



- [Blog](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Websites](#)
- [Software](#)
- [Courses](#)
- [Bio](#)
- [CV](#)
- [The Digital Past](#)

6 September 2011

## The Digital Past

### History 390

Professor Dan Cohen  
Research Hall 483  
Office Hours: M 10:15 – 12:15 and by appointment  
703-993-4524  
dan@dancohen.org  
[dancohen.org](http://dancohen.org)

**Introduction:** This course prepares you to use and understand a wide variety of current and emerging digital technologies in the service of doing history (and beyond). We will also spend time on ethics for historians in the digital age and the importance the challenges posed by the trade-offs between digital access and the need for data security. You will learn both the fundamentals and skills *and* something about how we as a society became so enamored of and dependent on these knowledge and information tools. Understanding a new technology requires not just knowing its technical aspects, but also understanding how new technologies transform the societies that embrace them.

**Learning Goals:** Each week we will focus on a particular IT skill through the examination of a particular historical topic or historical research skill. During the semester you will learn to use the more sophisticated features of digital tools and media, ranging from word processing software to collaborative social media to databases, websites, and maps. You will come to understand basic information technology concepts and technologies and be able to analyze newly experienced sites and technologies and figure out how they are put together. Finally, you will learn about computer security and how to protect yourself in an open and connected digital world.

**Learning By Doing:** The course largely emphasizes the acquisition of both historical methods and information technology skills through *doing* rather than just reading. That is, in most weeks students will engage in making or doing something historical using digital tools and networks.

**The General Education Information Technology Requirement:** This course satisfies the [University's information technology requirement](#), which has the following five goals:

1. Students will be able to use technology to locate, access, evaluate, and use information, and appropriately cite resources from digital/electronic media.
2. Students will understand the core IT concepts in a range of current and emerging technologies and learn to apply appropriate technologies to a range of tasks.

3. Students will understand many of the key ethical, legal and social issues related to information technology and how to interpret and comply with ethical principles, laws, regulations, and institutional policies.
4. Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate, create, and collaborate effectively using state-of-the-art information technologies in multiple modalities.
5. Students will understand the essential issues related to information security, how to take precautions and use techniques and tools to defend against computer crimes.

Unlike some other courses designed to satisfy the IT requirement, this course teaches the fundamentals of information technology within the context of a history course rather than as a set of abstract principles or discrete skills tied to particular software packages. But to make it more transparent which of the Gen Ed skills are being satisfied, the syllabus contains bracketed references to which of the five goals are addressed each week.

**Course requirements:** In addition to keeping up with the readings on a weekly basis, each student is expected to be an active participant in class discussions, both in the classroom and online. Failure to participate in our discussions will not only have a negative impact on your final grade, but will also make the class less enjoyable for you and for everyone else in class. Online participation will take place via the class blog and you will be expected to post there every week of the semester. Your blog will contain the results of the weekly exercises, as well as reactions to the reading and links to things you find that might be relevant to the class.

There will be a midterm exam and a final project, each of which allow you to demonstrate your mastery of the historical content *and* your mastery of the digital skills that are central to the course. The final project will involve multiple historical and technical skills as you create a portfolio of digital products (such as maps, charts, and visualizations) to explain a historical event or person.

### Grading

Your grade for the semester will be based upon the following criteria:

Blog	35%
Class participation	10%
Midterm exam	25%
Final project	30%

### Course Policies

**Attendance:** Because each week's topic lays the groundwork for the progressively more sophisticated work that we will be doing as the semester goes along, it is imperative that you come to class, keep up with your assignments, and stay engaged with the rest of the group, both in class and online via the class blog.

**ADA:** Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before September 7, please). Students should present appropriate verification from the Office of Disability Services, 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

**Medical and Other Excuses:** Every semester someone is forced to miss either an examination or the due date for an assignment either as the result of an illness or a family emergency. If you find yourself in this situation, fairness to all students in the class requires the proper documentation, without which your excuses will not be accepted. If

you need to know more about this process consult me as soon as the emergency is taken care of.

**Plagiarism and Cheating:** Don't. Plagiarism and cheating are much easier in the digital age, but finding cheaters is even more easy, especially when you know computers and the internet as well as I do. Besides, the university expects students to demonstrate a high code of personal honor when it comes to academic work. Please read the *George Mason University Honor Code* if you have any questions about what is expected of you in this regard. Penalties for academic dishonesty are severe. In short, you are at extreme risk for failing the course from just a single act of plagiarism or cheating, and your academic career will be put in jeopardy.

