

# HIST 390: The Digital Past

Fall 2012  
Tue-Thu 10:30am-11:45am  
Krug Hall 242  
George Mason Universit

## **Dr. Amanda French**

Research Hall 474

Office Hours: Thu 1pm-3pm and by appointment

Email & Gtalk: [amandafrenchphd@gmail.com](mailto:amandafrenchphd@gmail.com)

Web: [amandafrench.net](http://amandafrench.net)

Course blog: <http://digitalpast002.onmason.com>

## **Teaching Assistant: Richard Hardesty**

[rhardest@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:rhardest@masonlive.gmu.edu)

## **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.

## Grading

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

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

## Important Dates

- Tue, Sep 4 — last day to drop class with no penalty
- Tue, Sep 18 — last day to drop class with 33% tuition penalty
- Fri, Sep 28 — final drop deadline with 67% tuition penalty
- Tue, Oct 9 — no class due to Columbus Day
- Thu, Oct 11 — midterm exam
- Thu Nov 22 — no class due to Thanksgiving
- Thu Dec 6 — last day of class
- Tue Dec 18, 10:30am-1:15pm — final exam date; final project due by email to professor by 2pm

## 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 4, 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.

**How Not to Plagiarize:** If you are copying and pasting text that someone else wrote, you might be plagiarizing. Pasted or manually retyped text is not plagiarized only when all of the following three conditions are true: 1) the pasted text is surrounded by quotation marks or set off as a block quote, and 2) the pasted text is attributed in your text to its author and its source (e.g., "As Jane Smith writes on her blog . . ."), and 3) the pasted text is cited in a footnote, endnote, and/or a bibliography (e.g., "Smith, Jane. *Smith Stuff*. Blog. Available <http://smithstuff.wordpress.com>. Accessed August 1, 2012.") Conventions for copying and pasting computer code are less strict, but even when you copy and paste code, if you can identify the actual individual who wrote the code, you should give the coder's name and the source of the code in a code comment. If you find and use images, audio, or video on the web, you should also cite the creator (if known) and the source (at the very least) of that media file, usually

in a caption as well as in a footnote, endnote, or bibliography. Note that reproducing someone else's text, image, audio, or video file in full on your own public website may constitute copyright infringement, even with proper attribution.

Communications: In general, the best way to get hold of me is by email; I will usually respond within one business day. Please be aware that I don't usually check email in the evening or on weekends. You may also IM me using GTalk at [amandafrenchphd@gmail.com](mailto:amandafrenchphd@gmail.com) during my office hours or tweet me any time at [@amandafrench](https://twitter.com/amandafrench). I will usually contact you by email, and I too will try not to expect a response sooner than one business day.

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. 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.

## Course Outline

### Week 1 — The Digital Landscape — Aug 28 & 30

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

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

Exercise: Sign up for a blog at [onmason.com](http://onmason.com), learn [how to use its WordPress writing environment](#), which is a common one for many blog services, and fill out your profile with a short biography. By Monday at 10:30am, publish your first blog post 1) identifying the most important or interesting part for you of any one of next Tuesday's assigned material, 2) explaining why that part is important or interesting, and 3) listing three potential historical topics you might be interested in researching throughout the semester (e.g., "séances in America"). 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 — The Underpinnings of the Web — Sep 4 & 6

Read: Cohen & Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, ch. 2, "[Getting Started: The Basic Technologies Behind the Web](#)," and Ted Nelson, "[Complex information processing](#)"

Video: [History of the Internet](#)

Exercise: Create a blog post responding to next week's readings *using the HTML tab* that includes the following: subheads for sections, a numbered list, an unnumbered list, bold and italicized words, at least one link, and at least one image. See [the W3Schools.com HTML tutorial](#) if you need help. In this

blog post, choose one of the topics you posted last week and frame it as a question that can be answered by research (e.g., “When were séances most popular in America?”).

### **Week 3 — Digitization, Searching, and Finding — Sep 11 & 13**

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”); Archive Finder, also available through the Mason library website under the databases tab, and [Flickr Commons](#).

