

Besides Teaching, What Can You Do With A History Degree?

The study of history provides a solid foundation for careers teaching at public high schools and at universities. However, a History BA can also prepare you for many other careers, as well as for post-graduate study in a wide variety of fields. This is because history majors develop skills that employers and professional schools often seek, namely:

- solid writing skills
- effective speaking skills
- the ability to ask good questions
- research and investigative ability
- the ability to analyze information critically
- the ability to view problems in a larger context, while still paying attention to detail
- cultural knowledge and sensitivity
- foreign language and/or information technology skills

You might not be surprised to learn that some American presidents (Wilson, both Roosevelts, Kennedy, Nixon and others) have been history majors. But did you know that Chris Berman (ESPN Sportscaster), Wolf Blitzer (CNN anchor), Seymour Hersh (investigative journalist), Charles Kuralt (news correspondent) and the *Spokesman Review's* own Jim Kershner majored in history? So did comedians Sascha Baron Cohen, Conan O'Brien, Michael Palin (of Monty Python fame), and comedienne Janeane Garofolo.

Many students seek a history B.A. because they love history. They often envision becoming teachers because they simply don't know what else they can do with a history degree. This guide is **not** meant to discourage anyone from becoming a teacher; it **is** designed to help students who might be interested in doing something else to discover what that "something else" might be.

I'm not sure how you become the next Sascha Baron Cohen, though I suspect history helps some comedians have a broad base of knowledge to draw upon in developing their humor. Further, there are some very good careers for historians that don't fit into the job categories as I've organized them below. People who have carpentry or "handyman" skills might be well suited for a career in **historic preservation**, for example. Good scholars might find a career managing academic research through a career in **grants administration**. If you combine your love of history with a broad knowledge of world events, the **foreign service** might be ideal for you. **Intelligence services** are particularly interested in people with a facility for foreign languages. You might also become a **plain old historian**, but for an unexpected boss: a corporation, or the Air Force, for example.

I discuss other futures for history students below. For each type of work, I give some indication about who your employer might be, and indicate how you can start to prepare **now** for a job search. You don't have to do everything listed in the "Ways to Prepare for Employment" section, but this section does present strategies you can adopt to gain an edge over your competition later.

GRADUATE SCHOOL/CONTINUING EDUCATION

History provides excellent preparation for graduate study in many different disciplines.

A history graduate can successfully pursue a Master's degree or a PhD in history, of course, but s/he can also be well prepared to pursue post-graduate study in anthropology, business, government, journalism, international relations, law, library and information sciences, as well as in other fields of study.

CAREERS IN WRITING, PUBLISHING, AND/OR JOURNALISM (BROADCAST AND PRINT MEDIA)

Type of Work:

- expository writing and/or editing
- grant writing
- public commentary
- film making (especially documentaries)

Potential Employers:

- publishing companies
- radio/television stations
- newspapers
- magazines
- grant writers often work for governmental and non-profit organizations

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- develop excellent writing skills
- work on the campus newspaper
- work or intern at a local press or publisher
- work or intern at a commercial radio/television station
- volunteer or intern at a public or community radio/television station
- take classes in related area (English, journalism, electronic media, or web design)

CAREERS IN LAW

Type of Work

- providing legal advice and support to clients
- historical consulting (in disputes about rights to land or resources, for ex.)

Potential Employers

- law firms
- corporate legal departments
- local, regional, and national government agencies
- advocacy/non-profit organizations
- private historical consulting companies

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- develop excellent research and writing skills
- work or intern at a law firm
- intern or volunteer with a public advocacy/non-profit organization
- acquire formal paralegal training or a law degree
- take courses in related fields (such as English, philosophy, or sociology)
- take courses on specific populations that might become part of your clientele (African-Americans or children, for example)

CAREERS IN POLITICS

Type of work:

- elected or appointed public office (mayor, governor, legislator, judge)
- advising or staff support (for an elected or appointed public official)
- political campaign work

Potential Employers

- “the people”
- public office holders
- political parties
- political campaigns

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- participate in student or local government
- intern or volunteer with public officials, government agencies, or political campaigns
- intern or volunteer with community service projects
- take courses in related fields (such as government, economics, business administration, or urban planning)
- take courses on specific populations or issues (women, the environment, or public health, for example)

CAREERS WITH PUBLIC INTEREST/ADVOCACY GROUPS OR WITH NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Type of Work:

- advocacy for special causes or populations
- educating the public about a wide variety of topics (including history)

Potential Employers:

- historical associations
- cultural heritage organizations
- museums
- public interest/advocacy groups (environmental groups, public and community radio or television, advocates for low-income housing, for example)

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- intern or volunteer with advocacy groups or non-profit organizations
- take courses on specific populations or issues related to your future work interests (Spanish, or urban planning, for example)
- include public history courses in your curriculum

CAREERS IN INFORMATION SCIENCE, CURATORIAL AND ARCHIVES MANAGEMENT

Type of Work:

- librarian (potentially specializing in reference, genealogy, area studies, etc.)
- archivist
- curator

Potential Employers:

- libraries (public, private, university)
- archives
- museums
- government agencies (local, state, national)
- large corporations
- advocacy/non-profit organizations
- art galleries
- historic homes

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- develop attention to detail and strong organizational skills
- develop computing skills
- intern or volunteer in the field
- acquire a Master's degree in information sciences
- acquire foreign language competency

CAREERS IN EDUCATION (OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY/ PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM)

Type of Work:

- teaching
- employee training
- public presentation and education

Potential Employers:

- private schools
- museums
- state and national parks
- gardens and conservatories
- zoological parks and sanctuaries
- aquariums
- large employers

Ways to Prepare for Employment:

- develop excellent presentation skills (oral, written, multimedia)
- work or intern in the field
- work or volunteer as a tutor, camp counselor, or church teacher
- take courses in related fields (such biology, geology, or public speaking)

Additional Resources:

American Association of Museums website, at <http://www.aam-us.org>

American Association for State and Local History website, at <http://www.aaslh.org>

“Beyond Academe,” at <http://www.beyondacademe.com>

This website was designed by history PhD recipients who work outside academia. It explains what types of non-academic positions are available to historians with advanced degrees, and how various historians secured these jobs. There is a lot of extremely helpful information here on work in public history, state and federal jobs, and work for non-profit organizations, among other things.

“Careers for History Majors”, by the American Historical Association, at <http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/careers/index.htm>

Discusses careers for historians as teachers, as researchers, as communicators, as advocates, and in business. This is a good place to begin investigating careers for historians.

“Careers for Students of History,” by Constance Schulz, Page Putnam Miller, Aaron Marrs, and Kevin Allen, at <http://www.historians.org/pubs/careers/index.htm>

Discusses careers for historians as teachers, in museums and archives, in publishing, in historic preservation, in public history, and as consultants and contractors. Also contains a valuable section on additional resources. This guide is more detailed than the guide listed above.

Gardner, James B. and Peter S. LaPaglia. *Public History: Essays from the Field*. Malabar, FL, 2004.

Public History Resource Center website, at <http://www.publichistory.org>

Society of American Archivists website, at <http://www.archivists.org>