

## *WHTC University application subject guides*

# History

This guide has been written to help support you in your application to university. It contains the following information relevant to your subject to help you decide where to apply and put together the best application that you possibly can:

1. Links to the top courses for this subject in the UK (according to
2. Entrance requirements
3. Recommended A Levels
4. Admissions tests
5. Recommended reading
6. Interesting Online Courses (MOOCs)
7. Useful additional resources, including: podcasts, articles, the Historical Association, and essay-writing competitions
8. Related university courses
9. Oxbridge example interview questions

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## 1. Course links

Below are links to the top courses for this subject in the UK (according to [The Complete University Guide](#)). **Click on the links below** to find information about what the course is like, what you'll learn, and loads of information about things such as fees and accommodation.

However, remember that there are lots of other great universities out there, so check out [The Complete University Guide's page for studying History](#) for more courses:

- o [University of Cambridge \(Rank 1\)](#)
- o [University of Oxford \(Rank 2\)](#)
- o [Durham University \(Rank 3\)](#)
- o [UCL \(University College London\) \(Rank 5\)](#)
- o [University of Sheffield \(Rank 8\)](#)

- [University of York \(Rank 12\)](#)
  - [University of Glasgow \(Rank 15\)](#)
  - [Royal Holloway, University of London \(Rank 28\)](#)
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## 2. Entrance requirements

Here is a list of A Level grades that some universities state that you need to get in order to be accepted as a student on their degree programme.

- [University of Cambridge \(Rank 1\)](#): A\*AA, with some colleges asking for an A Level in History
  - [University of Oxford \(Rank 2\)](#): AAA
  - [Durham University \(Rank 3\)](#): A\*AA, including an A Level in History
  - [UCL \(Rank 5\)](#): AAA, including an A Level in History
  - [University of Sheffield \(Rank 8\)](#): AAB, including a grade A in History
  - [University of York \(Rank 12\)](#): AAA-A\*AB, including a grade A in History
  - [University of Glasgow \(Rank 15\)](#): AAB-BBB, including an A Level in a Humanities Subject
  - [Royal Holloway, University of London \(Rank 28\)](#): AAB-ABB
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## 3. Recommended A Levels

Universities may differ as to what A Levels they expect you to have studied. While some universities might list one subject as '**essential**', others might list the same subject as just a '**helpful**' or '**recommended**' qualification. Therefore, make sure you carefully read the '**Entry Requirements**' of undergraduate history courses, which are clearly outlined on university websites, so you know what subjects and grades your chosen university expects. **For example:**

- A lot of universities expect you to have studied an **A Level in History or a related subject**, and some even expect you to have achieved a grade A in the subject in order to be accepted into their programme.
- Other universities (like many of the colleges in the University of Cambridge) do not specify that you need to have taken an A Level in History.

## 4. Admissions tests

### What admissions tests are you typically required to sit in addition to submitting your application?

This also differs from university to university, so if your chosen university isn't on this list, make sure you check out the course page so you know exactly what you need to apply:



1. **University of Cambridge:** Some Cambridge colleges require you to take a **written assessment at interview**. In addition, some colleges require you to **submit two to three examples of your written work** (e.g. A Level History essays) in advance of an interview. [Further information about admissions requirements for a history degree can be found here.](#)
2. **University of Oxford:** All history applicants to the University of Oxford are required to take the [History Aptitude Test \(HAT\)](#) and are required to **send in an essay on an historical topic**, written in their own time as part of their normal school or college work. The university clearly states the qualities they are looking for in a prospective student, particularly **“intellectual curiosity”** and **“a flexible approach to engaging with unfamiliar concepts or arguments and an enthusiasm for history”**. You may also be asked to discuss your submitted written work and personal statement during the interview, and to read and talk about a short passage as part of the interview process.

**The other universities referenced above do not require you to sit an admissions test.**



## 5. Recommended reading

Carrying out wider reading of historical topics and periods is a key way that you can **prove your enthusiasm for the subject**, which can make you stand out amongst other applicants applying to the same university courses.

Reading historical books is also a primary way that you can **enhance your knowledge of history**, as well as your understanding of how to construct a coherent and substantiated historical argument. A lot of your undergraduate degree will be spent immersed in different historians' works or historical evidence. Therefore, getting used to reading more widely *now* will be excellent (and enjoyable!) preparation for your history course at university.

In order to decide which books and/or resources to study, you should think very carefully about **what historical topics, periods or developments you are interested in**, and also what **area of the world** you are keen to learn more about. It might be that you're very keen to develop your understanding of history over a **broader sweep of time**; alternatively, you might know of a **specific historical event** that you want to study in more detail. It doesn't matter!

