

# Handbook for Current and Prospective M.A. Students

(updated September 2025)



Graduate study in history offers many opportunities. A history M.A. can help you build a career in museums, archives, libraries, law firms, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and private research firms. For those pursuing a career in K-12 or community college teaching, an M.A. in history can improve your job prospects, prepare you to teach diverse courses, and even lead to new opportunities at your school. For those interested in obtaining a Ph.D., the M.A. helps you define your goals and make a successful application. Lastly, working on the M.A. is intellectually satisfying. If you enjoyed undergraduate classes that gave you the freedom to engage in deep discussions and develop research projects, then the M.A. program will allow you to pursue these activities at a higher level.

The History Department at Cal State L.A. is home to a talented, award-winning faculty that conducts world-class research while also offering students a personalized education. Members of the faculty have won the University's Distinguished Professor award, the American Historical Association's teaching award, system-wide CSU prizes, and research awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other scholarly organizations. In 2022, our department was recognized with the [American Historical Association's Institutional Equity Award](#) for "excellence in recruiting and retaining underrepresented racial and ethnic groups into the historic profession." Our department staff is deeply knowledgeable and helpful. Each year, students in the department publish their own scholarly journal, the award-winning [Perspectives](#). We also house an active chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the national history honor's society.

The department offers M.A. students flexibility in the design of their program. Depending on your interests and goals, you can complete your program with a master's thesis or with a set of smaller capstone projects known as "comprehensive exams." The department offers most of its graduate classes in the evening to accommodate students

who work during the day. You can also set the pace of your studies. With a full-time course load (three courses per semester), you can finish your program in four semesters. At the same time, many students balance school with work and prefer a part-time schedule. Once you start the program, you will have seven years to complete your degree, so the choice of how many classes to take each semester rests with you.

## **What Do Our Graduates Do?**

Graduates of our M.A. program have gone on to win research prizes and fully-funded Ph.D. scholarships at top research universities nationwide. Recent graduates have earned funded Ph.D. study at UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, UC Irvine, University of Minnesota, University of Delaware, University of Montana, Yale, Princeton, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Arizona, and Stanford. Other graduates teach at community colleges or universities around the country, including Cal Poly Pomona, Glendale City College, Santa Ana Community College, Rio Hondo Community College, LA City College, LA Trade Tech, and Niagara University. You can also find our alumni leading K-12 classrooms throughout Southern California private and public schools.

Our alumni also find work in archives, libraries, museums, non-profits, government agencies, and businesses. Graduates of our program have worked at the Petersen Automotive Museum, the Drum Barracks Museum, the Autry Museum of the American West, the Banning Museum, the 911 Memorial & Museum in New York City, the Ronald Reagan Library, the Oakland Scottish Rite Historical Foundation, the Los Angeles Public Library, the CSU Dominguez Hills Archives and Special Collections, and our own Cal State LA Special Collections and Archives.

## **1. Admission to the Program**

### **Application Materials and Due Dates:**

To apply, please use the [Cal State Apply](#) website. On the site, you will upload your undergraduate transcripts, your statement of purpose, and two letters of recommendation. Make sure to visit all four areas on the Cal State Apply portal: Personal Information, Academic History, Supporting Information, and Program Materials. If you have any trouble with your application, please contact the department at [history@calstatela.edu](mailto:history@calstatela.edu).

Statement of Purpose: This is a 500 to 750 word essay explaining why you want to pursue graduate study in history. You can also describe your areas of interest, your career plans, or any additional information that shows your preparation for and interest in graduate study in history at Cal State LA.

Letters of Recommendation: You should arrange for two letters of recommendation. At least one letter should come from a professor capable of evaluating your qualifications for graduate study. For returning students with a long gap since their undergraduate years, it is acceptable if neither letter comes from a professor. Once you provide your

letter writers' contact info on Cal State Apply, those writers will receive an automated invitation to submit their letters via the website.