**Enrollment Status:** Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment status in this course. Any change in that status is the responsibility of the student and must be made by the dates listed in the *Schedule of Classes*. The last day to add a course is September 6. The last day to drop a course is September 30. After the last day to drop a course, withdrawal from the course must be approved by the Dean and will be approved only for nonacademic reasons. Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the *Schedule of Classes* for selective withdrawal procedures.

### My "History 390 Student Blogs" Bundle

[Alex Mercer](#)

[Alissa Potter](#)

[Alli Clark](#)

[Aria Izadi](#)

[Audre Zellman](#)

[Brian Berglund](#)

[Caroline Dickman](#)

[Christa Smith](#)

[Dale Pendleton](#)

[Danielle Deane](#)

[Elaine Ziman](#)

[Elly Donlen](#)

[Jamesha Gibson](#)

[Jamie Gregory](#)

[Jane Kortan](#)

[Johnny P.](#)

[Kelsey Hancher](#)

[Kevin Gottlieb](#)

[Landon Long](#)

[Lindsey Carroll](#)

[Maggie Campbell](#)

[Morgan Johnston](#)

[Nicole Dierkes](#)

[Rebecca Rahmani](#)[Rob Lee](#)[Russell Topp](#)[Shelby Allen](#)[Shelby Reyes](#)[Troy Powers](#)[Youssef Tadros](#)[Subscribe](#)[Preview »](#)

## Course Outline

### Week 1 — August 29 & September 1 — The Digital Landscape

Course introduction to demystify information technology and help students understand the basics. As part of getting set up in new media for the course, students will look behind the scenes at how these websites and digital services are created, including basic IT concepts such as the client, server, hardware, software, the network and its protocols, the web and its standards, and newer technology such as mobile. We will continue to refer to these concepts and particular technologies week to week in the course. By the end of the course students should be able to analyze newly experienced sites and technologies and figure out how they are put together using these principles.

*Read:* Cohen & Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, Introduction, "[Promises and Perils of Digital History](#)," and ch. 2, "[Getting Started: The Basic Technologies Behind the Web](#)."

*Video:* [RSS in Plain English](#) by CommonCraft

*Practicum:* Sign up for a [WordPress](#) blog, learn how to use the writing environment in WordPress, which is a common one for many digital word processing services, and make a first post. Sign up for [Google Reader](#) to receive all posts from the class, in the process learning about connective technologies on the web, such as RSS.

[This week is geared toward meeting IT requirements 2 & 4]

### Week 2 — September 6 & 8 — The Origins and Anatomy of Modern Computing

*Read:* Vannevar Bush, "[As We May Think](#)," *The Atlantic* (July 1945)

*Video:* [Remington-Rand Presents the Univac](#) (1952)

*Video:* [Man & Computer](#) (IBM film from 1965)

*Read:* Theodore Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley*

*Practicum:* Describe the parts and purpose of an early computer, as well as its cultural and historical context. Choose an image from the [Computer History Museum's gallery of historical computers](#).

[IT requirement 2]

### Week 3 — September 13 & 15 — Digitization, Searching, and Finding

*Read:* Cohen & Rosenzweig, ch. 3, "[Becoming Digital](#)"

*Explore:* ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, available through [the Mason library website](#) under the databases tab (search for “ProQuest Historical Newspapers”).

*Practicum:* Internet scavenger hunt, to be explained in the first class of the week and finished by the second class. During our investigation of this particular database of historical sources we’ll consider such things as how databases are organized, the standards archivists use when organizing data, and how users interact with the data.

[IT requirement 1]

#### **Week 4 — September 20 & 22 — The Reliability of Digital Sources, and the Analog Sources They Come From**

*Read:* Errol Morris, series on a Crimean War photograph: “Which Came First?” Parts [1](#), [2](#), [3](#); also: Morris on Photoshop, history, and “[Photography as a Weapon](#)”

*Video:* Jon Udell, [Heavy Metal Umlaut](#)

*Read:* “[Evaluating Websites](#)”

*Practicum:* Judge a Wikipedia article on a historical topic by looking at its sources, discussion, and history.

