

HIST390-DL1
Fall 2020
Dr. Abby Mullen

[This is a truncated and less-interesting version of the course website, which exists at <http://abbymullen.org/hist390fall2020/>. To get a true sense of the course, you should go look at that course website.]

About

This class is a unique one: a history class that meets the IT requirements for the Mason Core. It's not like any class you've taken before, mostly likely. In it, you'll be stretched and you may be confused at times, but by the end you'll come out with knowledge and skills you didn't expect.

What is this class going to be like?

This semester, for the first time, this class will be fully online. I chose to make it online and asynchronous for a few reasons. First, I don't believe we can operate safely in a large class on campus this semester. That's just the reality. So that's why we're online. We're asynchronous because I believe that it's not possible to replicate the in-class experience merely by meeting on Zoom (this is your first lesson about digital technology). So instead of trying to use Zoom as a substitute for an in-person class, I've designed a whole new asynchronous class for you. You'll be doing individual work, but you'll also have a chance to build community with me and your classmates in different ways than you might in person.

I hope that we'll embrace these differences, rather than chafe against them. Things are different now. They may be different for the rest of your college career. Maybe the old ways aren't gone forever, but this semester we can create new paths for learning and community that can enrich your experience going forward, no matter what that experience looks like.

But this kind of teaching and learning is new! It might not be new for you, but it is new for me, your professor. So we may do some things that absolutely flop. That's ok. We'll learn from our mistakes, correct course, and carry on.

The biggest challenge in asynchronous classes is that students have to be intrinsically motivated to do all the activities. You won't have the watchful eye of your teacher staring balefully at you (just kidding, I don't do that even face-to-face) during class to encourage you to get involved. You're going to have to WANT to get involved. I've tried to help you by making the class activities meaningful and even fun, but there will likely be some that you don't see the value of or that seem silly to you. I'd ask that you just do them anyway, if you can.

What is this class about, anyway?

This class is called "The Digital Past," and we will be learning about the past and the digital, but mostly not about the past of the digital. Instead, we're focusing on a particular historical topic—

War in the Antebellum United States—and seeing how digital tools and technologies can help us understand this topic and others.

In this class, you will:

Create digital history on the Internet.

Evaluate how technology shapes and is shaped by our understanding of the past.

Analyze how war affected the antebellum United States.

Because it is a Mason Core IT course, this course will also meet the following learning outcomes:

Students will understand the principles of information storage, exchange, security, and privacy and be aware of related ethical issues.

Students will become critical consumers of digital information; they will be capable of selecting and evaluating appropriate, relevant, and trustworthy sources of information.

Students can use appropriate information and computing technologies to organize and analyze information and use it to guide decision-making.

Students will be able to choose and apply appropriate algorithmic methods to solve a problem.

What materials do I need for this class?

There is no textbook for this class; all readings will be online. That said, you do need a few things.

- A personal website, set up through Reclaim Hosting, that includes WordPress (we'll set this up during the first week of class); this will cost \$30 for a calendar year
- A Gmail account. You'll need this so we can do some collaborative work in Google Docs and Sheets. If you don't already have a Gmail account, you can make one that's solely for the purposes of this class and delete it afterward.
- A computer or computing device like a tablet that has an Internet connection. If you don't have this, talk to me very very early in the semester.
- A way to create video or audio content (a phone, a computer, a tablet) that you can post for discussion

CREDITS

In this mid-covid world, I have clung to many many many people's superior wisdom about teaching technology, teaching online, and teaching with compassion. In particular, my teaching philosophy and practice is informed by scholars such as Ryan Cordell, Cate Denial, Joshua Eyler, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Kevin Gannon, and Mills Kelly; many others have offered sage advice on Twitter (including some that I should undoubtedly call out by name but I've forgotten them; if that's you, I'm sorry and I do appreciate you). Thanks to Lindsay Passenger Wieck for being a constant sounding board for my more outlandish ideas; this course is better because of you. Thanks also the HIST390 instructors from this and past semesters, especially Katja Hering and Nate Sleeter. I've adapted the grading system in this course from Ryan Cordell.

Policies

My basic policies all exist so that you can give yourself a chance to learn but also so you can give yourself some space to take care of the rest of your life.

Main policy: If you are sick, please rest!

This semester is going to be an experiment in flexibility. We're nowhere near out of the crisis that covid-19 has set in motion, and though you may have settled into something like a rhythm, things could change at any moment. Anxiety and exhaustion, mentally and physically, are ever-present realities. For many of you, this will be your first experience taking an online course.

With that in mind, here are my main expectations:

Make a good-faith effort to complete the work in the syllabus on time.