Deadlines: You can apply in the spring to start in Fall Semester (August), or you can apply in fall to start in Spring Semester (January). Specific dates for each deadline appear on [this website](#).

Requirements for Admission: To gain admission, you must make sure that you meet the University's basic requirements for graduate study. You can find those requirements here: <https://www.calstatela.edu/admissions/graduate-application-and-admission>.

In addition, you should also meet the History Department's requirements. To meet department admissions standards, you should have a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better in the last 60 semester units (90 quarter units) of your undergraduate program. Applicants with GPAs under 3.00 may be admitted at the discretion of the department's Graduate Studies Committee.

Regular Admission vs. Conditional Admission: Applicants who meet the 3.0 GPA requirement and who earned their undergraduate major in history (or in a closely related field) are eligible for regular admission. This means they can start taking 5000-level graduate classes their first semester.

Other applicants may be given "conditional admission." If your GPA is under 3.0, you may be asked to complete qualifying courses before enrolling in graduate-level courses. If you did not major in history as an undergraduate, and you did not take classes similar to HIST 3080 (Historiography) and HIST 3090 (History Research and Methods), you can still gain admission to the program, and the Graduate Studies Committee may require that you complete certain undergraduate courses with a GPA of 3.0 or higher before embarking on 5000-level graduate courses.

If you have any questions about your eligibility for the program, please reach out to the department at [history@calstatela.edu](mailto:history@calstatela.edu). Our faculty advisor would be happy to talk about your application.

## **2. Requirements for the M.A. Degree (30 or 33 units)**

Students have two options for completing their degree. The most popular option is known as the comprehensive exams ("comps") option, and it requires 30 units. The second path is the thesis option, which requires 33 units. You can learn more about each option below. You do not need to decide which option you want until you are midway through your program. All students (comps or thesis) will start their program in the same way.

### **Required Courses: HIST 5000 and HIST 5940 (6 units)**

Whether doing comps or a thesis, you will start your 5000-level coursework with HIST 5000 (Introduction to Graduate Study in History). Later, after completing 21 units (7

courses), you will take HIST 5940 (Historical Research and Writing). In HIST 5940, you will create an article-length research paper, similar in length and originality to an academic journal article.

### **Electives (21 units)**

You will also take 21 units (7 courses) of electives. The department offers elective courses grouped into the following geographic fields:

- United States
- Latin America
- World (including Africa, Asia, Middle East, Europe, and Global/Comparative History).

Students have wide choice in determining their electives, with the following restrictions:

1. No more than five courses (15 units) may be in any one geographic field.
2. No more than two courses (6 units) may be at the 4000 level. Exception: Graduate students who take HIST 4970 (Editing and Publishing Perspectives) are allowed to count three 4000-level courses (9 units) toward their program.
3. No more than two courses (6 units) may be outside the History Department. If you see a class outside our department that you want to take, make an appointment with the department's faculty advisor to get approval, *before* you enroll in the class.

Extra classes: While enrolled in the University, you can take extra courses that are not part of your M.A. program. These might be foreign-language classes relevant to your areas of interest, or they might be undergraduate-level classes beyond the two 4000-level classes allowed in your program.

Technically, HIST 5000 is a pre-requisite for enrolling in other 5000-level classes, but the department's faculty advisor can waive that requirement for students who are in their first semester in the M.A. program.

