HIS 199, "America and the Contemporary World," covers American history from the end of World War II to the present. This course is required of all Niagara University students.

Like all history courses, you will learn facts. But your professors will also expect you to think about and analyze the facts; place events in context; synthesize information; compare events; and evaluate decisions, policies, and historical events. These are higher-order thinking skills. For example, in addition to knowing the when an event happened and who was involved, your history professors may also want you to understand how prior events led to the event, what else was occurring at the time of the event, and how the event affected subsequent events.

To help you become a better learner in HIS 199, we offer you these suggestions for reading, taking notes, preparing for exams, and writing papers.

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1. Read in a place with few distractions.

2. Turn off electronic devices and remove them from your study area.

3. Try to sit in the same place each time you read history.

4. Read when you’re most alert. Avoid reading when you’re tired, distracted, or upset.

5. If history challenges you, avoid reading it at the end of a study session. Push yourself to read earlier.

6. Schedule time to complete your reading.

7. Get interested:
   - ask yourself who wrote this, when was it written (that is, what was occurring in the nation and the world at that time), and why was it written
   - try to predict the author’s thoughts
   - try to connect the chapter with previous chapters
   - try to connect the primary source readings with the textbook
   - try to connect the chapter with events happening in the nation or world today
   - try to connect what you’re reading with what you’ve learned in other courses, or with your own observations or experiences
   - read critically by asking questions while you read. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For example, as you read:</th>
<th>You could ask these questions:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The strategy of containment fundamentally transformed American foreign policy. It ripped the United States from its isolationist roots, imposed new international obligations on the American people, and created a massive national security state. World War II had reconfigured the international environment and America’s place in it, but it had failed to produce a corresponding change in American attitudes towards the world.”</td>
<td>- What does the author mean by “containment” and “isolationist”? (These key terms for the early Cold War will be discussed in class.)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What is a “national security state”?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How did World War II change the international environment?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Why, according to the author, didn’t American attitudes change?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Why did World War II lead to all of these changes?</td>
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8. Combine mental and physical activities. For example, write notes and underline key points in your textbook, outline the reading, or make a cluster map.

9. Vary your activities. For example, alternate reading history with doing accounting problems or finishing a chemistry lab report.

10. Keep a distractions list. Jot down things that distract you while you’re reading but that you need to remember (for example, running an errand; making an appointment).

11. Keep a tally of how many times your mind wanders while you are reading.
12. **Prop up your book,** so your angle of vision is approximately 90°.

13. Avoid moving your lips, sliding your finger along the lines, or moving your head from left to right as you read.

14. **Avoid distracting physical activities** such as tapping your foot or chewing gum while you read.

15. As you read, **consider the author.** Why did the author write it? How did the author write it?

16. Treat reading as only the **first step** in the reading process. **One reading is seldom enough.** For true mastery, you’ll also need to re-read, review, write summaries, and/or discuss the material with others.

17. **Look up unfamiliar words and references.** If you skip over them, you will miss meaning. For example, many HIS 199 instructors use a textbook titled *The American Paradox,* and the author uses this phrase as a theme throughout the book, for example noting in the introduction:

   “The war forged the foundation of postwar America, but it was an **ambiguous legacy** that rested on a **paradox.**” (Gillon, 6)

   If you don’t understand what the author means by the key term “paradox” or “an ambiguous legacy,” then you will miss the main argument of the entire textbook.

18. **Establish a purpose** for reading each section of chapters by turning headings into questions. Try to begin your questions with **“WHAT,” “HOW,” and “WHY,”** because these questions words lead to more detailed responses. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEADING</th>
<th>POSSIBLE QUESTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Reagan Agenda” (Gillon, 291)</td>
<td><strong>What</strong> was Reagan’s agenda? <strong>Why</strong> did Reagan set this agenda?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Shaping National Culture: The Shared Images of Television” (Gillon, 76)</td>
<td><strong>How</strong> did television shape culture?</td>
</tr>
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Use your questions to make study sheets. Fold paper 2” from the left, and write your question in the narrow column on the left. Then read the section to find the answer. Searching for the answers can help you read more actively. Next, write notes to answer your question on the right-hand side. When you’re done, fold your paper to make a study sheet that you can use to quiz yourself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Don’t limit yourself to questions that begin with WHAT, WHEN or WHERE. For instance, for the heading “Dawn of the Atomic Age,” you might begin with the question “**When** did the Atomic Age begin?“ but continue with questions such as **“How** did the Atomic Age develop?” and **“How** did the Atomic Age alter life in the 20th century?” The active thinking needed to write such questions can lead to greater understanding of the material.
Connect subheadings to broader headings. This heading in a history textbook, “The Foreign Policy of Ronald Reagan,” is followed by the subheading “A New Anticommunist Offensive.” Connect them by asking Why was there a resurgence of anti-Communism under Ronald Reagan? What foreign policy strategies were employed by Reagan? What was the outcome? Such questions can be effective test preparation.