**Most importantly, make sure you read historical books that reflect YOUR interests of the subject. Here are a few suggestions to get you thinking and exploring...**

**Examples of historians' books which cover a broad sweep of history:**

- *'Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind'* by Yuval Noah Harari
- *'Black and British: A Forgotten History'* by David Olusoga
- *'Guns, germs and steel: A short history of everybody for 13,000 years'* by Jared Diamond
- *'The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans'* by David Abulafia
- *'The Silk Roads'* by Peter Frankopan
- *'Lost Islamic History: Reclaiming Muslim civilisation from the past'* by Firas Alkhateeb
- *'A radical history of the world'* by Peter Faulkner
- *'Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation'* by Brendan Simms



- *'The map of knowledge: A thousand-year history of how classical ideas were lost and found'* by Violet Moller
- *'A little history of the world'* by E. H. Gombrich

**If you're keen to explore more about studying history as a discipline, the following books will be of use:**

- *'What is History?'* by E. H. Carr
- *'Why history matters'* by John Tosh
- *'Studying History'* by Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild
- *'Why history matters'* by John Tosh

**Universities have also compiled recommended reading lists for studying a degree in history. For example:**

- Students from the **University of Oxford** have put together a [Reading Bank](#) of books they read, or wish they had read, before studying at Oxford.

**Finally, the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge provides excellent guidance on how you should approach reading historical works. Here's what they have to say...**

*"The key thing, in fact, is that **you learn from what you read and to do this you need to read analytically**. This means making **mental notes** and **asking questions** all the way through your reading. You might try asking yourself the following questions when you finish a book or an article, and writing down your answers:*

*(1) Can I **summarise the argument** the historian has made?*

*(2) What **evidence does the historian offer to substantiate his/her argument?***

*Historians are like barristers in court: they must convince people of their case. To do so they must use evidence judiciously and convincingly;*

*(3) Is this **historian's argument similar to, or different from, others** that I have read?*

*(4) Do I **agree or disagree with the argument** being made here?*

*Why? Is it **well supported** by the evidence? Is it **coherent**? Does it **contradict itself**?*

*Doing this will help you understand what you have read and remember it later."*



## 6. Interesting Online Courses (MOOCs)



Leading universities across the country offer an **array of free online courses** for you to begin to enhance your knowledge of historical periods and topics. This is one way that you can show your enthusiasm for the subject.

For example, **a total of 52 history courses can be found on the [Future Learn website](#)**. The courses range from those that can directly support your A Level History units to fascinating opportunities to learn about the Ancient World.

### **History courses that directly support your studies include:**

- o England in the time of Richard III
- o The Tudors

### **Other History courses on offer include:**

- o Beyond the ballot: Women's rights and suffrage from 1866-today.
- o Empire: The controversies of British imperialism
- o Health and wellbeing in the Ancient World
- o Understanding money: The history of finance, speculation and the stock market
- o The Scientific Revolution: Understanding the roots of modern science
- o Anti-Semitism: From its origins to the present

**Yale University** in the USA also offers online access to lecture series for the courses on offer at their university. **[The list of history lectures available can be found here.](#)**



Yale University

The **Open University** also offers numerous online courses for history, covering a variety of historical topics. [The list of courses available can be found here.](#)

# OpenLearn

Finally, **Class Central** have 275 online courses provided by institutions such as the University of Leeds, the University of Virginia, Tel Aviv University and other top universities around the world. You can also read reviews given by other students to find interesting courses for you. [The list of courses available can be found here.](#)

**The top-rated history courses on the Class Central website include:**

- Arab-Islamic History: From Tribes to Empires (*offered by the University of Tel Aviv*)
- The Modern World: Global History from 1760 to 1910 (*offered by the University of Virginia*)
- The Civil War and Reconstruction – 1865-1890: The Unfinished Revolution (*offered by Columbia University*)
- The Holocaust (*offered by the University of California, Santa Cruz*)

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## 7. Useful additional resources

### Part One: podcasts

There are a number of very **interesting history podcasts** available online or on certain podcast apps. Listening to podcasts is another brilliant way to find out more detail about a specific event, period or individual in history.

- **“In our time”**: A group of historians together in this **BBC history podcast** to discuss historical themes, events and individuals.



- **“You’re dead to me”**: The **BBC history podcast** for people who don’t like history... and those who do. It brings together the best names in comedy and history to learn and laugh about the past.
- **“Witness History”**: The **BBC podcast** that focuses on history as told by the people who were there.
- **“Histories of the unexpected”**: A show that demonstrates how everything has a history, even the most unexpected of subjects, and how those subjects all link together in unexpected ways. It will change the way that you think about the past... and the present.