### **Capstone Preparation for Comprehensive Exams (3 units)**

**OR**

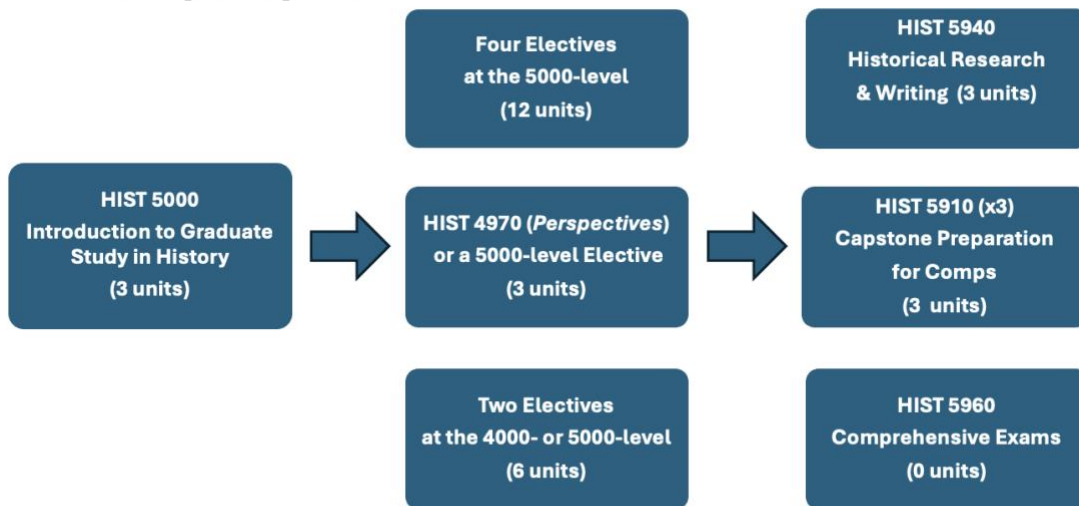
### **Thesis (6 units)**

Students completing their M.A. program via comprehensive exams will enroll in three sections of HIST 5910 (Capstone Preparation for Comprehensive Exams). Each HIST 5910 is a one-unit course, and you will take each one with a different professor.

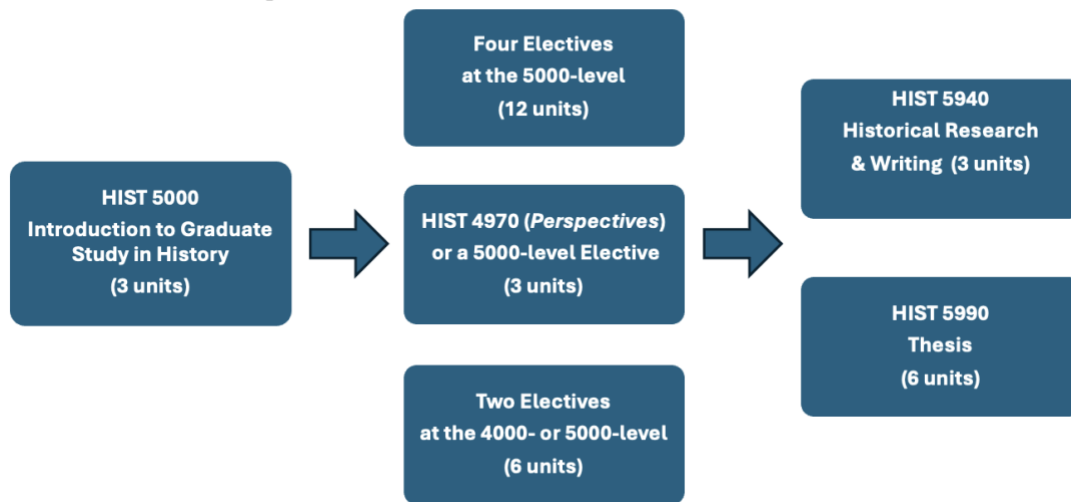
Students completing their M.A. program with a thesis will enroll in six units of HIST 5990 (Thesis). These six units must be spread out over at least two semesters and are normally undertaken all with the same professor (your principal thesis advisor).

See below for more details on both the comps and thesis options.

## The Comps Option



## The Thesis Option



## 3. The Comprehensive Exams

Most students in our program choose the Comprehensive Exams option to finish their M.A. program. Commonly known as “comps,” this option offers students the chance to develop wide-ranging knowledge in history. Despite its official name, comps are not really exams. Years ago, comps required students to sit for multiple hours of in-person hand-written exams, but comps have since evolved into a series of take-home projects.

