

## **Guidelines on Broadening the Definition of Historical Scholarship (2023)**

*Approved by the AHA Council on January 5, 2023*

Historical scholarship is a documented and disciplined conversation about matters of enduring consequence. Taking a cue from the sciences, history as a discipline has traditionally valued the creation of “new knowledge” as the primary (if not singular) aspect of that conversation worthy of consideration in personnel decisions. The American Historical Association (AHA) has concluded that it is time we also look to the Smithsonian Institution’s mission, articulated in 1846, which advances a broader aim: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

### **BACKGROUND AND CHARGE**

In January 2022, the AHA Council authorized the Ad-Hoc Committee on Broadening the Definition of Scholarship to:

1. acknowledge both long-standing and increasingly diverse genres of historical scholarship that go beyond traditionally valued models of single-authored and peer reviewed books, journal articles, and other essays; and
2. create guidelines for evaluating this work in tenure and promotion cases, as well as any other professional settings in which historians work and where historical scholarship is produced.

This report lays the foundation for a broad expansion of what constitutes historical scholarship. It is by no means limited to the examples it invokes, or to academia and its standard professional ladders. These guidelines can be adapted to any institution in which historians work and where historical scholarship is an expected aspect of that work.

The first decades of the 21st century have witnessed a broadening of the ways historical knowledge is advanced, applied, accessed, integrated, diffused, and taught. Despite this multiplicity of scholarly forms, most history departments remain wedded to narrow conventions defining how historical scholarship is packaged and circulated, as well as what “counts” toward elevations to tenure and full professor and in decisions about fellowships, awards, hiring, and other venues of evaluation. At the same time, essential forms of scholarship—from textbooks and reference works to documentary and journal editing, op-eds, expert witness testimony, and more—have traditionally been relegated to the category of “service” within the triad of research, teaching, and service on which academic promotion rests. The disconnect between the wide variety of valuable work being done by historians and the much narrower boundaries of scholarship considered for professional evaluation limits historians’ public influence while perpetuating inequities harmful to individuals and to the discipline as a whole.

### **PREVIOUS STEPS**

In recent years, the AHA and other professional organizations have taken significant steps to identify and value the variety of work that historians do. The Ad-Hoc Committee has drawn on and reaffirms statements previously issued by the Association. In 2010 (revised 2017), the AHA issued a [joint statement](#) with the Organization of American Historians and the National Council on Public History that recommended full academic recognition of “publicly engaged

and collaborative scholarship.” The [\*Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in History\*](#) (2015) asserts that “digital history in various forms often represents a commitment to expanding what history is, and can do, as a field, as well as the audiences that it addresses. . . . Work done by historians using digital methodologies or media for research, pedagogy, or communication should be evaluated for hiring, promotion, and tenure on its scholarly merit and the contribution that work makes to the discipline through research, teaching, or service.” Similarly, in 2019 the AHA Council approved the [\*Guidelines for the Incorporation of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Work of the History Profession\*](#), affirming its legitimacy and significance as historical scholarship. While these guidelines have aided both candidates and departments in personnel evaluations, the recommendations have been unevenly adopted across the discipline.

Though the AHA’s journal, the *American Historical Review*, includes reviews of digital scholarship alongside book reviews, it has only recently begun including scholarship on teaching and learning, exhibitions, podcasts, and historical work in other formats. It is less clear whether history departments, in their promotion protocols and decision-making processes, have begun to value scholarship on teaching and learning, and historical scholarship published in a variety of formats.

## CHALLENGES

The stability and effectiveness of using the conventions and traditions of academic historians to define historical scholarship constitutes a major hurdle in the pathway to change. Removing that hurdle requires expanding the scope of how we define both *genre* and *format*.

A second set of challenges derives from our methods of evaluation. History departments have well-established criteria for assessing the originality and significance of books and articles that appear in competitive peer-reviewed journals. Many alternative forms of scholarship do not yet have an established infrastructure of evaluation. For traditional modes of publication, the content of standard peer review, the prestige of a press or journal, and the stature of a peer reviewer can readily serve to validate quality. Other genres require venturing beyond these protocols to make the case on intellectual merits alone. In addition, some modes of explaining and disseminating historical understanding are collaborative efforts that will require learning how to discern the nature of individual contributions.

## IMPERATIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the face of these challenges, we understand why some departments remain wedded to conventional boundaries of scholarship and methods of evaluation. But standing pat risks losing ground as a discipline in an environment with so many venues for intellectual and civic contribution. It also risks undervaluing important work being done *within* our discipline. Historians depend on public support—whether as employees of public institutions, recipients of federal research funds, or faculty at universities and colleges that allocate resources according to enrollments. If legislatures, public officials, governing boards, and students don’t learn from us why history and historical thinking are essential elements of education and public culture, those resources will be allocated elsewhere.

