Dear future student,

With very few constraints on paper choices and the majority of time spent outside the lecture hall, the key to studying History at Cambridge is independence – the emphasis is on discovering what interests you most and working out your own approach to learning about it (whilst enjoying the freedom and flexibility to get involved in all that Cambridge has to offer beyond essays and supervisions).

Across the three years of your degree, the only restriction of time period is that you have to study one paper (out of a total of ten components) covering a pre-1750 period. In Part One (first and second year) there are 24 papers to choose from, all of which offer fairly broad outlines. First year typically involves taking papers from British social and economic, British political and European categories (each divided by period). Second year involves choosing two more papers, with World History, American History and History of political thought options on offer alongside the British and European ones. Each paper is divided into essay topics and most supervisors will let you choose the topics you want to write about most. Part One also involves a piece of coursework called Themes and Sources, with a choice of around 12 papers on offer, which tend to be more specific than the outline papers.

Part One follows a structure based on writing one essay a week during term time. Although this may sound daunting at first, you soon get used to it and learn how to work pretty efficiently. One of the main benefits of having a weekly essay is that it’s easy to get into a routine and plan your work without being thrown off course by a rush of several deadlines all at once. Being able to plan work in advance so easily means that there is always time to fit in plenty of extra-curricular and social activities. The majority of working time is spent reading and, since nobody can ever be expected to finish a week’s reading list, it’s all about finding a balance that works for you. Everyone works differently and there’s definitely no set formula to follow but a useful guide can be to split your day into 3 sections (morning, afternoon and evening) and aim to work for two of these. And be sure to leave yourself at least one full day off each week!

Contact time for History is pretty minimal, with perhaps one or two lectures per day on average. Many people choose not to go to lectures whilst others find them useful for giving an overview – it’s really your decision. The most important contact time is the hourly supervision each week, which is a great opportunity to have all of your questions answered by an expert. Unlike most other subjects, History supervisions tend to be one-on-one. This may seem scary at first but it can actually be a great way to build confidence and it allows you to tailor your essay and the discussion to your own interests. Even better, it means that you never have to compare yourself to other historians and can avoid some of the competitiveness that comes with group supervisions. But if you do ever want to chat with other historians, there are about six of us in each year at Downing who are always happy to help so don’t hesitate to ask any questions!

The best advice I can give would be to ask for help when you need it and never let the length of reading lists panic you, to figure out your own approach without worrying about how other people work and – most importantly – to balance all of this with plenty of time spent outside the library!

Feel free to contact me jmg214@cam.ac.uk if you have any questions

Jess Guest