



From Books to Bits

*Reimagining Victorian History
for Today's Students*

*“Victorians and Victorianism”
Spring 2026*

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CU Denver Quick Facts

ENROLLMENT

14,000 students

48 History majors

Humanities disciplines now only 25% of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

70% undergraduate

30% graduate/professional

74% full-time students

82% from Colorado

43% male, 56% female

Faculty to Student Ratio 17:1

DIVERSE POPULATION

55% of enrolled students are students of color
Over 50% of students are first generation college students

Average age of undergraduate students: 23

Average age of graduate students: 32

Students from 52 states and US territories and 135 countries

Our Mission: Make Education Work for All

The long read is no longer a viable default assumption in undergraduate history course design.



Students Aren't Reading

20-30%

of students complete assigned readings

*Bean & Melzer, 2021
Hobson, 2004*

And they really aren't reading BOOKS

Many college humanities students are daunted by the idea of reading several books over a semester.

Faculty expectations are already dropping

Professors are cutting (even halving) reading loads -- and students are still not reading.

Students want jobs and doubt humanities get them there

Work and extracurriculars sometimes seem more important to their career goals than academics do.

Horowitz, 2024



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Challenges to sustained reading



Work

64% work while enrolled; 40% work full time

Lumina Foundation, 2026; Perna, 2010

Family & Life

Students (understandably) prioritize families and economic challenges over reading

Malesic, 2024



Social Media

Short-form content reshapes attention and working memory

Carr, 2010; Konnikova, 2014



Prior Education

Students have become familiar with excerpts, not whole books

NEA, 2007; Goldstein, 2025



A Structural Problem: Students Don't LEARN to Read

"They've been formed in a kind of scanning approach to reading -- trained not to sit with texts, but to extract from them."

-- University of Notre Dame Professor, cited in Horowitz, The Atlantic, 2024



Common Core & No Child Left Behind

Decades of standardized testing shifted curricula from whole books to short passages aimed at test-readiness.



The Skills Gap is Real

Some students arrive at college unable to read 20 pages with critical attention.



Not Laziness – Disparity

Students are not deficient; they have been prepared in different reading environments.



The AI Problem

AI compounds the reading crisis -- and raises new questions about what reading is for.



AI enables bypassing reading entirely

AI tools allow students to engage with any text's surface meaning without reading a word.



AI degrades the motivation to read carefully

Chatbots can answer any comprehension question in seconds, so the case for careful reading becomes harder to make -- especially for students already pressed for time.



AI is reshaping what 'reading' even means

If students interact with AI-generated summaries, the use of reading to develop critical thinking skills and empathy central to the humanities is lost.



Rethinking the History Classroom

1

Meet students where they are

not where I wish they were. Design for the student in front of me, not an idealized reader.

2

Reading is a skill to be taught

not a prerequisite to be assumed. Instruction in reading belongs inside the course.

3

Make required reading meaningful

so aim for shorter texts read more carefully rather than longer texts skimmed or skipped.

4

AI is part of the student experience

so structure assignments that help students use it critically.

Guiding Principles for My Redesign



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Course Learning Goals for Reading

By fully participating in this course, you will be able to

- **Read Victorian sources with confidence and curiosity, interpreting a wide range of materials** – novels, government documents, images, journalism, maps – and thinking about what they can and can't tell us about the past.
- Recognize how historians build arguments, **reading secondary sources to get practice identifying historians' main claims, evidence, and interpretive choices**, and how these shape the stories we tell about the nineteenth century.
- Use historical evidence to make your own argument about something you care about, **developing your own historical question, gathering relevant sources, and crafting an argument** that connects the Victorian past to an issue that matters to you today.

BEFORE

- 50-100 pages per class session
- Two class periods per week at that load
- Reading stamina assumed, not built
- Students fell behind and disengaged

AFTER

- ~50 pages per week total
- Three types of reading: descriptive context, short primary sources, secondary source article/excerpt
- One sustained novel spread across four weeks alongside weekly readings
- A load students can realistically complete – although they say even this is tough
- (Grad students do extra reading, including two full-length books)

North and South weeks are heavy (~100 pages added); students accepted this because they have established a baseline load. Assignment breaks up the long read but allows students to see what immersive reading does that an extract cannot.





*Every class begins students writing a **synthesis paragraph by hand** -- connecting that week's readings before discussion opens.*

Handwritten, not typed

Writing by hand means students cannot search, paste, skim, or ask AI -- they must draw on what they actually read.

