time and effort are the ones who tend to finish the program.

What do I want to do with my degree?

Graduate school is an expensive and inappropriate place to “find yourself.” Those who come in with vague goals tend to have trouble getting through. Knowing what to do with that graduate degree, whether it is working towards a Ph.D., entry into the work world, an enhanced certification in one’s current job, or for personal enrichment, will help you shape and develop your graduate career. If you are not sure what to do, talk to the department’s graduate coordinator.

Is my everyday life ready for the demands of graduate school?

Graduate studies are not for everyone. Are you already working 40+ hours a week? Are you caring for young children or aging parents? Do you have a full schedule already packed with civic or social activities and obligations? Are you anticipating a major life change? While some people have successfully balanced career, family, and graduate school, it is a lot harder than most realize. Each student needs to assess the amount of time they can realistically devote to graduate studies.

Contrary to the ads we see on television, **quality** graduate education demands more than just the occasional class on evenings or weekends. It requires a reallocation of priorities and is not something that can just be added to an already full schedule. Other activities and obligations **do** and **should** take a back seat – usually for 2 years or more. If personal issues are pressing, it may

be better to hold off on graduate studies until you have the time and energy to give all of your goals the attention they deserve.

This department believes that in-class time with the instructor and fellow students is the best way to learn the material. In addition, graduate classes assume a student will spend at least 3 hours a week outside of class **per hour** of graduate class. A 3-credit hour class assumes at least 9 hours of work outside of class. Therefore, each class one takes adds 12 hours to the workweek. Students are expected to meet the requirements of the class, regardless of other family or work obligations. Moreover, graduate education is about developing ties with other professionals. Graduate students are expected to attend conferences, present papers at these conferences, attend workshops, and play an active role in department, college, and university activities.

We want our students to succeed and do well. We want them to have an experience that is fulfilling and challenging. Toward that goal, we want to make sure that students are prepared so that they can make the most of their graduate experience at WSU.

The M.A. degree in History.

Why pursue a Master's degree?

M.A. candidates usually come to us for one of three basic reasons. 1) They are teachers seeking to supplement their knowledge of historical content and process. 2) They are interested in Local/Community history, and want the credentials to seek a job that requires extensive historical knowledge, such as with a museum or historical society. 3) They hope to pursue a career in academia, and want to improve their research and writing skills to allow them to apply to a Ph.D. program in the humanities at another institution. 4) Some applicants simply like history, and wish to study it further. They would pursue the track that best fits their personal interests.

The program offers two basic tracks for the M.A. – thesis and non-thesis. **See below.** Typically, candidates from group 1 choose the non-thesis track, which places more emphasis on coursework. They will however complete original research in History 725, and possibly in seminar courses. Non-thesis students are required to pass two comprehensive exams (see below), whereas thesis students take only one. Local/Community history candidates usually take the thesis option, though in some circumstances, in consultation with their advisor, they may choose a non-thesis plan. Students hoping to advance to a Ph.D. program are strongly encouraged to take the thesis route, in order to develop the research and writing skills that would be critical for success in such a program. Furthermore, if the plotting and execution of an original research piece of approximately 100 pages is overly daunting or unpleasant, a Ph.D. program is not for you. Because reading knowledge of foreign languages is a requirement for admission to Ph.D. programs, all thesis-track candidates (excepting Local/Community history ones) are required to pass one foreign language reading exam – administered by the department of Modern and Classical Languages – **prior** to taking their comprehensive exam.

Building relationships for the future

Especially in graduate school, there are no unimportant courses, and you should seize the opportunity to repeatedly demonstrate your zeal and skill to faculty as well as your fellow students. In addition to mastering historical content and skills, a graduate degree is also an important opportunity to forge relationships with people who can be crucial to your future success, whether you continue in academia or immediately enter the job market. Whatever path you choose, you will need references and letters of recommendation – for jobs, admission to other programs, grant and fellowship applications, or even security background checks. Employers and scholars want people who have demonstrated the following basic qualities:

