

History 203L  
Dimensions of History and Lab  
M, W, F, 11:00 - 11:50: W 5:00-7:50  
CAS 228  
Spring Semester, 2009  
Roger Williams University

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## Course Introduction

(History 203) Examines the basic concerns of historians in the modern world, focusing on the development of history as an academic discipline, philosophies of history, and elements of historical method (research, writing, and analysis) 4 credits. *Roger Williams University Catalogue*

## Texts

Davidson, James W., and Lytle, Mark H.  
*After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*  
New York: McGraw Hill College Division, 2000

Rutherford, Edward  
*London*  
New York: Fawcett Books 1997

## Some Opening Remarks

The world of knowledge has changed dramatically since I began teaching 36 years ago. The major change ("revolutionary" is not too strong a word) is the explosion of access to information of all sorts. Regardless of who "invented" the information highway, we're all on it, or at least on its shoulder, and I don't believe we can survive doing the "same old, same old" much longer. Consequently, we'll be spending a lot of time at the computer, especially in the lab section of the course. Our room is "wifi" equipped, and I'm hoping the majority of you have laptop computers with wifi capacity. For the rest, we'll construct a workaround somehow..

Integrating new techniques with old ones is a risky business. I think this is a good course to use to stretch our capacities: it is a requirement only of the history major, and elective for everyone else. This means that those of you who are not majoring in history don't have to be here unless you want to be here. Most of you are majoring in history and should find the research techniques and methodologies very useful for the upper level courses. Hopefully, anyone taking the course as a free elective "for fun" will find them useful, too.

## Expectations of the Course

The catalogue description I've reproduced above is a good summary of what we'll be doing in this course. In addition, I want to explore some of the ways non-academic history interacts with the lives of people outside the bounds of a campus like our own. Large numbers of people who never have enjoyed studying history find experiencing it enjoyable and interesting. Popular fiction and movies on historical themes draw large audiences (*Brave Heart*, for example, or *The Madness of George III*, which we'll watch in class), and historical tourism is a booming business.

Each of the two main books in this course is designed to give us opportunities to experience academic history and explore its connections with life in general.

*After the Fact* will introduce us to a number of the problems of historical method and to a wide variety of theoretical approaches to the study of the past. Its 17 chapters provide a chronological exposure to American history, but they are independent of each other and each tells its own story. Most if not all of you who had U. S. History I and II, which will provide some advantage in background, but I am confident you won't find the story repetitive. We will read most of this book, with class discussions led by teams of class members.

*London* narrates the adventures and misadventures of about a half dozen fictitious English families through nearly 2,000 years of the development of the English Nation. We'll make this book central to an ongoing exercise involving research and class presentations by teams of investigators. It will also sit at the core of a paper each student will write. These presentations and papers will build upon the factual elements in this novel, based on internet research conducted as part of the process. The book is a fascinating exposition of fairly ordinary people caught up in fairly extraordinary events. **It is also VERY long.** I wager it may be the longest book many of you have ever read. It's Humongous. It's got a lot of pages. (Get the point?) I want to encourage people to get to, and through, the book in an expeditious fashion, reading it casually before returning to it with a greater eye for detail. In order to encourage you and to apply a wee bit of the whip, there will be a series of quizzes on a regular basis between now and **Early March**, by which time everyone should have completed a preliminary reading.

## The Internet Component

We will be spending part of most lab periods doing some internet work, and a significant part of your work outside of class will be internet based. I have begun a website for this class: you can locate it at <http://hist203.homestead.com>. After today, this site will be the controlling authority for this class. I do not plan to hand out any more written materials except in the case of unforeseen circumstances. Having said that, I have to say that I am certain that there will be a number of unforeseen circumstances: the technology of the internet is relatively new and growing by leaps and bounds. In its history, it is about as well developed as the model T was in the history of the automobile. We can expect machines not to work, systems to crash, websites to appear and disappear, and all sorts of other instances of Murphy's Law (anything that can go wrong, will). We'll just roll with the punches and do our best. UNFORTUNATELY, I have not been able to secure a computer-equipped classroom for this class, though our space is internet wired. From the responses to my pre-semester e-mail, I have found that most of you have wireless internet access on our computers (wifi). I have a spare I can bring in for someone as well, and there may be ways to work around the situation for the rest of you.

## Grading and Evaluation

People will be graded on a combination of written and oral presentations, plus possibly a quiz or two. There will be an additional requirement for a "research log," in which your daily work is faithfully and accurately recorded.

### Oral work in the classroom.

1. Class Discussions on the essays in *Davidson* will be led by panels of three students. Each student will be responsible for participating in a panel or panels. Students will list essays in order of preference, and I will do my best to ensure that students get their higher choices in each case. Students will be evaluated on how well they have mastered the material and how well they encourage the class to enter into the discussion. I will encourage each group to meet with me at least once in the planning phase and perhaps a second time immediately before it presents. (Everyone needs to be aware that this is a reciprocal obligation: the more you participate as a member of the class the more you have a right to expect from the class when you're in a leadership position).
2. Group Research and presentation of information relating to one of the units involved in studying *Rutherford*. The class will be apportioned equally among the units (see the website for how these units are divided). The group is responsible for conducting internet research on selected people, places, events, movements, objects, etc., mentioned in the chapters for which they are responsible. Part of this

will be devoted to presenting a summary of that part of the book itself. Each group will be responsible for a 45 minute (minimum) presentation.

### Written work:

1. A paper, based on some aspect of your work using Rutherford. This paper should be the equivalent of between 8 and 10 pages in length, documented informally (more of that later), but written grammatically with some attention to a pleasing literary style. This paper will be converted and posted to a website of your own making. You'll learn how to make web pages in the lab section of the course. I recommend using the software at <http://www.homestead.com>, which is the program I use to make the websites for all my courses. If you already make websites using geocities or some other commercial site, that's fine. There is also the possibility of using [My RWU](#)
2. A short reaction paper (2-3 pages maximum), based on either of the two articles from Davidson and Lytle for which you will be responsible to lead class discussion.
3. Quizzes on Rutherford. These will be short answer, general, rather than specific, and designed to reward diligent and timely reading.

### Other Work

1. **Web research.** Each of you will sign up for two newsletters: These are [The Librarian's Internet Index](#) and [The Internet Scout Project](#). You'll be creating annotated bibliographies based on the websites reviewed by these two projects. The bibliographies will have two parts: the first will locate useful sources for *one* of the introductory history courses (Western Civilization I, Western Civilization II, United States History I, or United States History II) and the second will locate useful sources for *one* of the upper level History or American Studies courses). In the course of this work, I'll also be introducing you to some very useful web-based resources, [delicious](#) and [StumbleUpon](#), to cite just two. You will also have an opportunity and obligation to contribute to the [Distributed Proofreading Project](#).
2. **Attendance and Participation.** This course will only work if everyone gives it his or her best. Attendance will be taken on a regular basis, and excessive absences penalized. The quality of participation and preparation for class will be evaluated and constitute approximately 10% of your grade. Three unexcused absences will lower a grade by 1/3. Coming, but coming unprepared is the equivalent of an absence. Excuses will be granted for illness, a family emergency, or a scheduled activity for another class if the teacher of that class notifies me directly. Seven unexcused absences will result in the assignment of the grade of F. Exemplary attendance and participation will boost grades.

You'll notice that with the exception of participation and preparation for class I haven't broken down these tasks in terms of their contributions to your final grade. I'm going to try to be flexible about this. You all have different strengths, and some of these assignments are going to be more challenging based upon your particular skill set. I want to take that into account when I fill in the grade sheet at the end of the semester. More about this later.