

## 1. Introduction: Why History?

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*Employing History: A Guide to Graduate School and Navigating the Job Market* is a manual by historians for historians. This new edition revises and updates an earlier text *Becoming a Historian* (1999, 2007). It seeks to answer questions you might not want to ask (or might not know how to ask) about pursuing an M.A. or PhD in history, career options, and sharing your work. It isn't quite a how-to manual. Instead, we share different ways of being a historian, bringing together the best advice available.

This guide won't resolve big picture questions facing universities. In our consultations, CHA graduate student members expressed frustration about PhD enrolments, precarity, and the concept of "alt ac" work. We don't address these issues directly in the manual. We do, however, try to reflect a reality with which universities continue to grapple: most M.A. and PhD-prepared scholars will work outside the academy.

Sections on applying for graduate school, collegiality, grants, the conference circuit, and publishing have been retained in similar form to earlier editions of the guide. In these chapters, we've added content about accessibility, social media, publishing for a general audience, and financial survival. Other sections are new, reflecting an expanded understanding of what a historian can be and where they can work. You'll find a more extensive section on career outcomes that includes advice from working historians, profiles on them, and some sample CVs.

### Why History?

We use the term historian to describe people who use history as a lens through which to analyze problems, teach, interpret the world, pursue social justice, uncover secrets, and tell stories.

Training to be a professional historian is something that applies to anyone who works in the field, broadly conceived. Teachers, civil servants, museum workers, public historians, journalists, and more, all need to have the same broad learning, methodological training, and research skills.

As we finalize this manual in 2020, history is at the forefront of public debate on several intersecting issues. History is always relevant. But, at this moment, there is a

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demand for historians to offer context on issues including anti-racism, a global pandemic, police brutality, and settler colonialism. Societies all over the world argue about their shared pasts, about monuments and school textbooks, about collective guilt and modern accountability. Everywhere we see one side accuse another of lying or distorting or “editing” history. What these struggles over the past confirm is that historical memory is a serious part of contemporary life and everyone knows it. The public sphere is filled with calls for more historical understanding, even while universities, governments, and students opt for other fields of study. We can’t solve that dilemma here. But what we’re trying to do is move past a hierarchical understanding of what being a historian means, to provide a guide to navigating the training process in ways that maximize your career flexibility. (And hopefully bring more “history” to the world.)

History is a discipline. It is neither a vocation nor a specific career path. Most history degrees will prepare you to study and interpret the past. Beyond that, history can involve different methods (oral history, documentary analysis, data mining) and can include any time period. Likewise, a history degree can have diverse outcomes and equip you to do different jobs, teach in other disciplines, or simply satisfy your curiosity, among many other things. Everyone’s motivations for doing history can be very different. This guide recognizes that, within the “discipline” of history, there are many different ways of being a historian.

### Why us?

Why and how do we qualify to edit and write new content for this manual? We don’t qualify more or less than others in this field. The spirit of this guide has always been for historians to share their experiences with those who are new to the profession. We continue that approach, as well as the goal of including as many different voices as possible. Together, we represent three different generations of historians who are using our history degrees in different ways. Below, we share a little bit about ourselves. Our experiences haven’t been ideal or smooth or perfect. We’ve had some wins and some setbacks. We’ve learned lessons and continue to learn lessons. As editors, we are good examples that being a historian isn’t just one thing.

*Carly Ciuflo*

I began my doctoral studies with experience in museums, archives, and libraries as a junior researcher, copyright and acquisitions assistant, archives assistant, and media

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librarian. Being a historian as a young woman with a History MA in venues like these was an equal-parts precarious and liberating kind of living. Returning to an academic environment as a mature PhD student has, for me, been a process of sorting out who I want to work with and where I can do my best work.

I first came into contact with the last rendition of the *Becoming a Historian* handbook when I seriously considered returning to the academy to pursue a PhD. I was living in Halifax at the time, mid-way through a five-month oral history transcriptionist contract at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. Before coming to know that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights was being built, Pier 21 was the place I imagined when I thought “dream job.” But, in 2016, the job was not going well, and I felt completely lost, professionally.