[IT requirement 1, 3]

#### **Week 5 — September 27 & 29 — Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues in a Digital Age: Owning and Mining the Past**

*Read:* Cohen & Rosenzweig, ch. 7, “[Owning the Past?](#)”

*Video:* [The Amen Break](#)

*Video:* [Copyright Criminals](#)

*Practicum:* Determine the ethics and legality of various websites and services from an assigned list.

[IT requirement 3]

#### **Week 6 — October 4 — Ethics in a Digital Age (cont.)** [No class October 6 for Yom Kippur]

*Read:* Mason’s Copyright Office PowerPoint presentation, “[The Basics](#)”

[IT requirement 3]

#### **Week 7 — October 13 — Midterm exam** [No class October 11 because of the Columbus Day shift]

#### **Week 8 — October 18 & 20 — Maps, Spatial Analysis & History**

*Read:* Will Thomas and Edward Ayers, “The Difference Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities,” <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/>

*Explore:* [Hypercities](#), [PhilaPlace](#), [Euclid Corridor History Project](#)

*Practicum:* Using [GeoCommons](#) or [Google Earth](#), choose a database or data layer and create a usable map from the results. Then write a post for the class blog in which you discuss how a scholar could use your results to construct a historical argument.

[IT requirements 1, 2, & 4]

#### **Week 9 — October 25 & 27 — Databases and Statistics**

Read at least two [Feltron reports](#)

*Practicum:* Learn how to use [Google Charts](#) and create at least one chart using historical data. Links to historical datasets will be provided.

[IT requirements 1, 2, & 4]

### **Week 10 — November 1 & 3 — The Visual Communication of Information**

*Read:* Edward Tufte, "[PowerPoint is Evil](#)" and Peter Norvig, "[The Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation](#)"

*Explore:* [Many Eyes](#)

*Practicum:* Using the slideware program of your choice, create a three-slide presentation on a moment in history. You are limited to three slides because a good presentation should be concise even as it is visually rich.

[IT requirements 2 & 4]

### **Week 11 — November 8 & 10 — Digital Research**

*Read:* Cohen, "[From Babel to Knowledge: Data Mining Large Digital Collections](#)"

*Explore:* [Time Magazine Corpus](#)

*Explore:* [Google Ngram Viewer](#)

*Practicum:* Create a chart using one of the services mentioned, and explain how it illustrates a historical event or era. Be sure to include any caveats about using the chart.

[IT requirement 1 & 2]

### **Week 12 — November 15 & 17 — The Stability of Information Technology and Digital Records**

*Read:* Roy Rosenzweig, "[Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era](#)"

*Explore:* "Born digital" archives: [April 16 Archive](#), [Hurricane Digital Memory Bank](#), [September 11 Digital Archive](#)

*Read:* [Digital Preservation Guide from the Library of Congress](#)

*Practicum:* Create a preservation path, describing any hardware, software, and processes needed, for your family's historical record.

[IT requirement 1, 2, & 3]

### **Week 13 — November 22 — Securing Information [No class on November 24; Thanksgiving]**

*Read:* [Operation Aurora](#)

*Read:* [Basic Computer Security](#)

*Discussion:* The practical problems of computer security and how one weak link compromises the network and all the computers connected to it. We will discuss what informed users can do to protect against this.

*Exercise:* Students will find another computer security and/or ethics case and discuss on their course blogs.

[IT requirement 5]

### **Weeks 14/15 — November 29, December 1, 6, 8 — Student presentations and final wrap-up**

SEARCH

## SUBSCRIBE



[Subscribe to this blog](#)




[Receive posts via email](#)



New here? [Check out the best posts from this blog](#)

## TWITTER

 dancohen · 5,858 followers

## PODCAST



[Subscribe](#) to the [Digital Campus podcast](#), a biweekly discussion of how digital media and technology are affecting learning, teaching, and scholarship at colleges, universities, libraries, and museums. Featuring [Tom Scheinfeldt](#), [Mills Kelly](#), and me.

## INFO



I'm the Director of the [Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media](#) at [George Mason University](#) and a historian who explores—and tries to influence through theory, software, websites, and this blog—the impact of computing on the humanities (see my full [bio](#) and [cv](#)).

### **This blog is Zotero-enabled.**

Easily save, organize, annotate, share, and cite posts with [Zotero](#), the next-generation research tool.





Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog by [Dan Cohen](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License](#).