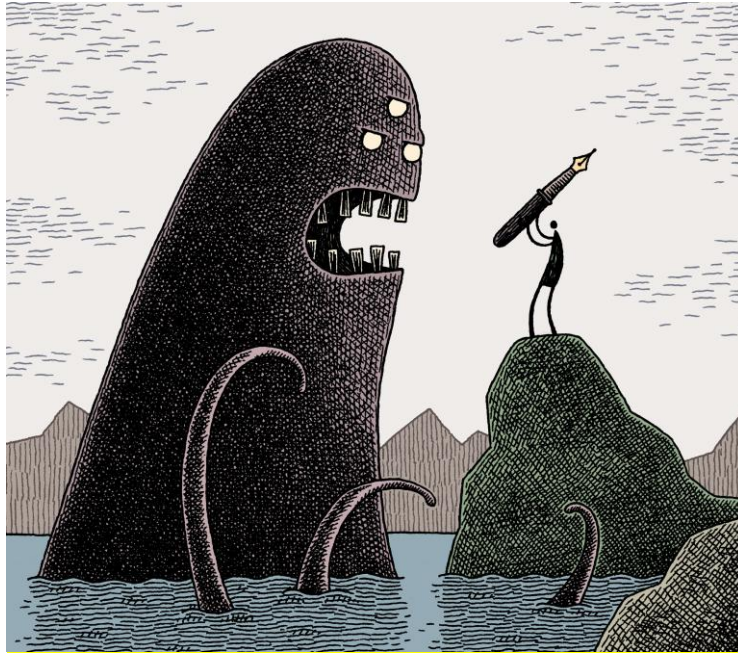


History 9805B
Writing History
Winter 2026



Instructor: **Professor Rob MacDougall**

Email: rmacdou@uwo.ca

Office: **Lawson Hall 2228**

Office Hours: **TBD** (These are drop-in hours, when you may drop in without an appointment, for any reason. I am also happy to talk to you other times! Just email me to set it up.)

Course Description

This is a graduate course about the writing of history—the actual art and craft of writing historical nonfiction. It is not a seminar on research methods, historiography, or any particular subfield of history. It is a weekly writing workshop, in which we will all give and get criticism, working together to improve our writing skills.

The work of the course consists of **weekly writing assignments** that we will share and critique together, paying attention not only to questions of evidence and argument but also to issues like voice, pace, storytelling, and style. We will read and discuss advice on academic and other writing, along with samples of effective prose. The purpose of the readings is to suggest strategies and techniques that we can apply to our own work, and to help us each think about how and maybe even why we want to write about the past.

Learning Objectives

Students who succeed in History 9805 should be able to:

- identify structures and conventions of historical nonfiction writing, and analyze historical writing as writing
- analyze, evaluate, and give constructive feedback on the writing of their peers
- reflect on their own writing and writing processes
- revise their written work to incorporate feedback and reflection
- write history with clarity and grace

Enrollment

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in History, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program. Please contact Kara Brown, the graduate program coordinator (kbrow@uwo.ca) if you are in a department other than History and would like to enroll in the course.

Course Materials

There is one **required** book for this course, available from the [Western bookstore](#) and other sellers in paperback or e-book format:

Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

There is also a **recommended** book for this course: Joseph Williams, *Style*. First published in 1981, this excellent writing guide has been revised and republished many times, often with different co-authors and subtitles. (It was originally just titled *Style*; then it became *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*; then *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*; there is also an abridged version, called *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, which has itself gone through multiple editions). Unfortunately, it keeps going in and out of print, and out-of-print editions are often very expensive. If you are in a position to buy a copy of this book, in any version or edition, I encourage you to do so. If you cannot, I will make the necessary lessons available to you. The edition I use most is the 5th edition of the abridged version:

Joseph M. Williams & Joseph Bizup, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015).

All other readings will be made available online.

Assignments and Evaluation

This class is a writing workshop. There will be a **short writing assignment due every week**. Sometimes this will be something new, sometimes this will build on or revise the assignment from the previous week. That is worth repeating: **when you enroll in this class, you are committing to sharing a new piece of writing with the entire class every week**. This is no small thing! But the

more you are able to put into this weekly writing, the more you will get out of this course. Each week the writing assignment will be due a few days before class; we will all read and workshop a small set of the assignments submitted. On weeks 4, 8, and 12, you will hand in **a revised and polished version of the writing you have been doing for the previous three weeks**. All assignments will be read, and all matter, but only the three revisions will receive detailed feedback and numeric grades.

Your course grade will be calculated as follows:

- 20% **Weekly writing assignments** (due every week; you may miss one without penalty)
- 20% **Revision #1** (due week 4; a polished version of writing from weeks 1, 2, and 3)
- 20% **Revision #2** (due week 8; a polished version of writing from weeks 5, 6, and 7)
- 20% **Revision #3** (due week 12; a polished version of writing from weeks 9, 10, and 11)
- 20% **Participation & feedback on other students' work** (every week)

More details on the assignments will be available at the start of term.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT is discouraged in this course. You may use AI tools in this course for initial activities, such as researching and refining your ideas, or drafting an outline to organize your thoughts—but **not** for generating prose. **All writing submitted in this course must be your own.** If in doubt, please ask me for clarification and advice. In one class we will discuss the use of such tools and experiment with them; any use of such tools beyond that should be clearly acknowledged and explained.

