



So You Want to Be a History Teacher?

A Guide for Preparing Yourself at Stanislaus State Department of History

If you want to teach history at the secondary level (high school and junior high) in the state of California, you need to be aware that California does not offer credentials specifically in history, but rather in social science, which includes history, political science, geography, and economics. To become a history teacher you will need: 1) a bachelor's degree; 2) subject matter competency; and 3) teacher certification. The trick is to figure out how to accomplish this in the most efficient manner, so here are some tips about doing this.

First, your bachelor's degree may be in any field, but the two most appropriate majors offered at Stanislaus State, are history or social science. In deciding on whether to major in history or social science, you should weigh the following two points. First, students who are considering pursuing an advanced degree in history later should probably major in history, or if they major in social science, they should take as much history as possible. There are no advanced degrees in social science at most universities. Second, some students find it advantageous to take the social science major, because it overlaps better with the subject matter preparation program (explained below) and thus reduces the number of units they have to take.

Second, you need to prove subject matter competency. There are two ways to do this. You may take a state-wide exam (CSET) or you may complete the subject matter preparation program. I recommend taking the CSET exam for two reasons: 1) The CSET may be required in the future; and 2) Most students can prepare for the CSET without taking every single course in the subject matter preparation program. The subject matter preparation program is an extensive program including coursework primarily in history, political science, geography, and economics. You can view the full program at the CSUS website or the current catalog.

If you opt for the subject matter preparation program, you should pay careful attention to overlapping as many units as possible with GE and major courses. For instance, HIST 1010 or 1020 (World Civilizations) counts both for the preparation program and for lower-division GE. ECON 3100 (Economic History of the US) is a course in the preparation program and also counts as an upper-division GE course. If one is majoring in history, one should take history courses in as many categories as possible.

Here are some other tips about the subject matter preparation program. If you attended a junior college, you may have already fulfilled some categories. Most are fairly obvious, but the one that is least obvious is the American history requirement. Because we do not offer a two-semester sequence in American history here at Stanislaus State, the preparation program lists four American history courses to complete the program. However, if a student has taken a two-semester sequence in American history at another college, that fulfills the requirement. It is also important to note that courses for the preparation program do not have to be upper-division classes, even if the list shows upper-division classes. For example, if one took a California history class at the JC that fulfills the requirement for California history, even though the course listed in our program is upper-division.

Finally, you need to complete the teacher certification program, either here at Stanislaus State, or elsewhere. I highly recommend attending an information session on the single subject credential program offered regularly by the department of teacher education. If you plan to get your credential at Stanislaus State, the teacher education department recommends several education courses as prerequisites to the credential program. Make sure you find out what these courses are as soon as possible, so you can complete them in a timely fashion.

Added Note for Students Currently in Junior College

Contrary to what you might expect, the best strategy for preparing to become a history teacher is NOT simply to take as many history courses as possible at the JC. A better strategy is to take a two-semester American history sequence and a two-semester World Civilizations sequence (NOTE: Do not take Western Civilizations, as it does not fulfill the subject matter preparation program requirements). Then, take courses in geography, political science, and economics that will count toward the social science subject matter preparation program. Some that would be especially appropriate are courses in American government, world regional geography (not physical geography), and microeconomics and macroeconomics. Courses in California history, California politics, or California geography might also be helpful. Courses in anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences may fulfill GE requirements, but they will not generally be helpful in completing the social science subject matter preparation program.

What about Teaching History in College?

If instead of teaching at the secondary level, you want to teach college, ignore everything above. College teaching does not require teacher certification, but it does require an advanced degree in history. If you are interested in teaching at the junior college level, the minimum qualifications are an MA in history. Some junior colleges prefer applicants with a Ph.D. or at least study beyond the MA. Most four-year colleges and universities require or at least prefer a Ph.D.

The best way to prepare yourself for teaching at the college level is to major in history and take as many courses in upper-division history and related fields as possible. Some colleges and universities require proficiency in a foreign language, so it would be helpful to study at least one foreign language, if possible.

If you are considering pursuing a Ph.D. in history, you should make sure you are proficient in whatever languages will be necessary to study the particular field of history in which you are interested. For example, if you want to study medieval German history, you will need to master at least Latin and German. Also, make sure you study fields related to your research interests. For example, if you are interested in economic history, it would be good to study some economics and probably statistics.

Please be advised that the competition is intense for college teaching positions, so make sure you excel in your studies, getting the highest GPA possible, and preparing yourself to do well on the GRE exam, which is required by many graduate schools.