19. Use the traditional “S-Q-3 R” method of reading, but add a “W” step. “S-Q-3 R” stands for “Survey – Question – Read - Recite - Review.” This systematic approach to reading includes specific steps before you begin to read, and more steps after you finish reading:

Survey - In 3-5 minutes, glance over the headings in the chapter to discover the main points that will be developed. If there is a summary paragraph, read it.

Question - To arouse your curiosity and increase your comprehension, turn each heading into a question. The questions can also help you distinguish the main point from the explanatory details. Turning a heading into a question is really a simple task, but it requires a conscious effort on your part.

Read - Read carefully, to answer the question (usually to the end of that headed section). Actively search for the answer.

Recite - Look away from the book and try to recite the answer to each of your questions. Use your own words and include an example. If you can, you know what you just read. If you can’t, review the section. An excellent way to do this reciting from memory is to jot down cue phrases in outline form on a sheet of paper. Make these notes very brief.

Review - After you’ve read the material, look over your notes to get a bird’s-eye view of the points and their relationship, and check your memory of the content by reciting the major subpoints under each heading. This checking of your memory can be done by covering up the notes and trying to recall the main points. Then uncover each major point and try to recall the subpoints listed under it.

Write - This is an extension of “Review.” In addition to just thinking about what you remember, write the material down. Write lists, write summaries, write answers to questions. Writing helps you commit the material to memory.

20. Make Connections.

Because HIS 199 textbooks can be dense with facts, it can be helpful to summarize sections and paragraphs. As you read, concentrate on the relationship between facts and events and the author’s interpretations. For example, the author of The American Paradox repeatedly refers to the concept of “American paradox” as outlined in detail in the book’s introduction. As you read, keep asking yourself how the various historical examples you encounter fit into this interpretation of American history.

To use an example, page 223 of The American Paradox contains a section called “Détente,” which includes a key primary source document on the following page. Your notes might condense a few hundred words into something more manageable:

Theme

Détente in the early 1970s: a lessening of tensions between the Soviet Union, China, and the U.S.

Goal

Improve relations with the Soviet Union and China in the hope that this would:
- Decrease the threat of nuclear war and allow the US to cut spending on nuclear weapons
- Lead the Soviets to get the North Vietnamese to negotiate an end to the Vietnam War
**Examples/Evidence**

- Nixon visits China in February 1972
- Nixon and the Soviets reach an agreement on SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks)

**Outcome**

- The US improved relations with both China and the Soviet Union BUT the author notes that “Détente did not mean an end to the U.S.-Soviet competition in other parts of the world.”

**Tied to these larger themes or processes**

- Cold War
- Nixon’s foreign policy
- arms race

**Key terms/People/Places**

- Détente
- Nixon
- Kissinger

**Primary source document: The Principles of Détente**

*Historical context: 1972 meeting between Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union*

- Both sides agree that it is important to lessen the threat of war and reduce tensions between them (détente)
- Agree to continue talks to limit armaments with the ultimate goal of “complete disarmament”
- Agree to strengthen economic ties between the two countries

Your instructor will most likely give more detail on this topic in class, addressing the domestic implications of these policies and whether or not they achieved Nixon’s goal of ending the war in Vietnam. By doing the reading in advance, you will have the necessary context to understand these more complex interpretive issues.