Course Schedule and Readings

This is only a draft schedule, still subject to change. For up-to-date information and instructions, including the weekly assignments, see the individual Course Content pages on our OWL site.

Week 1 Introduction to the Course

History as writing. Can good writing be taught? Writing in order to think. Unlearning the habits we've taught you.

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 1-2.

Short excerpts from a few pieces of historical prose I admire. (In 2024, we read the opening pages of Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*; Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages*; and Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map*.)

Week 2 Writing as Practice

“Practice” as in piano, and also as in mindfulness. Making time to write. Committing to revision. Our first workshop. Tools, not rules.

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapter 3.
Excerpts from various writing advice books.

Week 3 Writing for Readers

No ideas but in readers. My model for feedback. Read/write for others as you would have them read/write for you.

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 6-7.
Williams, *Style*, “Lesson 2: Actions” and “Lesson 3: Characters.”
Sample introductions to historical monographs. (In 2024, we read the introductions to Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* and J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empire: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean*.)

Week 4 Revising for Clarity and Coherence

When to get picky. Cohesion and coherence. Managing information. The Uneven U.

Read: William Germano, “Good to Better,” from *On Revision: The Only Writing that Counts*.
Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 8-10.
Williams, *Style*, “Lesson 4: Cohesion and Coherence” and “Lesson 5: Emphasis.”

Week 5 Framing an Argument

They say/I say. The work of an introduction: engaging, locating, and teaching; establishing a shared context, posing a problem, offering a solution.

Read: Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein, excerpt from *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*.
Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 11-12.
Williams, *Style*, “Lesson 6: Motivation.”
Sample introductions to several journal articles in history. (In 2024 we read the introductions to Matthew Avery Sutton, “Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamental Antiliberalism in a Global Age”; Elizabeth A. Fenn, “Biological Warfare in Eighteenth-Century North America: Beyond Jeffrey Amherst”; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” all from the *Journal of American History*.)

Week 6 Engaging Counterarguments

Planting a naysayer in your text. Verbs of argument. Modality and authority. Who cares? So what? And yet...

Read: Graff & Birkenstein, another excerpt from *They Say / I Say*.
Barbara Kamler & Pat Thomson, “Persuading an Octopus Into a Jar,” in *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*.

Other excerpts and samples. (In 2024, we read Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and sample introductions from three more journal articles.)

READING WEEK

Week 7 Using Evidence

Showing your iceberg. Curating your sources. Managing quotations. "History by the ounce."

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 15, 19, 21, 23.
Barbara Tuchman, "History by the Ounce."
Some excerpts from historical works presenting rich historical evidence. (In 2022, we read excerpts from Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*.)

Week 8 Revising for Style and Grace

The secret lives of sentences. Balance and symmetry. Troubleshooting long sentences. Pedantic punctuation stuff.

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 27-31.
Williams, *Style*, "Lesson 9: Shape" and "Lesson 10: Elegance."
Excerpt from Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools*.

Week 9 Telling Stories

Narration vs argument. Showing vs. telling. Unmotivated background. How to tell a joke.

Read: Zachary Schrag, "Storytelling," in *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*.
Other excerpts and examples. (In 2024, we read excerpts from Rick Perlstein's *Nixonland*, Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Sons*, and China Mieville's *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*.)

Week 10 Breaking the Rules

Going beyond what is "allowed" in academic history. Memoir, creative nonfiction, maybe fiction?

Read: Various excerpts and examples. (In 2024, we read excerpts from Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*; Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts"; John Higgs' *The KLF*; and John Kaag's *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*.)

Week 11 Writing in the Age of AI

We confront the Frankenstein that promises? threatens? to remake our relationship to reading and writing.

Read: Various essays and blog posts. (In 2024, we read short pieces by Benjamin Breen, Mark Humphries, Ethan Mollick, Aimee Morrison, John Warner, and Timothy Burke.)

Week 12 Being a Writer

Remaining a writer. Only writing writes. Publishing, academic and otherwise. Writing as a social practice; writing for life.

Read: Hayot, *Elements of Academic Style*, Chapters 32-34.
Williams, *Style*, “Lesson 11: Ethics of Style.”
Stephen Pyne, “Theory and Practice.”
Other excerpts and samples. (In 2024, we also read excerpts from Gregory Semenza, *Graduate Study for the 21st Century* and Steven Pinker, “Why Academics Stink at Writing.”)

Additional Statements

See additional policies and statements on the Graduate section of the History Department Website: https://history.uwo.ca/graduate/program_information/graduate_policies_and_statements.html. This includes information on academic support services for health and wellness and on other academic policies, including copyright, plagiarism, and accessibility.