Be respectful of others' time and needs.

Be willing to change things up if our current system isn't working.

Participate in the discussions online.

Ask a lot of questions! Don't wait to get help.

If you know of something that will prevent you from being active in our class, please let me know. You don't have to be specific, but I'd appreciate a heads-up. (Please do this privately, either in an email or via direct message in Slack.)

If you see another classmate struggling, help them out. This isn't a competition; we're all in it together.

UNIVERSITY-WIDE POLICIES

See the George Mason University catalog for general policies, as well as the university statement on diversity. You are expected to know and follow George Mason's policies on academic integrity and the honor code. Please ask me if you have any questions about how these policies apply to this course. Please note the dates for dropping and adding this course from the academic calendar.

GETTING HELP AND ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please talk to me and contact the Office of Disability Services at 703-993-2474 or <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. That said, if you need help about anything, or you have special circumstances that I need to know about to help you succeed in this class, please come talk to me. Special circumstances could be a disability, or childcare issues, or an aging parent who needs help, or a full-time job, or any number of other things. I can't help you unless you tell me that you need help.

LIFE

We're all humans. This class is not your only responsibility. I know that. If there are things in your life that are making it hard for you to do your work, please let me know. If you're struggling with mental health, or your work schedule is overwhelming, or you need help with time management or workload management, please talk to me privately.

ENROLLMENT IN THIS CLASS

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class.

Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes.

Last Day to Add: August 31

Last Day to Drop: September 15

After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons. Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

Assessment

This class is all about moving you from wherever you are, in terms of history and technology, to someplace further along both of those lines. It's not about you meeting an "objective" standard, but about making progress that feels meaningful to you.

That said, there are skills in this class that have to be done "right" in order for the ideas to work. But in the tech world, and in the history world, learning is iterative: in other words, you get more than one shot to learn something. Sometimes an initial failure helps you learn and remember the right way even better. So in this class, you're going to get as many attempts to do the major projects as you need.

By contrast, discussion is something that has to keep moving in order to really be effective. So you don't get more than one chance on discussion; you just move on if you miss something.

So, how are we going to move together from novice to not-as-novice? We're going to use a process called "Contract Grading." In this system, you and I agree together on how much work you're going to do, and what will happen if you don't, and we agree on what grade that work will merit. You'll have one chance in the middle of the semester to revise your contract to change your grade, if you like.

HOW DOES CONTRACT GRADING WORK?

By Monday, September 7, you'll need to submit a grade contract to me, using this form. It needs to include four things:

The grade you want to contract for

The specific things you'll do in order to achieve that grade

The penalties you'll assess on yourself for not meeting your contract obligations (and the ways in which you'll show me how you assessed that penalty)

Anything I need to know about you in order to help you achieve your goals

This isn't completely individual: I'll mandate some of the things you have to do; you'll select from some options. You may not contract for a D or an F.

To receive an A, you agree to these things:

Satisfactory completion of Small Projects 1-3
Satisfactory completion of three of the four remaining small projects (4-7)
Satisfactory completion of final project, going above and beyond the requirements to create a really excellent project
Completion of at least one response per week
Participation in group discussion at an A level (which you will assess yourself)
Respect for your classmates' persons and ideas in both synchronous and asynchronous communications
Completion of self-assessment
Completion of scheduled office hours visit
Any other thing you wish to have assessed
To receive a B, you agree to these things:

Satisfactory completion of Small Projects 1-3
Satisfactory completion of two of the four remaining small projects (4-7)
Satisfactory completion of final project, going above and beyond the minimum requirements
Completion of at least one response per week, but you can take one week off
Participation in group discussion at a B level (which you will assess yourself)
Respect for your classmates' persons and ideas in both synchronous and asynchronous communications
Completion of scheduled office hours visit
Completion of self-assessment
To receive a C, you agree to these things:

Satisfactory completion of Small Projects 1-3
Satisfactory completion of one of the four remaining small projects (4-7)
Satisfactory completion of the final project with the minimum requirements
Completion of at least one response per week, but you can take two weeks off
Participation in group discussions at a C level (which you will assess yourself)
Respect for your classmates' persons and ideas in both synchronous and asynchronous communications
Completion of scheduled office hours visit
Completion of self-assessment

What is your professor's part in this contract?

Every contract has stipulations on both sides; both parties agree to certain terms. Here are the terms you may either tacitly or explicitly acknowledge in your contract that you will get from my part in this contract.

By accepting your contract, I (and my TAs) will promise these things:

I will promptly provide constructive feedback, not attacking you as a person but only seeking to make your work better.