- 1) *Drive/sense of purpose.* Simply showing up consistently, on time and ready to work, is perhaps the most important quality for a potential hire or school admission. Particularly in graduate programs, those who **want** to finish and display the determination to do so tend to be successful, while those with indifferent commitment, regardless of talent, tend to fall by the wayside.
- 2) *Clarity of goals.* The people you need to impress **are looking for an excuse** not to hire/admit you, because there are scores of applicants seeking your spot. Figure out what you want from your degree program, and pursue it with a vengeance.
- 3) *Individual initiative.* Self-starters only need apply. {Think about it. By definition, historians tend to work alone, and should be ready, willing, and able to track down sources and answer questions.} Syllabi, course catalogs, and academic calendars are a good example. Asking the professor a question that is answered on the syllabus is an excellent way to signal that you are not ready for graduate study. Especially in today's economic climate, academic admissions and job markets are hyper competitive. Asking one of the faculty a question that you could have answered in a few seconds on the department website, admitting that you did not read that day's assignment, or showing indifference to your work, are all potentially damaging to your reputation.
- 4) *Poise and people skills.* A.K.A., professionalism. While historians usually work alone, we do not live in a vacuum. Whether with classmates, university staff, librarians, or faculty, you need to be able to communicate properly (i.e., grammatically) and respectfully (tone). Any communication should begin with an honorific (e.g., Dr., or Professor). There is no such thing as a casual conversation (or email) with a faculty member. Each day presents innumerable opportunities to demonstrate your fitness (or lack thereof) for scholarship.
- 5) *Planning skills.* The old adage that "failing to plan is planning to fail," while trite, is nonetheless true. Study course syllabi, the graduate catalog and academic calendars with care. Semesters have a rhythm to them, and while there may be periods of relatively light work, those are times when you need to get a jump on tasks and projects that will require more time and effort. (This is one of the challenges of the academic – you are never really *done*.) Successful students plan for unpleasant contingencies. Anyone can have

family emergencies or health issues crop up, but those who have worked steadily give themselves insurance (and faculty goodwill) for such times.

- 6) *Maturity*. Responsible adults show the above skills, and develop them on their own without being told.
- 7) *Writing skills*. The ability to synthesize source materials and turn them into clear, compelling prose is perhaps the most important concrete skill one can develop in a History M.A. program. Businesses, Ph.D. programs, museums and others absolutely require clarity in reports, papers, and exhibitions. Take any writing assignment, regardless of length or grade weight, *seriously*. It is an opportunity to hone your abilities as a writer, not a short-term annoyance to be dispatched with quickly.

Regardless of your academic focus, seize the opportunity to make a positive impression on as many of the faculty as you can. We often speak of the dangers of “majoring in a professor” – taking the vast bulk of one’s classes with one member of the faculty. Aside from imposing a pedagogical narrowness on your education, doing so drastically limits your pool of possible recommenders. You want to project intellectual strength and confidence. Remember that academia is a surprisingly small, interconnected web of relationships. You have no way of knowing who was an old school chum of, or conference panel member with, whom. Make as many positive impressions as you can. Remember that, in the words of one of our alums, “it is not what you know or who you know, but who knows you.”

Comprehensive Exams

Comprehensive exams require candidates to display a mastery of secondary sources and scholarship beyond that expected of undergraduates, hence, a “Master’s” degree. They ask questions that, should you be unable to answer them adequately, would be embarrassing both for you and the program. The department offers comprehensive written exams in the fields of American, Modern European, Ancient/Medieval, and Local/Community history. Exams are typically about four hours each, and may be written in bluebooks or typed on a computer. The exams are in essay format, often with three or four sections – usually with a choice of question in each section. Many faculty advise that one bluebook per answer is a good rule of thumb for such broad questions. Students should contact two History faculty members to form each exam committee, and will need to use the Department’s Comprehensive Exam Request Form (see link on Department’s Graduate webpage). Choose faculty with whom you have taken coursework, and be sure to meet with them to discuss expectations and study strategies for the exam.

Thesis track students must pass **one** comprehensive exam after the completion of their 500-700 level coursework and their foreign language competency exam. (Local/Community History students do not need the language exam.)

Non-thesis students must pass **two** separate comprehensive exams, and then submit a **degree completion form** to the Graduate School.

Exams are graded on a pass/fail basis. Should the committee disagree on the exam's result, an oral exam based on the written exam questions with the same two faculty will take place within the same semester. A student who fails any combination of three comprehensive exams will be summarily dismissed from the M.A. program.

Thesis

Upon passing the comprehensive exam, thesis student then sign up (through their instructor) for two hours of History 801 (Thesis Research) and two hours of History 802 (Thesis Writing). These courses do not involve classroom work or specific assignments, but rather base the grade upon the instructor's assessment of your progress. Students could conceivably take 801 and 802 simultaneously, but you **must** be enrolled in at least one hour of coursework the semester you graduate – and do not forget to submit your **degree completion form** to the graduate school.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Graduate Program

Q: What is the difference between a “content course” and a “seminar?”

A: A “content course” (numbered 500 or 600) explores a particular era or subject in depth, providing factual information and an introduction to the relevant issues related to the specific content. Seminars (number 700) assume students have a basic understanding of the topics being covered and go into more depth on issues, debates, and differing scholarly perspectives on given topics. While content courses cover basically the same material each time they are offered, every seminar is unique and topics vary from instructor to instructor and even semester to semester. (By definition, seminars will lean heavily on readings and group discussions, as opposed to lectures.) Further, seminars may be devoted to readings from an historical era – post-WWII Europe, the American Revolution, etc., or may be original research seminars (this is up to the professor) geared towards producing a paper that is based in primary source material and potentially publishable at a future date.