We should remain mindful of the many other arenas of potential influence. If we believe that historical thinking and knowledge should inform public policy, then we need to make our work accessible to policymakers and influencers. This will be accomplished not by increasing

their access to scholarly journals, but by applying and explaining our research to those who operate beyond our established sphere of influence, in policy and other decision-making environments.

This recommendation and the guidelines that follow rest on four pillars:

- A wide range of scholarly historical work can be undertaken in ways consistent with our disciplinary standards and values, from writing briefing papers and op-eds, to testifying in legislatures and courts, participating in the work of regulatory agencies, publishing textbooks and reference books, expanding our media presence across a wide range of platforms, and more.
- To support such publicly engaged and/or policy-oriented work, history departments should give it appropriate scholarly credit in personnel decisions. Not doing so diminishes the public impact of historians and cedes to others—observers less steeped in our discipline-specific methods, epistemologies, and standards—the podium from which to shape the historical framing of vital public conversations.
- Historians cannot expect decision-makers or other potential audiences to appreciate the value of our work if we don't affirm its value ourselves.
- All historical work can be peer reviewed, whether before or after publication.

In accentuating opportunities presented by publicly engaged and policy-oriented work, the AHA does not intend to diminish the value of traditional forms of scholarship and traditional standards of evaluation; we are not inverting old hierarchies in which monographs reigned in favor of a new order in which public history or other scholarly forms have primacy. Nor are we recommending creating a universe of *additional* expectations or requirements. Institutions will continue to determine criteria for the quantity and quality of scholarly deliverables in the evaluation of candidates for promotion. Many historians will continue to focus on researching and writing traditional peer-reviewed books and articles. This includes works of synthesis that speak to some combination of fellow scholars, students, or public audiences. Synthesis is intellectual work that increases the value of narrower scholarship as well as the discipline itself. Consider also, at the other end of the process, where historians collect, categorize, and describe primary materials. Such work is scholarly activity in much the same way as the selection and ordering of facts in the creation of a historical narrative. There are many ways to be a historian.

Instead, this report argues that history departments benefit from bigger tents in which many different forms of scholarship coexist and are mutually invigorating. Diversity strengthens our discipline; a department that includes historians working in a variety of modes and genres (as with methods and subfields) enhances the quality of collegiality, teaching, and research.

Nor does the shift imply an abandonment or even relaxation of standards. The challenge is to apply and adapt existing methods and theories of evaluation to a wider range of formats. Candidates can be required to write short memos putting such work into historiographical context as part of their portfolio, adapting customary expectations of clarity, originality, and significance to the relevant genre. A case must be made, at least during a period of transition to these broader definitions, that a particular publication or other product is appropriate to communicate the knowledge and precepts of a professional historian, as articulated in the AHA's [\*Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct\*](#) (for example, not all op-eds are works of scholarship).

The evaluation of a historian's adherence to these standards has traditionally relied on peer review as a requisite to publication. There is no reason, however, why peer review and other

conventional paths of evaluation prior to publication cannot take place *after* work is produced and circulated.

The AHA recognizes the logistical challenges posed by post-hoc peer review. The calendar for peer review is already complicated by factors that depend on an institution's particular criteria. Institutions that consider scholarly "impact" often depend on *predictions* of influence, or they must wait until that influence can be assessed (if only through measures of visibility that can even include word of mouth). With some exceptions and the occasional time lag, the impact of work directed toward scholarly audiences usually aligns with quality. This is not necessarily true for publicly engaged scholarship, whose influence sometimes derives more from marketing, sensational modes of presentation, catering to prejudices, financial resources, and other factors unrelated to quality. Evaluation that considers public impact should, in all cases, include scrutiny of how such impact was attained, and maintain the standards of scholarship equal to those expected of other eligible formats.

Once we have liberated notions of what constitutes legitimate scholarship from the constraints of traditional calendars and modes of peer review and accepted the principle that all historical scholarship can be subject to comparable evaluative criteria, the obstacles to broadening genre and format fall away. This broader landscape of historical scholarship might now include (but is not limited to) textbooks, official histories, reference books, op-eds, blog posts, magazine articles, museum exhibitions, public lectures, congressional testimony, oral history projects, expert witness testimony, media appearances, podcasts, and historical gaming. Rather than attempt a comprehensive list of genres, the guidelines proposed here are intended to be expansive and flexible enough to accommodate forms we have yet to anticipate. What the forms thus far envisioned have in common is that they can be peer reviewed after the work has been disseminated. What remains is the second challenge: how to carry out that evaluation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Existing standards can be adapted to this broadened notion of scholarly contribution. Procedures, however, will need to change. The AHA proposes an evaluation process in which the candidate and the evaluators engage in a conversation around a series of questions about the work under review. We start from the assumption that there is general agreement within the discipline that appropriate and transparent metrics are essential to evaluating the originality, quality, and significance of historical scholarship, regardless of the form or format it takes. That said, the process of valuing different genres of scholarship offers new challenges as well as opportunities.