Today, the comps option consists of four elements:

-three 1-unit independent studies (HIST 5910) taken with three different professors

-one zero-unit comps “class” (HIST 5960) in which you compile your HIST 5910 work and write a reflective essay (1000 to 2000 words) for your three HIST 5910 professors.

The department encourages students to take all four elements in their final semester. However, it is possible to spread the work over multiple semesters (details below).

### **Advantages to the Comps Option**

One big advantage to comps (instead of the thesis) is that this option provides students with wide breadth of knowledge in three different fields. Comps is a great choice for those planning a career in teaching, or for those who enjoy reading history for a sense of the “big picture.” Comps also provides a strong foundation for students interested in a Ph.D. This is because Ph.D. programs also require their own comprehensive exams, and good work with comps at the M.A. level can accelerate the Ph.D. comps process. Ph.D. programs will ask applicants for a brief writing sample, and the HIST 5940 research paper that both our comps and thesis students create is more than enough for that purpose. Not least, M.A. comps are generally quicker to complete than the M.A. thesis.

### **Rules and Steps for HIST 5910 (Capstone Preparation for the Comprehensive Exams)**

- You must be “advanced to candidacy” before you can register for any HIST 5910s. See below, under section 5 of this handbook, for more details on advancing to candidacy.
- You must complete at least 21 program units (7 courses) before you can start your HIST 5910s. Students who have completed 18 units can request a waiver to this requirement if they can show that they will graduate within two semesters of starting their HIST 5910s.
- You should identify three qualified History faculty members for your HIST 5910s. Qualified faculty are tenure-track History Department faculty (assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors). Lecturer faculty are not eligible.
- You must secure the approval of a qualified History professor as the instructor for their HIST 5910 before the start of the semester in which you plan to take that HIST 5910. You should request approval directly from the faculty member. If the faculty member agrees to supervise a HIST 5910 with you, that professor emails their approval to the History Department chair, who forwards the request to our Dean’s office. Once the request is approved by the Dean’s office, the History Department will enter a permit that

allows you to register for that HIST 5910 on GET. (Note: GET stands for “Golden Eagle Territory,” and it is Cal State LA’s online portal for enrollment and student records.)

- Students are encouraged to take prior coursework with their HIST 5910 professors. However, this may not always be possible due to faculty sabbaticals and other constraints, and it is possible to take a HIST 5910 with a professor you haven’t worked with before.
- You may register for all three HIST 5910s in a single semester, or you can do so in multiple semesters, including the semester when you enroll in HIST 5960.
- HIST 5910 is graded with traditional letter grades. Each 5910 grade is determined solely by the one supervising professor for that 5910.
- TIP: Do not browse for HIST 5910 classes on GET like you would for other classes. The University Registrar only creates a 5910 GET listing for a particular faculty member *after* a student and professor agree to work with each other.

### **Rules and Steps for HIST 5960 (Comprehensive Exam)**

- You cannot enroll in HIST 5960 until you have registered for or completed all three HIST 5910s.
- To complete your HIST 5960, you will submit a portfolio using the Canvas course page called “History Department MA Comprehensive Exams.” Your portfolio should contain the HIST 5960 essay and the final comprehensive examination content prepared in each HIST 5910. You will gain access to this Canvas course page when you register for HIST 5910 and HIST 5960.
- Information on the requirements for the HIST 5960 essay is available [here](#). HIST 5960 essays and portfolios are due by noon on Monday of the exam week in which the student has registered for HIST 5960.
- HIST 5960 is graded on a simple credit/no credit basis. All three of the HIST 5910 professors consult to determine if a student’s work for HIST 5960 earns a “credit” grade.
- When you register for HIST 5960, you will designate one of your three HIST 5910 professors as your “primary examiner.” This professor will serve as your first contact for questions you might have with your HIST 5960 work. Otherwise, there is no difference between your primary examiner and your other two “comps” professors.
- Successful completion of HIST 5960 requires successful completion of all three HIST 5910s.