Q: What are the differences between HIST 730 and HIST 733?

A: HIST 730 is a seminar based on the history of the Americas, while HIST 733 refers to a seminar based on historical subjects outside the Americas, typically Europe.

Q: What is a “blue card course” and how do I enroll in one?

A: “Blue card” is a nostalgic term from when such courses were processed on blue paper cards. A blue card course is an independent study course that a student arranges with an individual instructor rather than a pre-scheduled class with a classroom and other students. This could be based on a standard catalog course not currently being offered, but also includes reading courses (HIST 727), special topics (HIST 810), internship (HIST 803), and thesis-related courses (HIST 801 and HIST 802). In each of these, the enrollment process is the same: 1) Contact the instructor about taking the course, typically through email. 2) The instructor emails the particulars of the class to the department's administrative assistant, who then gets the student enrolled. Please note that the communication must include the student's Shocker I.D. number.

- **Students on Financial Aid: Please note that, unlike standard courses, enrollment in blue cards is not instantaneous. While usually not a problem for the fall semester, waiting until January to contact your instructor for a spring blue card – for**

example, one's thesis hours – can fool Financial Aid into thinking you are not registered for sufficient hours, and cause a delay in your funding. You are strongly advised to request the blue card from your professor in the November prior to avoid this problem.

Q: How do I know when I am ready to take comprehensive exams?

A: Non-thesis students – once you have completed all of your 500-700 level courses, and met with your exam committees to discuss expectations, you may begin as soon as you feel prepared. For thesis track (excluding Local/Community History) students, you must pass a foreign language competency exam **before** taking your comprehensive exam, in addition to completing all of your 500-700 level coursework. **All candidates:** By the time you have taken a significant part of your coursework, you should have a sense of the major eras and topics of your selected field(s). **Start paying attention to what your strengths and weaknesses are.** Filing a plan of study with the graduate advisor is a good time to assess this. Another way is to draw up a chart. On one axis, list the major eras and time periods of the field you are studying. On the other axis, list the topics (political, social, economic, cultural, military). See how well you can fill out the chart. That will tell you what you need to emphasize in your remaining classes. HIST 727 – Independent Readings – is an excellent opportunity to fill in gaps in your knowledge.

Q: What are comprehensive exams like?

A: While the specific content and structure vary with the instructors writing the exam, the basic format will cover broad concepts and will involve essays discussing terms and concepts. Students will be expected to know the basic facts and issues of topics discussed and should be prepared to explore the historiographical literature on the topics as well. This is more than just a regurgitation of facts. Students should be able to prove that they are sufficiently knowledgeable about a topic to be conversant in it. There is no set length to the essays, although they should be expected to cover several pages in length. Four hours is the typical time limit, though this will vary by committee. *Comprehensive exams are only given in the two-week windows following Fall Break and Spring Break.* **Students must print out and utilize the comprehensive exam request form – see Graduate page of the History Department website - for each exam.**

Q: Can I take the comprehensive exam and defend my thesis in the same semester?

A: Technically, yes, but it usually proves to be a bad idea. The exam will be challenging enough – and is taken mid-semester – and writing a thesis is certainly deserving of an entire semester. Most M.A. candidates have never completed a project on the scope of their thesis before, and it can prove challenging as well as time consuming.

Q: What is the difference between History 801 and 802?

A: History 801 – Thesis Research – is typically taken through your advisor – as a blue card – while you are performing the initial work on your thesis, after finishing your coursework. It allows you to remain an active student for purposes of financial aid, university privileges, etc. You would sign up for 802, Thesis Writing, also through your advisor, the semester you plan to complete and defend your thesis. *You must have two hours of each to graduate, and the graduate school requires that you be enrolled in at least 1 hour of graduate studies the semester you graduate.*

Q: How many members are on a thesis committee?

A: Three: Two must be members of the History Department. One is a chair, your thesis advisor. The third member must be a WSU faculty member who is from another department. {Consult with your advisor about possible third readers.} All members must be tenured, or tenure-track members of the WSU faculty.

Q: How do I select members of my thesis committee?

A: Talk with faculty members with whom you have taken classes, especially your advisor. They can guide you in settling on a thesis topic and who might make appropriate committee members. It is up to the student to contact these faculty members.

Q: How long is a thesis and what should it cover?

A: There is no set length for a thesis, although roughly 100 pages is typical. A thesis should have an introduction, a body of several chapters, and a conclusion. To be valid, the work should discuss an unexplored (or under-explored) topic in historical scholarship, or look at an existing topic in a new way, i.e., not ‘reinvent the wheel.’ It should, with both primary and secondary source research, address a historical question (“why did ...?”) and fit into a body of literature that includes books and articles from other scholars. The point of a thesis is not only to demonstrate mastery of a topic, but to contribute to it as well.

DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

Students may follow one of three plans/tracks for a graduate degree in history: A thesis program, a non-thesis program, or a program in Local/Community History. Please note that transfer students must complete 15 hours of History at WSU.

Thesis Program:

HIST 725 – Advanced Historical Method	3 hrs.
HIST 727 – Readings in History	3 hrs.
HIST 730, 733 – Seminars (3)	9 hrs.
HIST 500 and 600-level (4)	12 hrs.
HIST 801 – Thesis Research	2 hrs.
HIST 802 – Thesis Writing	2 hrs.

Total = 31 hrs.

[Note: Per Graduate School requirements, at least 60% of hours must be taken at the 700 level or higher.]

Candidates must take at least one seminar and one lecture based [500-level] course outside the primary comprehensive field, e.g., Americanists must take at least one 733 and one non-U.S. based 500 level course.

Excepting those in Local/Community History, students must pass a foreign language competency exam prior to taking their Comprehensive Exam. Comprehensive Exams will only take place in the two weeks after Fall Break or two weeks after Spring Break. Upon completion of the thesis, all candidates must pass an oral defense of their thesis.

Non-Thesis Program:

HIST 725 – Advanced Historical Method	3 hrs.
HIST 727 – Readings in History (2)	6 hrs.
HIST 730, 733 – Seminars (4)	12 hrs.
HIST 500 and 600 level (4)	12 hrs.

Total = 33 hrs.

Candidates must pass two comprehensive exams.

Thesis Program in Local/Community History:

HIST 701 – Introductory Course	3 hrs.
HIST 702, 703, 705, 781, 803 – Application Course	3 hrs.
HIST 725 – Advanced Historical Method	3 hrs.
HIST 730, 733 – Seminars	6 hrs.
HIST 500, 600 – Content Courses	12 hrs.
HIST 528 or 535 – Regional History	3 hrs.
HIST 801 – Thesis Research	2 hrs.
HIST 802 – Thesis Writing	2 hrs.

Total = 34 hrs.

Candidates must pass a written comprehensive exam in one field, and, upon completion of the thesis, pass an oral defense of said thesis.

Admission

The admission process is initiated by submitting an application for admission to the Wichita State Graduate School. The WSU Graduate Bulletin describes general admission procedures. Admission to the History Graduate Program requires a minimum of 18 undergraduate hours in History with a 3.0 grade point average (GPA). Applicants must also submit a one-page Statement of Purpose [what you hope to accomplish by earning an M.A.] and a writing sample of no more than 20 pages, sent as e-files directly to the graduate coordinator.

Awards and Funding Opportunities

The History Department is fortunate to be able to offer a number of graduate scholarships and awards to recognize student achievement and to support research. The John Rydjord Award is given to the superior graduate student as selected by the department. Potential candidates will have completed a minimum of twelve hours of graduate credits. Graduate students are also eligible to receive the Anthony and Dana Gythiel Endowed Scholarship, which is annually offered to either a graduate or undergraduate student. Students are encouraged to submit their papers in competition for the Fiske Hall Seminar and Non-Seminar Paper Awards. The awards are given to the best paper in a seminar and non-seminar course, respectively. Papers are to be submitted by the posted spring deadline and will be recognized at the annual spring luncheon honoring scholarship and award winners.

Graduate research is supported by the Miner/Unrau Award. To receive the award, designed to support thesis research and travel, students must submit applications including the relevance of

the trip to their project, their research plans, and an estimated budget. Applications will be submitted to the Department Chair in the fall and spring semesters, or the summer term, with the selections being made by the Chair in consultation with the department's Policy Committee. The award comes in the form of reimbursement for itemized travel expenses.

Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society) graduate students are eligible for the Mike Heaston Phi Alpha Theta, Gamma Rho Chapter Research Award. The award is offered in both the fall and spring semesters. Applications are to be submitted to the department Chair, who will make the selection in consultation with the Policy Committee and the Phi Alpha Theta faculty advisor. Proposals should include the relevance of the trip for the project, a research plan, and an estimated budget. The award will come in the form of reimbursement for itemized expenses. Questions about format and eligibility may be directed to the department Scholarship Chair and Phi Alpha Theta faculty advisor (George Dehner, George.dehner@wichita.edu; 978-7734).

Teaching Assistantships: The Department employs four graduate teaching assistants per semester. Appointments are typically made for the fall and renewed for the subsequent spring semester. TAs who perform well may re-apply and be re-appointed for a second year. To apply for a teaching assistantship, fill out the form from the graduate school -

<https://www.wichita.edu/academics/gradschool/FinancialAssistance/assistantships.php>

The form and three letters of recommendation should be sent to the History Department's graduate coordinator, 1845 Fairmount St., Wichita, KS 67260-0045. Applications should be received by the first Friday in March.