### **Post-Hoc Review Process**

All scholarship should be subject to careful professional review, regardless of which stage in the creative process the evaluation takes place. There is no reason such work cannot be peer reviewed after publication as part of a promotion process. This principle would extend to any format that creates a product, whether written or preserved in other media. A history department can adapt its standards of quality and quantity to any mode of diffusing knowledge, just as we have different criteria for evaluating books, articles, and digital scholarship.

Departments and candidates should acknowledge and account for the different timelines that might be required for post-hoc review. Departments should offer guidance and appropriate mentorship to candidates to help them prepare and arrange for post-hoc review of work, including iterative or staggered assessment.

## Criteria

Guidelines or criteria for the evaluation of nontraditional scholarly deliverables will serve not only as a tool for tenure committees; they will also allow candidates planning their portfolios to gather the necessary documentation to support their promotion. Scholarly projects intended for public audiences—exhibitions and public history ventures, digital projects, collecting initiatives, op-eds, reference works, historical gaming, etc.—do not always include citations in their final product. Guidelines for demonstrating the research and historical thinking that went into creating these kinds of scholarship will allow historians to prepare for post-hoc peer review or personnel evaluation while the work is underway.

As a wider variety of modes and formats of diffusion gain acceptance as scholarly work, some of the challenges with assessing them will diminish. Until then, there are interpretive questions that the candidate can help to answer—articulating, for instance, why a particular medium is appropriate, or even better suited, to a particular historical pursuit. Some genres of scholarship involve collaboration with other scholars and work with communities, academic and otherwise. In this context, it might be helpful for a candidate to describe the structure and extent of their collaboration, along with a description of their own specific role(s).

Allowing that these reviews should involve both candidate and assessors, the AHA proposes the following categories of evaluation, to be used in various combinations and with varying emphases, depending on the form of scholarship under consideration:

1. **Genre and Dissemination:** The candidate should articulate what form the project takes and how it is being circulated, as well as explaining *why* this genre and mode of presentation are optimal for this project (a practice that follows the recommendation made in the AHA *Guidelines on the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship by Historians*). Some genres involve continuous revision and therefore projects might be iterative, rather than terminal, in form. In such cases, the peer review might involve a different process—and the reviewer might require expertise different—from what might ordinarily be required for with an article or book.
2. **Argument and Documentation:** Regardless of genre, the AHA *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* (updated 2019) should guide candidates and evaluators. As that document states, “Professional integrity in the practice of history requires awareness of one’s own biases and a readiness to follow sound method and analysis wherever they may lead.” Historians should not misrepresent their sources or omit evidence that runs counter to their interpretations. The *Standards of Professional Conduct* also emphasize the importance of historians documenting the primary and secondary sources on which a work depends. As much as possible, with allowances for genre, candidates should cite or make transparent the sources of their scholarly output. If the genre does not readily accommodate citation, the candidate must be willing to share their sources with evaluators.
3. **Impact and Influence:** Typically, scholarly impact in history is measured by the quality of reviews and the quantity of scholarly citations—the latter a metric that might sometimes be misleading. In addition to these traditional measures, the impact of scholarship might be weighed on other scales. For example, scholarship that is transmitted digitally might have a quantitative metric for impact based on the number of clicks, site users, or amount of site traffic. Candidates should make clear to evaluators the bases of their claims for impact or influence and explain how and why those metrics reflect scholarly influence.
4. **Current and Future Trajectory of the Project:** Some projects represent ongoing scholarly research. These might include new editions of textbooks, website design and curation, construction of scholarly databases, etc. Because these projects frequently have no finite deadline, candidates must be able to articulate the state of a project at the start—and the end—of an evaluation period, accounting for all

new work conducted in between. Some institutions emphasize the quality and originality of the new work introduced during the period under evaluation; others will focus on the product itself.

5. Collaboration: Some genres of scholarship involve collaboration with other scholars and work with larger communities. When appropriate, the candidate should describe the structure and extent of the collaboration, along with a description of the candidate's specific role(s) in producing the work under review.

For all these criteria, the AHA will host conversations—at its annual meeting and through online programming—that we hope will generate continuing evolution of standards and procedures.

## CONCLUSION

As the AHA declared in the *Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in History*, “At its heart, scholarship is a documented and disciplined conversation about matters of enduring consequence.” This conversation, and hence the work of the discipline, is enriched and enhanced by the inclusion of diverse forms of scholarship. The AHA has a responsibility to play a leadership role in broadening the landscape and influence of historical scholarship.