### Special cases with comps:

- If you do not complete all three HIST 5910s by the end of the semester in which you are enrolled in HIST 5960, you will receive a grade of “NC” (no credit) for the HIST 5960.
- A student who has received an NC for HIST 5960 has only one more opportunity to complete the HIST 5960. (Exception: Students who receive an NC in HIST 5960 for violating the University’s [Academic Honesty Policy](#) cannot retake HIST 5960.)
- Students cannot obtain an “incomplete” for HIST 5960. If you are enrolled in HIST 5960 and suspect that you will not be able to finish your remaining work (e.g., the HIST 5910s), you probably should request to withdraw from HIST 5960 rather than take an NC. Then you can register again for HIST 5960 the next semester.
- Students who need to register only for HIST 5960 can do so by paying the comprehensive exam fee (currently \$10). You do not need to pay any other enrollment fees if you are registering only for the zero-unit HIST 5960.

## **4. The Thesis**

The M.A. thesis represents an extensive and original scholarly paper that shows the skills of a professional historian. There is no formal page requirement, and past theses have ranged in size from 80 to 150 double-spaced pages. Students who take the thesis do not take the comprehensive exams. Instead of HIST 5910s and HIST 5960, students in the thesis option register for 6 units of HIST 5990 (Thesis), for a program total of 33 units.

### **Advantages of the Thesis Option**

The thesis is especially attractive for students with a specific research interest, or for those who want the experience and challenge of extended independent research. Your M.A. thesis will enter the university library’s catalog for other scholars to find and consult, an accomplishment not offered via comps alone. If you are considering a Ph.D., please note that doctoral programs are typically satisfied with strong comps work, but the thesis can help *you* decide if you want to embark on a doctoral dissertation.

### **Rules and Steps for HIST 5990 (Thesis)**

- Minimum GPA Requirement: Before formally starting the thesis option, you must complete 18 units with a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Under exceptional circumstances, a

faculty member willing to serve as the principal advisor for a student with a GPA under 3.5 may request that the department's Graduate Studies Committee waive the minimum GPA requirement for that student.

- Students writing a thesis should attend the university's thesis writing workshop that is held once every semester in the library. This workshop will offer valuable information and advice on university thesis regulations and formatting.
- Official procedures for the thesis proposal and final submission are set by the [College of Natural and Social Sciences](#) and the [Office of Graduate Studies](#).

### **When to start thinking about the thesis**

From the start, make sure that you are on pace to meet the 3.5 GPA requirement. In your first year, you should identify a faculty member whose interests are close to yours. This faculty member may then serve as your principal thesis adviser. You should also identify two other faculty members who can offer supporting advice for your project. Together, these three professors will form your thesis committee. Once you have formed a committee, developed a topic, and completed 18 units with the required GPA, you and your principal advisor will petition the department to formally begin the thesis option. At this stage, you will also submit your "advancement to candidacy" (described in section 5 below) and submit a thesis proposal using this [Graduate School approval form](#).

## **5. Other Rules and Policies**

### **Independent Studies**

With department and faculty approval, students can apply up to 6 units of HIST 5980 (Graduate Directed Study) to their program. All independent studies are subject to agreement by a supervising faculty member.

### **Transfer Courses and Credits**

Up to 9 units of acceptable transfer or extension courses may be included in an MA degree program. No more than 6 of these 9 units can count for 5000-level (graduate-level) courses. Credit for thesis or comprehensive exams is not transferable.

No courses taken as an undergraduate count toward your MA degree program except as specifically provided for baccalaureate candidates in their final semester of undergraduate study. See the University Catalog for details on this policy.