***NOTE:** BBC podcasts can be found online or on the “BBC Sounds” app.*

## Part Two: Articles

The website [History Extra](#) offers a range of articles about historical people, periods and topics, as well as reviews and information about the latest historical films and TV series on our screens.

[History Today](#) is a world-leading history magazine, which also offers a number of academic articles on its website.

# HISTORY TODAY

## Part Three: The Historical Association

As a student at Wembley High Technology College, you are also a member of the **Historical Association**. The Historical Association offers an abundance **of high-quality resources** for history students studying from GCSE to postgraduate level. For example:

- **The HA has lots of resources focused on the [transition to university](#), including advice on:** (1) applying for history at university; (2) how to prepare for interviews; (3) what life as an undergraduate historian might be like; and (4) what to expect on a history course.



- The HA offers a range of **articles, podcasts and lectures** given by historians on numerous historical periods and events, which can help to develop your knowledge of the past. [Click here to explore what they have to offer!](#)
- Finally, make sure you keep checking the **HA's calendar of live lectures** that you can sign up to attend on numerous historical topics. [Click here to explore their upcoming calendar of events!](#)

**NOTE:** *You'll need to log-in to access resources on the HA website using the following details:*

*Username: 51989*

*Password: wembley123*



## Part Four: Essay writing competitions

Each year lots of universities offer **essay-writing competitions** (with prizes!) for A Level History students across the country. Participating in an essay-writing competition is another great way that you can **prove your enthusiasm for the subject**, and it will also help **make your UCAS personal statement stand out** from other applicants.

**Prominent essay writing competitions held annually are:**

- Peterhouse College, the University of Cambridge: [Vellacott History Prize](#)
- Trinity College, the University of Cambridge: [The Robson History Prize](#)
- Robinson College, the University of Cambridge: [Essay Prize](#)
- St. Hugh's College, the University of Oxford: [The Julia Wood Prize](#)
- The University of Sheffield: [Y12/L6 History Essay Prize](#)
- [The History of Parliament Essay Competition](#)



## 8. Related courses

If you're keen to study history alongside another subject, or if you wanted to study a particular aspect or time period of history, **you're in luck!** Lots of universities across the country offer 'joint honours degrees', which allow you to study **more than one subject**, as well as more **specialised history courses**.

For example, UCL offers the following history degree courses:

- History
- Ancient History
- History with a European Language

Durham University offers:

- History
- Ancient, Medieval and Modern History
- English Literature and History
- Modern European Languages and History

While the University of Oxford offers:

- History
- Ancient and Modern History
- History and Economics **OR** English **OR** Modern Languages **OR** Politics

Finally, if you're enthusiastic about studying history there are **other degree courses** which you may also want to explore, which draw on the discipline:

- **Classical Civilisation** – the study of the literature, history, philosophy, languages, art and archaeology of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.
- **History of Art** – gaining historical understanding through the origins, meaning and purpose of art and artefacts from different world cultures.

Make sure you look at the **full list of undergraduate courses** offered by the universities in order to see the **full range of history courses (or related courses) you can study**.



## 9. Oxbridge example interview questions

Before being offered a place on a history course at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, applicants are interviewed. The interviewers will usually ask you questions about what you have **written in your personal statement**. However, they may also ask more **open-ended questions** about the past, as well as history as a discipline. They may also provide you with **charts or extracts of historical writing to analyse**.

Remember, the University of Oxford explicitly say that they want undergraduate students who show “**intellectual curiosity**” and “**a flexible approach to engaging with unfamiliar concepts or arguments**”. Therefore, universities like Oxford and Cambridge deliberately ask interview questions that test how you think under pressure, whether you show “intellectual curiosity”, and how you present and communicate your ideas and logic.

**For example, here are the kinds of questions they can ask:**

- Can history stop the next war?
- Should historians be allowed to read sci-fi novels?
- Which two history books would you take to a desert island and why?
- How do you organise a successful revolution?
- Is there such thing as 'race'?
- Do you think that all of History is a History of Thought?
- Would History be worth studying if it didn't repeat itself?
- Is national character a useful concept in History?
- How can one define a revolution?
- How would a biography of a major political figure written while they are alive differ from one written after their death? Which would be the more accurate assessment of their contribution to history?
- Who writes history?
- Do you think the government should spend money preserving historical sites?
- How would you research illiterate medieval craftsmen?
- What is the difference between modern history and modern politics?
- What is the position of the individual in history?
- How do historians obtain evidence?
- What is the most useful source for a historian?



- How much of the past can you count?
- How could you research the lives of medieval children?
- If you could interview anyone from history, who would it be?
- Do you think the dumbing down of history for television and in museums is a good thing?

Which person (or sort of person) in the past would you most like to interview, and why?