I will be responsive to your questions, comments, and ideas.

I will create high-quality materials that will challenge you and educate you about the topics of this class.

I will be your advocate, not your adversary; I will work with you to overcome the difficulties that hinder your success in this class, whether that difficulty relates directly to the class content or not.

I will be respectful of your person and your ideas.

What happens if you don't meet the terms of your contract?

First of all, I will be working with you throughout the semester to make sure that you do meet the terms. I reserve the right to lower your grade by 1/3 (so, a minus grade) if I feel that you have technically met the terms of your contract but have not demonstrated a good-faith effort to be involved in the life of the class. By the same token, I reserve the right to raise your grade by 1/3 (so, a plus grade) if I'm extremely impressed with the work you've done.

But it may be that things go catastrophically wrong. If they do, I do reserve the option of giving you a D or an F if you fail to meet the terms of significant portions of your contract. These grades will likely be the result of a breakdown of communication between you and me. If you're talking to me about your situation, I can help you. If you're not, I can't.

Assignments

The assignments for this class are a mix of informal progress checks and responses and formal projects. One of the most challenging aspects of an online asynchronous course is that we don't have the opportunity to develop community through informal connections in the classroom. We're going to try to develop a sense of class community through various means; though it won't be the same as an in-person experience, it will still be meaningful.

This semester is going to be a very hard semester for some of you, maybe for all of you. My goal is to be as adaptable and flexible as I can in order to help you learn while also juggling the many other physical, mental, and emotional stresses. To that end, I reserve the right to alter the assignments in the schedule as we go, due to shifts in student interests, new materials, or societal (or personal) upheaval.

RESPONSES

Our course is broken down into week-long content sections. You'll be responding to the course materials (how many depends on what grade you contracted for) through a variety of means.

I will provide you with a few prompts for how you may respond; however, if you have another burning question or concern, you may always respond to whatever struck you the most about our week's materials.

You have a variety of mechanisms to create your response, though not all options are in play for every response. I'll mark your options next to the response in the weekly plan. These mechanisms include:

Blog post, written and posted on your own blog

Audio recording, embedded in a blog post on your own blog
Hypothesis annotations (sign up for an account and join our course group here)
Some sort of creative creation (a drawing, a comic, an original song, etc.), submitted through this Google Form

PROJECTS

There are 7 small projects in this class plus the final project. No matter what grade you contracted for, you must complete the first three and the final project. How many of the others you do is up to your grade contract.

Small project 1: Website creation

Small project 2: Zotero

Small project 3: Tropy

Small project 4: Timeline

Small project 5: Map

Small project 6: Audio

Small project 7: Creative expression

Final project

All of your projects will center on one antebellum conflict, which you will select in the first week of class. You may choose from these options:

American Revolution

First Barbary War

War of 1812

Seminole Wars

Mexican-American War

PARTICIPATION

Participation is a vital part of this course, but it also may prove the most challenging. Your level of participation will vary throughout the semester, and it will also be tied to your grade contract.

You can participate in a number of ways. First and foremost, you will need to use our Slack group to interact with the people who are in your small group. This will mean a number of things:

You respond to your classmates' responses.

You respond to the discussion prompts given in the class materials.

You work independently to explore areas of interest that you've found through working through course materials.

Second, you will need to comment on fellow students' blog posts on our course website. You'll receive instructions about how to do that.

Third, you will need to have one 15-minute office hours appointment with me, your professor, at some point during the semester. This isn't if there are problems in the class; it's just to check in with me and see how you're doing with this class and everything else.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction + what is the Internet?

Week 2: American Revolution

Due Monday, August 31, 2020: Small Project 1 (Set up your website)

Week 3: Library “visit”

Week 4: Using the Internet to find credible sources

Week 5: Early naval wars

Due Monday, September 21, 2020: Small Project 2 (Zotero)

Week 6: Primary sources, digitally

Week 7: War of 1812

Due Monday, October 5, 2020: Small Project 3 (Tropy)

Week 8: Sustainability and ethics + visualizations

Week 9: Seminole Wars + professionalization

Week 10: Timelines + maps

Week 11: Exploration + other perspectives on war

Due Monday, November 2, 2020: Small Project 4 (Timeline)

Week 12: Audio + games

Due Monday, November 9, 2020: Small Project 5 (StoryMap)

Week 13: Mexican-American War + final project workshop

Week 14: Final project workshop

Due Monday, November 23, 2020: Small Project 6 (Podcast)

Week 15: Civil War

Due Monday, November 30, 2020: Small Project 7 (Creative expression)

Final project due December 8; final revisions due December 12