

Study Tips: The Four Steps to Success

Get interested! History provides invaluable perspective on how the world—and individuals like yourself—became what they are today. Just like individuals or families, cultures and institutions have pasts. Being familiar with your past allows you to better understand your present.

The challenge: My classes are challenging because they cover a lot of history, including many specific laws, cases, or other kinds of concrete examples, and thus there are a lot of names, (approximate) dates, and facts to know. But one also needs ideas, i.e., the significance of the facts. So the best study tip of all is to connect these two: the ideas allow you to make sense of the information. Most students need to spend at least two hours outside class for every hour in class, i.e., about six hours a week. Here are my suggestions for the best way to spend that time:

Daily Preparation: The Four Steps to Success

1. READ the assignments before class, making notes on important points, questions, etc. The key is to read actively (see below, step 3). I usually assign readings for the whole week, and ideally you should read all of them before the first class of the week for which they are assigned. When you do not have enough time to do this, it is also OK to prioritize the readings based on the order in which they appear on the syllabus. Beyond this, it also usually makes sense to begin with the most general, secondary sources (i.e., textbooks and other texts written recently), and then proceed to more specific texts and to the primary sources (primary sources were written in the period being studied, including laws, court cases, etc.). Primary sources are usually assigned in smaller quantities, because they can be challenging to read, but they provide the essential evidence for historical analysis. I will often reserve class time towards the end of each week to discuss the primary sources.

2. TAKE GOOD LECTURE NOTES: To get the most out of lectures, you need to do the reading beforehand, so that you already have a sense of the topic, and have already come across some of the key names or new concepts, so that they will not slow you up too much in class. This should enable you to take careful, complete lecture notes, while still being able to think about the material at the same time. In this way, class time is actually your first review of the material! Remember to get down virtually everything that is said, **NOT JUST WHAT'S IN THE BULLETS**. Taking good lecture notes is an art: you need to listen carefully, leave yourself lots of space on the page, and write quickly. *Tip: leave 2-3 lines between each bullet, for filling in later (see step 3).

3. STUDY ACTIVELY: This is the most important step, though it necessarily builds on the previous two. Don't just read, **WRITE**: read over and fill-in or rewrite your lecture notes, preferably when class is still fresh in your mind. At this stage you should also review the reading assignments, paying more attention to what you now can identify as the most important sections. For most students it is also helpful to make flash cards for key people, laws, cases, events, or other specific things. You can identify the most important factual items by noting which ones receive the most attention in lecture or the readings: an item is very important when most or all of a lecture slide, or at least a page or two in a text, is devoted to it.

4. ASK QUESTIONS. I can always answer questions in and after class, during my office hours, or by appointment. Please bring your lecture notes and any flash cards and outlines with you! I will be glad to advise you as to how to choose key facts, identify main ideas, make outlines, etc.