Candidates know that this is not a right/wrong type question. The question is not so much about which person the candidate wants to meet, but what sort of issues the candidate wants to find out about (which can be quite revealing) and then working out the best way to do so. 'Meeting' Elizabeth I or Winston Churchill might be exciting, but if the candidate wants to find out about, say, their leadership style, they might be better off asking questions of a courtier or member of the war cabinet. Or if they wanted to find out what we don't know about any given period, they might want to interview people who didn't leave any written records. Sometimes we might encourage the candidate to think through whether the person they selected would be willing or able to reveal the information they sought (and we allow plenty of time for the candidate to change the issue they want to find out about, and reconsider their choice of person).

Imagine we had no records about the past at all, except everything to do with sport – how much of the past could we find out about?

I would say this to a candidate who had mentioned an interest in sport on their personal statement, though it could equally be applied to an interest in something else – like film, drama, or music. What I would be looking for is to see how the candidate might use their imagination, building on something they know about (probably much more than I do) to tackle questions of historical research.

Answers could relate to the racial/class/gender relations in society (who played the sports, and which sports, at any given time); international politics/empire (which countries were involved, did groups of countries play the same sport); economic development (the technological development of sports, how sport was watched); the values within a society (bloodthirsty sports to more genteel sports); health (participation rates); or many other issues – the list is long. I would usually ask supplementary questions, to push the students further – and often, I would have no answer in my mind, but would



simply be interested in seeing how far the student could push their analysis.

Is violence always political? Does 'political' mean something different in different contexts?

This pair of questions allows the interviewer to deal with historical material from any period the candidate is studying or knows about from more general reading. It could also be answered extremely well from contemporary or current affairs knowledge. The aim of the question is to get the candidate to challenge some received notions about what constitutes politics, and to think about how political history might be studied away from the usual kings, parliaments etc. A good candidate would, with assistance, begin to construct categories of when violence looks more and less political. A very good candidate would, with assistance, begin to construct a useful definition of 'political', but this is challenging. The main aim would not be to solve these problems, but to use them to find some new interest in a subject that the candidate already knows something about.

What would a historian find interesting about the place where you live?

We use this question to open a discussion that could go in a number of different directions. We want to encourage candidates to talk about a subject on which they know something, but where probing questions can lead them to look at what they know in a new and revealing light. It was very common for candidates to say that nothing interesting ever happens where they live, but this was a chance for the interviewers to encourage them to reflect on what we mean by historical significance, and why some places seem unremarkable in those terms. It also allowed us to hear candidates describe things like a town in decline, unusual street names, or pride in local sports teams, and then to ask them what questions a historian should ask in order to set these in context. It's also a good question because it allows us to steer candidates away from prepared scripts (which are always a waste of time), and for us to see evidence of some of the instincts and skills that are really important in good History students: observation, noticing the unusual, being interested in the world around them, a questioning attitude, and the ability to see things from new angles.



What can historians not find out about the past?

The aim of this question is to encourage candidates to think critically, creatively and comparatively about how historians know what happened in the past. I would use this sort of open question to allow a candidate to talk about the availability of historical evidence in whatever time period, place or theme interested them from their school-work or wider reading. For instance, a candidate might start off by saying that they had been studying Tudor England and historians don't know much about the lives of the poor because they were less likely to be able to write. Given these lower levels of literacy, we could then talk about what sources historians can use to learn about the lives of the majority of the population in sixteenth-century England. This would require the candidate to think creatively about alternative sources (and their drawbacks), such as, for instance, criminal court records in which people who could not write were required to give oral testimony as witnesses.

Historians are always interested in explaining continuity and change over time, so I might then ask the candidate to compare what historians can know about Tudor England to another time period or place that interests them. For instance, if they had also studied the USA during the Depression, I might ask the candidate whether the gaps in historical evidence are different in interwar America. By thinking comparatively across four-hundred years and in different continents, a candidate might be able to draw some thoughtful conclusions. They might want to think about how structures of power have altered over time or about how social norms for what can be recorded and kept in archives have changed. This is the sort of conversation that no candidate could predict in advance. The hope is that the discussion allows candidates to show their understanding of, and enthusiasm for, history, and – most importantly – their ability to think independently, flexibly, and imaginatively about the past.

**Here is how a student (Nick Lawton) described his interview experience at Clare College, the University of Cambridge:**

*"The only specific question thread I remember was about biased evidence. After I had rejected posters as being propaganda with a purpose to manipulate people's views, I was asked whether photographs of an event were more*



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*reliable. I answered that they could equally be propaganda and it would depend what motives or interests the photographer had. This was followed by a question about whether cave paintings were biased if they didn't have a need to persuade others – they were decoration. I argued that a caveman still had a choice about what to draw, and as soon as someone makes choices, they are manipulating the evidence. Therefore it might be no better than propaganda.”*