On a phone call with Dr Rhonda Hinthner, who hired me for my first contract at the CMHR in 2013, we worked through the pros and cons of what my History PhD project would be, where best to do it, and who I should work with to see it all through. Quite quickly, she suggested I seek out the *Becoming a Historian* handbook; it, she said, would help guide me through the months and years ahead.

There is no such thing as one way of being a historian anymore, if there even ever was one. I hope our efforts here, though incomplete, give some sense of the ways becoming a historian has stayed the same and the ways it has changed for a wider range of people in the field.

*Jenny Ellison*

In 2007, I volunteered to be a graduate student commentator on the last edition of this manual. To my surprise, I return in 2020 as a co-editor and a working historian. My experiences in the intervening years led me to volunteer to be part of the group that revised this document. As a PhD student at York University, I loved BAH because it demystified parts of academia and answered questions I was afraid to ask. I followed a lot of the guidance given in this manual and, looking back on it today, know that I made a few mistakes in spite of the sage advice offered by previous generations of editors.

As an editor, my career path is a good example of the fluidity of contemporary post-PhD work in history. After my PhD I worked a year contract teaching at four (!) different universities, followed by a two-year postdoctoral fellowship, a one-year maternity leave, and a 9-month Limited Term Appointment. Through these years, the

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vision I had for my career when I started graduate school changed pretty dramatically. I fell out of love with the idea of working in universities and became increasingly committed to public engagement. Realizing this shift, I decided to look for work outside of universities, joining the Canadian Museum of History as Curator of Sport and Leisure in 2015.

I'm not sharing this because it is a success story. Depending on your viewpoint, it might seem like a story of failure. I see it as a story of career re-evaluation and reinvention. It reflects the biggest lesson I've learned between graduate school and today, which is that careers are fluid. What you do will shift no matter where your career takes you because your life will change and/or the job market will change. In graduate school, I thought (as most people did) that becoming a historian meant one thing: being a professor. What I've learned in my path through this system is that there are many ways to do history.

*Andrew M. Johnston*

I have had the most traditional pathway to becoming a professional historian, and it is therefore perhaps the most outdated. I leveraged a respectable undergraduate career at the University of Toronto in the early 1980s into graduate degrees in the US and Britain. When I returned to Canada in the early 1990s, dissertation still unfinished and one year of SSHRC funding left, I stumbled fortuitously into a one-year contract job. At that time, there was another recession, fresh rounds of university cuts, and much handwringing about the value of the humanities and, consequently, few tenure-track jobs.

There were only two jobs in my field (as a PhD student, we sometimes find our “field” is often defined by the next job ad), both in the Maritimes. I was not, to be honest, sure I wanted to be a professor for the simple reason all graduate students feel: I didn't think I was smart enough. Most days, I confessed to myself as I struggled with finishing my dissertation that I simply wanted to retreat to a cabin in the woods. But I applied, got one call, and was hired (I later heard) because of my “sangfroid” during the interview—my certainty that I was unqualified having been mistakenly interpreted as a state of existential calm. I was also hired without having yet completed my PhD, something unheard of in today's market, but it was becoming rare even then. The University of New Brunswick's (UNB) congenial history department took a chance though, for which I owe them everything. Everything I learned about teaching and collegiality, I learned at UNB. It was there, too, about

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three years in, that I was asked by some graduate students when I knew I wanted to be a professor. I answered honestly that I only just realized it at that very moment. I needed to be a professor before I could escape from my insecurity about it. But, to be honest, it could have gone either way.

I know that my path has been ridiculously lucky, barely keeping ahead of the slamming of academic doors behind me. But I still believe that the history of the world was of urgent importance to even the greenest of undergraduates from the smallest of towns. That passion for the ineluctable virtues of thinking historically kept me employed, but it's only good fortune that placed me in a tenured position, and no small measure of privilege. It's clear today that ardour alone is no longer enough for the conventional academic career, but this guide aims to provide the best advice for navigating the challenges and opportunities of living in a precarious economy while keeping that idealism for history alive.