Low stakes, high accountability

Every student arrives knowing they will be asked to synthesize readings -- even if uncertain exactly how.

Synthesis across multiple readings

Multiple texts must be engaged to write coherently about the question; develops practice of critical thinking.

Launch discussion from evidence

Discussion begins with students' ideas on the table rather than silence or vague impressions.



How does Victorian history illuminate an issue you are passionate about today?

Student-defined research

The history is not abstract -- it is instrumental to something they already care about.

Writing as the culmination of reading

The weekly in-class synthesis paragraphs prepare students for deep thought in this final argument.

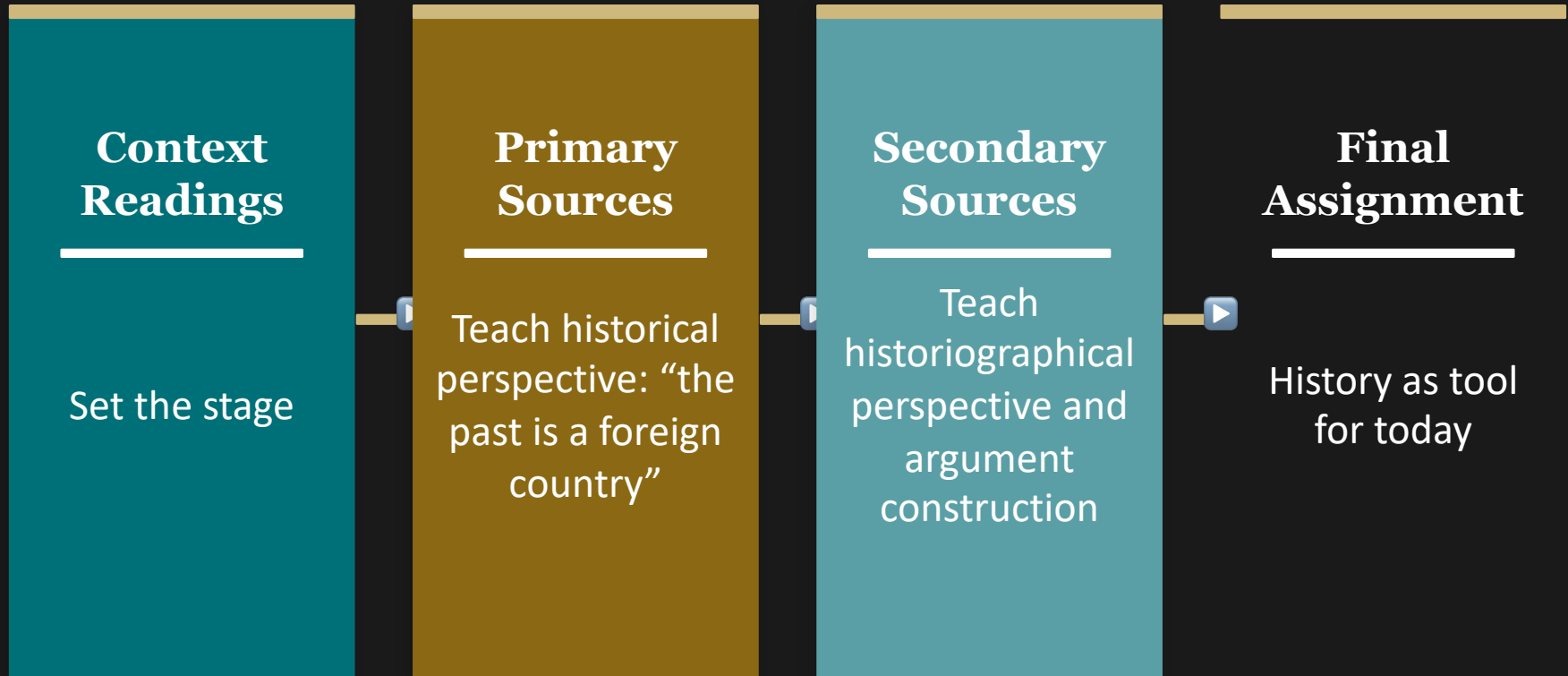
Victorian history becomes a method

Students must show that course material has analytical purchase today: “use content rather than simply acquiring it.”

Bean and Melzer 2021



Different types of reading



*None of these course aspects **assumes** students have arrived ready or that reading happens without support.*

Example 1: Legacies of Slavery in the Victorian Economy and Culture

This session examines how slavery's abolition enriched British slaveholders through compensation while exploring slavery's ongoing economic and cultural legacies. We'll analyze literary responses to slavery and investigate some of the problems associated with recovering the voices of non-dominant groups.

