The New History Course

Undergraduates who join us from 2021 will study a substantially new and significantly enhanced course. At present, the Tripos (the historic name for a Cambridge undergraduate degree) consists of a two-year Part I (the first and second years of study) and then a one-year Part II (the third year of study). In future, the programme will be divided into three discrete years: Part IA (the first year), Part IB (the second year), and Part II (the third year). Part II is not affected by this change.

The reformed course has been designed in consultation with current undergraduates and aims to enhance students’ knowledge, skills and employability. The hallmarks of the Cambridge History degree – detailed and in-depth study across a vast range of subjects, supported by expert and personalised teaching – will be reconfigured around three types of historical study: area-specific content, the interpretation of primary sources, and the analysis of historiography (the history of how history has been written). This new course will help students develop their historical skills more effectively and progress from Part IA fully-equipped for the more challenging and demanding papers in Part IB.

The new structure looks like this:

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In addition, students will have access to a varied programme of training throughout their degree course. This will cover key historical skills, including writing, numeracy and archival research, as well as more specialist areas such as palaeography, languages, oral history and using visual and material sources.

*Area-specific content: Outlines and Topics*

In the first year, students choose two *Outline* papers which are defined by chronology and/or geography (usually, a continent or hemisphere over an historical epoch): for example, early medieval Europe, early modern Britain, modern Europe, the South since 1750, or North America since 1800. Each Outline introduces students to the major themes, issues, and approaches across a broad stretch of history. We’ll be teaching Outlines through a combination of lectures and supervisions (very small-group teaching). Lectures will introduce students to different facets of their chosen period; supervisions will provide students with the opportunity to hone their essay-writing skills, to discuss primary sources, and to debate the significant issues in that area of history.

In the second year, students choose two *Topic* papers which, like Outlines, have defined geographical and chronological boundaries but provide a greater intellectual challenge by cutting across conventional periodisations or by integrating comparative and ‘transnational’ perspectives. These papers might take a theme (such as the natural world, religious rhetoric, or the sea) and examine it in several continents and/or across several time-periods. Other Topics may deepen students’ understanding of a particular theme (such as economic growth, democratic culture, or imperial expansion) within a more limited spatial and temporal horizon.
Like the Outlines, Topics will be taught through lectures and supervisions, with individual feedback and personal guidance integral to the student learning experience.

**Interpretation of primary sources: Sources and Research Project**

The assessment and evaluation of evidence are essential skills for a historian, and these two papers will enable students to fine-tune them. In the first year, students choose a *Sources* paper from a wide range of options, varying year-on-year but always reflecting the different types of history taught within the Faculty. Each Sources option will be based around a designated body of primary sources, which students will get to examine in great detail. The Sources paper will be taught through intensive classes and will be assessed through a coursework essay.

In the second year, students choose a *Research Project*, building on the skills developed in their Sources paper. Through seminars and supervisions, students will explore concepts and methodologies relating to a particular field of History and learn how to pose research questions and identify evidence with which to answer them. Each student will write a long essay on a subject of their own choosing, receiving guidance through one-on-one supervisions from an expert in that field. The Research Project will be excellent preparation for students who wish to write a dissertation in their third year and aims to foster a skill highly valued by employers: that of being able to undertake independent inquiry and to write up your findings in a position paper or briefing document.

**Analysis of historiography: Historical Thinking**

Appreciating the many ways in which historians have approached the past is complex and also illuminating. Understanding why history has been written the way it has enables us to perceive scholarly traditions and revise and renew our discipline. In the first year, *Historical Thinking A* examines a ‘great work’ of history, meaning a work that has influenced subsequent scholarship over many years and remains pivotal in the field. Through college-based classes, students will get to discuss and debate its approach, method, sources, and underlying assumptions, and will write a book review, on which they’ll receive guidance in supervision.

In the second year, *Historical Thinking B* broadens out to look at different types of historical scholarship, ranging from environmental history to intellectual history. Students will acquire a thorough appreciation of the many ways in which history has been written: their distinctiveness, their peculiar methods and assumptions, and also their points of contact with other kinds of history. Historical Thinking B is taught through a combination of college classes and faculty lectures and gives students an opportunity to focus their interests on one specialist area. Assessment is through a ‘literature review’, in which students analyse how the scholarship has developed in their chosen field: its distinctive features, seminal moments, and present direction. Combined, Historical Thinking A and B enable students to hone their ability to write with precision, rigour and high levels of critical awareness.