Exercise: Find one item from each of the above sources related (at least tangentially) to your research question: a newspaper article or advertisement, an archival collection, and an image. Write a blog post describing (or including, or linking to) what you found and its significance for your research.

[IT requirement 1]

### **Week 4 — The Reliability of Digital Sources, and the Analog Sources They Come From — Sep 18 & 20**

(Dan Cohen will teach class on Thu Sep 20)

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](#)”

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

[IT requirement 1, 3]

### **Week 5 — Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues in a Digital Age: Owning and Mining the Past — Sep 25 & 27**

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

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

Video: [The Amen Break](#)

Video: [Copyright Criminals](#)

Exercise: Determine the ethics and legality of one of the following sites:

- 1) Teachers Pay Teachers
- 2) Internet History Sourcebooks Project
- 3) History in Photographs of the California Gold Rush

[IT requirement 3]

### **Week 6 — Securing Information — Oct 2 & 4**

Read: Mat Honan, “[How Apple and Amazon Security Flaws Led to My Epic Hacking](#)” and “[How I got my Digital Life Back](#)”

Read: [Basic Computer Security](#)

Read: [Passwords Under Assault](#)

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: Evaluate your own computer security practices

[IT requirement 5]

### **Week 7 — Midterm exam — Oct 11**

(No class Tue Oct 9 due to Columbus Day)

### **Week 8 — Tools and Services — Oct 16 & 18**

Readings and Exercise: Familiarize yourself with some of the tools we will be using in the second half of the class by trying them out and reading their help documentation.

[Google Docs \(Spreadsheets, Presentations, Charts\) Tutorials](#)

[Google Chart Wizard](#)

[Google Maps – My Maps](#): If you are logged into your Google account, go to [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com) and click on “My Place” and then “Create Map”. You can export your map as KML by adding “&output=kml” to the end of the URL for the map you create (the URL is in the upper right, where the chain/link icon is).

[KML Tutorial](#)

### **Week 9 — Maps, Spatial Analysis & History — Oct 23 & 25**

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](#)

Exercise: Create a historical map involving geolocated data, images, or video using [Google Maps](#). Some links to get you started:

[Guide to Google Maps “My Maps”](#)

[New York Public Library historical maps](#)

[Digital Harlem, 1915-1930](#)

[LookBackMaps](#)

[Overlaying a historical map on Google Earth](#)

[Maps from the Library of Congress](#)

[History Pin](#)

[IT requirements 1, 2, & 4]

### **Week 10 — Databases and Statistics — Oct 30 & Nov 1**

Read at least two [Feltron reports](#)

Practicum: Learn how to use [Google Charts](#) well and create at least one chart using historical data.

[Daytum personal data recorder and visualizer](#)

[Rumsey map search](#)

[Rumsey Historical Maps on Google Maps](#)

[Google Maps introduction at TeachingHistory.org](#)

[Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#)

[Example Google search for KML/KMZ files](#)

### **Week 11 — The Visual Communication of Information — Nov 6 & 8**

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

Explore: [Many Eyes](#)

Exercise: 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 12 — Data Mining and Text Mining — Nov 13 & 15**

(Dan Cohen teaches class Tue Nov 13)

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

Explore: [Time Magazine Corpus](#)

Explore: [Google Ngram Viewer](#)

Other tools: [Wordle](#), [BYU Corpora](#), [Bookworm](#)

Exercise: 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 13 — The Stability of Information Technology and Digital Records — Nov 20**

(No class Thu Nov 22 due to Thanksgiving)

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](#)

[IT requirement 1, 2, & 3]

### **Week 14 — The Art of Programming — Nov 27 & 29**

Video: [Intro to Scratch](#)

Read: [Scratch Getting Started Guide](#)

Download and explore: [Scratch](#)

Exercise: Solve the [Blockly maze](#)

**Week 15 — Final wrap-up and review — Dec 4 & 6**

Final projects should be submitted via email to Amanda French by 2pm on Tuesday, December 18.

*This syllabus based heavily on one originally developed by Dan Cohen available at <http://www.dancohen.org/digitalpast/>*