- Context: National Archives, "[The 1833 Abolition of Slavery and Compensation Claims.](#)"
- Context Video: "[Britain's Legacy of Slavery](#)".
- PS: [UCL Legacies claimant profiles.](#): look at some of the tabs under "Legacies." We will explore in class.
- PS: Olaudah Equiano, [Interesting Narrative.](#), excerpt
- PS: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "[The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point.](#)"
- Context and PS: [One More Voice.](#) digital humanities project – note the **Warning:** "Readers should exercise caution when consulting the texts accessible from this page due to the possible inclusion of offensive or otherwise problematic historical language." Read the introduction.
 - Read the "[Overview](#)" of "Racialized 'Authority' and 'Civilization' in Victorian Missionary Periodicals"
 - Under "[BIPOC Voices in the Victorian Periodical Press](#)" read the following:
 - "[Native Female Education.](#)" Make sure to scroll all the way down; "[Bellary.](#)"
- Secondary (all): Catherine Hall, "The Slavery Business and the Making of 'Race' in Britain and the Caribbean," Auraria full-text
- Grad secondary: Scanlan, "Blood, Money and Endless Paper: Slavery and Capital in British Imperial History," Auraria full-text

Example 2: Domestic Economy, Women, and the Moral Household

This session explores Victorian domestic ideology through household management guides, images of domesticity, and debates about women's proper sphere. We will look at how the middle-class home was constructed as a moral space and how factory work challenged traditional gender roles.

- PS: Gaskell, *North and South*, Book II, chs.24–36 (about 125 pages)
- PS: Isabella Beeton, “The Mistress,” in [Beeton Household Management.pdf](#) Read numbered headings and skim descriptions [do a search on “India” to note how many household items have imperial connections]
- PS: [Images of domesticity](#). [Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and family as model]
- PS: Lord Ashley on Women Factory Workers, [AshleyWomenFactoryWorkers.pdf](#)
- PS: Engels, [The Condition of the Working Class in England](#), pp. 141 (“Let us examine”)-149 (“vested rights”).
- Secondary (all): Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, “What Was the English Middle Class,” in [Family Fortunes](#), google books, pp.18-28.
- Grad secondary: [Zlotnick, Domesticating Imperialism.pdf](#)

Agenda: Domestic Economy, Women, and the Moral Household

Quick Intro (5:35-5:45pm): MEAL paragraphs

Short Response (5:45pm-6pm)

Discuss: the Victorian middle class (*Family Fortunes* reading) (6-6:20pm)

Small groups: image analysis (6:20-6:30pm); Report out (6:30-6:40pm)

Small groups: primary source analysis – ideals and realities (6:40-7pm)

BREAK 7-7:15pm

Report out: 7:15-7:35pm

Discuss: *North and South* (7:35-)

What I've Observed

So far ...

Students are doing the reading

With short chunks of material and a synthetic paragraph due at the start of every class, students arrive having done the reading. The paragraph becomes a signal of genuine engagement – more than attendance or a quiz.

In-class writing raises the quality of discussion (and writing is improving)

Because students write a paragraph connecting multiple texts, discussion begins with actual arguments. Students cite specific passages and make cross-source claims.

North and South changed the texture of the course

Spreading the novel over four weeks gave students time to develop a relationship with it. They brought Gaskell's arguments into discussions of other readings and are still referring to it.



What Was Lost



Intellectual honesty requires naming what the redesign costs.

- Coverage: less historical breadth
- The expectation of truly independent long reading

Pain point

Adapting to shorter reading may deepen cognitive losses rather than compensate for them. The capacity for deep reading may atrophy if never practiced.

Carr, 2010

A reframing

The redesign is not a complete retreat from the long read. North and South is still there, and students have clearly carried it with them.



Implications for Humanities Pedagogy

What might this mean for disciplines that have long defined themselves through the long read?

Revisit inherited assumptions

Coverage, reading load, and independent preparation are instructor choices. They can be questioned without abandoning rigor.

Make reading instruction explicit

If close reading is a core humanistic skill, it belongs on the syllabus as a learning objective, not as an assumed prerequisite.

The student in front of us is the student

Designing for an idealized reader (culturally fluent, independently motivated, time-rich) produces courses that exclude many students.

Adaptation is not capitulation

Meeting students where they are supports a growth mindset, not lowered standards. The goal remains humanistic formation.



The long read is no longer a viable default assumption in undergraduate history course design.

Open for discussion.

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