### **Advancing to Candidacy**

Before embarking on either comps or the thesis, you must "advance to candidacy." The University will not let you graduate without first "advancing," so please schedule an appointment with the department's faculty advisor as soon as you are eligible.

You are eligible to advance to candidacy when you hold “classified” graduate standing (i.e., you do not need to take any qualifying undergrad classes) AND when you have completed at least 12 units (4 courses) in the MA program with a GPA of 3.0 or higher.

Advancement to candidacy requires submission of the [GS-10 form](#). Please schedule a meeting with the History Department’s faculty advisor to obtain the signatures required for the GS-10 form

### **Leaves of Absence**

Students may petition for a leave of absence for the pursuit of professional or academic opportunities, for medical reasons, or for financial reasons. Graduate students are granted a maximum of two semesters’ leave. Petitions must be filed with the University after approval by the department chair and dean’s office no later than three weeks before the end of the semester preceding the proposed leave.

### **Maintaining Your Status in the M.A. Program**

Students must maintain an overall GPA of 3.0 to keep classified standing in the M.A. degree program. Grades below C (i.e., C- and lower) receive no credit in the program and are computed in students’ overall GPA. Students with a GPA under 3.0 will be placed on academic probation and cannot complete final degree requirements. An individual course grade of C, C+, or B- can still count toward your M.A. program unit total, so long as your overall GPA remains above 3.0. If you find yourself having trouble with the GPA requirement, please schedule an appointment with the department’s faculty advisor as soon as possible.

## **6. Tips for Surviving and Thriving in the M.A. Program**

### **Plan Your Program**

Use GET and faculty advice to plan your progress through the MA program. Note that the department only offers graduate-level courses during the Fall and Spring semesters, so that you will not be able to take program classes during the summer or winter intersessions.

### **Seek Advice from Faculty**

The department offers two forms of advising:

- 1. Every semester, the department designates one or two professors as the “faculty advisor” for that term. This professor will offer regular advising appointments (15- or 30-minute time blocks) that you can reserve using Canvas. Use these appointments to get advice on program requirements, course selection, university policies, and general career options. As a general rule, you should schedule *at least* one advising appointment per semester. For help scheduling appointments, call the History Department office at 323-343-2020.

•2. You can also obtain advice in a less formal manner by getting to know faculty who teach in a field that interests you. Even if you do not have a class with that professor, you are welcome to drop into their office hours to introduce yourself and discuss your career goals. You can find faculty office hours posted outside the History Department Office in King Hall, or by emailing the professor. Students interested in undertaking a thesis, or in applying to Ph.D. programs, should speak with relevant professors as early as possible to discuss expectations for advanced research in specific fields of historical study, including potential language requirements.

### **Socialize with Classmates**

Hang out in the student lounge on the fourth floor of King Hall. Join Phi Alpha Theta, the national history honor society, which is open to all history students with a 3.5 GPA in history classes. Even if you are not a member, you can follow [Phi Alpha Theta \(PAT\) on their Instagram account](#). Also check out the [Instagram page for our student journal, Perspectives](#). The [Department also has its own Instagram](#).

### **Use the Graduate Resource Center**

Located in the basement of the campus library (Library North A124), the [Graduate Resource Center](#) offers workshops, writing and research support, and other programs.

### **Balance School and Life**

If you have work or family obligations, do not feel pressure to take more courses per semester than feels right. Check with professors and the department faculty advisor to find the right pace. Some students finish in two years (four semesters), but many students take longer, and that's fine too. Cal State LA gives M.A. students seven years from the start of their program to graduate. Just make sure to pace your progress so that you are done within the seven-year limit. (Once course credits become seven years old, they expire and go off your record.)

### **Advice from Alumni of the Program**

The editors of our department's student research journal *Perspectives* (Volume 50 in 2023) solicited lightning talks from a few of our graduate and undergraduate alumni to highlight their successes, stories, and adventures in the program. You can find these [lightning talks on the Perspectives webpage](#).