

St. Olaf College

Department of History

Departmental Distinction

Guidelines used prior to Fall 2018

Distinction is a formal academic honor (which appears on transcripts) that each department in the college may vote to bestow upon its senior majors who have those qualities most valued in their discipline and who demonstrate their ability to produce independent work of the highest scholarly or artistic standard. A department awards Distinction to recognize outstanding achievement and encourage potential.

The Department of History invites senior majors who seek a significant and challenging intellectual experience to submit a project proposal for Distinction in history.

See St. Olaf College Statement on Distinction:

<https://www.stolaf.edu/catalog/0910/academicregs/academic-status.html>

Distinction Dates for 2018-19

- Fall semester, senior year: meet with project advisor to focus on your Distinction proposal, and finalize your research timeline and goals.
- January 11: submit completed **Distinction Project Proposal** to History Department Chair, (Professor Steven Hahn).
- January 4-March: substantive discussions (at least three) with advisor about progress.
- March 15: completed draft of paper must be submitted to project advisor.
- April 5: final draft submitted electronically to the Chair of the Distinction Committee (Note: the project advisor must sign off on the project before sending it on to the Distinction Committee)
- April 8: initial department discussion of submissions, with input from the Distinction Committee; announcement of oral examination committees
- April 9-26: oral examinations with candidates
- April 29: department meeting to vote on conferral of Distinction

Criteria for Distinction

To be considered for Distinction, you must satisfy certain minimum GPA requirements, prepare a project under the direction of a project advisor in the Department of History (or an advisor approved by the department), have your work reviewed by faculty, and successfully complete an oral defense of the project.

GPA requirements

Seniors submitting a proposal need a cumulative GPA of at least 3.30, and a GPA in History courses of at least 3.50. Under special circumstances — and after consultation with his or her project advisor — students who do not meet the minimum GPA requirements may petition the Chair of the History Department for permission to begin the Distinction process.

Project

The core of Distinction work is a formal research project based on primary sources or an extended historiographical essay that demonstrates excellence in historical method and analysis. For the most part, these projects take the form of papers, but students might also submit a substantial museum display, website, or poster accompanied by a shorter analytical paper. In all cases, a Distinction project should exhibit research and writing above and beyond “normal” coursework. A Distinction project is something you might use in a graduate school application, present at an academic conference, or submit to an academic journal for publication.

A Distinction project poses a provocative, clearly-defined historical question and cogently argues a response to that question based on critical and sensitive evaluation of primary and/or secondary sources, as appropriate to the type of project submitted. A Distinction project must place its question firmly within the historical and scholarly context — that is, it must acknowledge the scholars who have influenced the question as well as assess the importance of those scholars’ contributions to the context of the question.

While Distinction is a matter of quality, not quantity, typically the written component (the paper) is between 30 and 40 pages in length.

The Department of History uses the Chicago Manual of Style [see Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*] and expects all footnotes and bibliographic references to conform to that system. MLA or other styles are acceptable under special circumstances only.

Project Review

The award of Distinction depends upon an evaluation of the project and an oral exam, which considers the project within the larger context of your work as a St. Olaf History major.

Faculty review of your project proposal occurs at four levels:

- The project advisor (chosen by the student) first signs off on the Distinction Project Proposal. Please refer to the **Distinction Project Proposal** instructions.
- A Distinction Committee (three members of the department) screens all projects that have been submitted. By majority vote, the Distinction Committee will decide whether or not the project merits further consideration.
- A project meriting further consideration passes to a readers' committee (three members of the department,)), which discusses your work with you in an oral exam.
- Following the oral exam, the readers' committee will bring a recommendation to the entire History faculty, which, by majority vote, awards Distinction (the final decision to award Distinction is made by the History faculty as a whole, not the Distinction or readers' committees).

N.B.:

Copies of completed Distinction projects will be made available to all members of the History Department.

Project advisors serving on the Distinction Committee will recuse themselves from deliberations pertaining to their advisee (another member of the department will be chosen as a replacement).

Project advisors shall not serve on the readers' committee conducting the oral exam of their advisee.

Students will be notified of the History Department's decision in writing by the Distinction Committee Chair (including a brief rationale explaining its decision).

Past Examples

Examples of past Distinction projects are available in the [St. Olaf Archives](#) (click on Sources; Fram; Scope: All Collections; Keywords: History Distinction; Format: Paper; Date: Any Year). Successful Distinction projects have included:

1. research based on the imaginative use of primary sources to present an original argument
2. reflective or critical analysis based on extensive reading in the scholarship of a significant historical topic
3. analysis of a particular methodological dissemination of historical understanding

The History faculty encourage each student (in consultation with a faculty advisor) to develop original project proposals that contribute to the study and scholarship of history in diverse and creative ways.

Routes to Distinction

Many students use work begun in another course (including the History Research Workshop, Level-III seminar, IS, or IR) as a foundation for a Distinction project. Please note, though, that if a project proposal has its origins in work for an earlier course, the final Distinction proposal must undergo **substantial** revision in size and scope, conducted under the direction of a project advisor in the Department of History (or advisor approved by the department) for it to qualify for Distinction in History.

If for any reason you decide not to pursue the approved project proposal or wish to make changes in the scope and scale of the approved project, you must meet with the Chair of the Distinction Committee for approval before making any changes.