21. Some HIS 199 instructors use the textbook *The American Paradox* for HIS 199. One special feature of this text is that it includes excerpts from key primary sources. Don’t skip over these readings because primary sources are the building blocks of history. You will likely discuss these primary sources in class, and they provide great pieces of evidence to include in your history essays and exams. For guidelines on how to use these sources, consult the handout “HIS 199: Using Primary Sources in History” on the Academic Support website.
HOW TO TAKE NOTES IN HIS 199

BEFORE CLASS:

1. Staple the course syllabus in your notebook and refer to it often.
2. Arrive early to get a good seat and to review your notes from the previous class.
3. Sit near the front and away from the door, to minimize distractions.
4. Try to sit where you can see all the boards and screens.
5. Keep your notes together, in a spiral notebook or on loose-leaf paper in a binder.
6. Use a separate notebook for each class, so if you lose it you won't lose all your notes.
7. Carefully read all assigned material BEFORE class so you can listen and participate more actively.
8. Look over your notes from the previous class, so you can understand the "story" of history (that is, the cause-effect relationships between historical events).
9. Draw a line for a 2" margin on the left-hand side of each page or leave the backs of each page blank, and after class use this space for editing or summarizing your notes, for writing questions based on the notes, or for adding details from the textbook.
10. Bring your HIS 199 textbook to class. The American Paradox text, assigned by most HIS 199 instructors, includes key primary sources that you will likely be asked to refer to during class.

DURING CLASS:

1. Turn off electronic devices; if you live in a residence hall, leave your phone in your room.
2. Date your notes, and number each page if you take notes on loose-leaf paper.
3. Write legibly, and streamline your handwriting. (Recopying notes can be an effective study strategy, but if you don't have time your original notes must be readable.)
4. Observe your professor's style, and notice changes in voice, facial expression, and body language.
5. Avoid merely copying the material on the board. Instead, write your own notes with fuller, more detailed information.
6. Add details, examples, and explanations that are NOT on the board or overhead.
7. Listen for key phrases such as "The most important aspects ..." or "Four of the most commonly identified causes..." or "I want you to know this."
8. Record all details that your professor mentions, not just those on the board, to increase your understanding of terms or concepts.
9. Use a signal (such as ? or *) to indicate when you're confused.
10. Occasionally glance over the last few lines of your notes to fill in gaps or to rewrite illegible words.

11. Leave plenty of blank spaces, especially if the lecture moves rapidly, and then fill in details or missing information as soon as possible after class, by consulting the textbook or asking classmates.

12. Develop abbreviations that you’ll recognize later.

13. Use numerals instead of writing out numbers.

14. Omit vowels in long words, or write only the beginnings of long words.

15. Notice how much time your professor spends on an idea. (The more time spent on an idea, the more important it is, and the more prominence it may have on the test.)

16. Indent, to distinguish main ideas from details and examples.

17. Continue to take notes during class discussions.

18. Avoid writing down every single word your professor says, instead try to listen and then rephrase details succinctly yet accurately.

19. Look at your professor and maintain eye contact, to remain focused.

20. Ask questions whenever you’re confused during class, office hours, or via email.

21. Jot down unfamiliar words and terms that your professor uses.

22. Avoid daydreaming or “zoning out” and push yourself to remain focused for the entire class.

23. Think actively about the content of the lecture. If your professor provides outlines or PowerPoint slides, take careful note of the information they include but do not let them be the limit of your note-taking in class or use them as an excuse to avoid paying attention. Add details from your professor’s lecture. Most PowerPoint slides are not meant to be your full set of class notes. Instead, they are an outline of what will be covered in class. It’s your job to fill in details and examples.

24. Try to visualize what your professor is describing.

25. Date any handouts and keep them with the day’s notes.

26. Take notes right up to the very end of class, and remain quiet and attentive.

27. Continue to take notes during films, videos/DVDs, and class discussions.

AFTER CLASS:

1. Think about the lecture as you leave class and immediately afterwards.

2. Edit your notes in the 2” margin or on the opposing pages immediately after class.

3. Fill in any gaps in your notes very soon after class.

4. Highlight, circle, or mark important ideas and new terms.

5. Review your notes frequently - perhaps even daily – especially if HIS 199 is difficult for you. (Research has shown that many frequent study sessions over time result in greater retention than one last-minute cramming session.)

6. Try to write possible test questions as you review your notes, then close your notes and see if you can answer them.

7. Get acquainted with classmates and exchange phone numbers and email addresses.

8. Look up any unfamiliar words or terms that you heard in class.
How to Prepare for HIS 199 Tests

1. Set a goal for each study session.

2. Study away from noise and distractions. Disregard, rather than react to, disturbances. If you study at home, tell others you can’t take phone calls or visitors while you’re studying. Turn off your cell phone and remove it from your study area.

3. Don’t just memorize facts! Although facts are important, you will be asked to synthesize facts and evaluate them, especially in essays. You will also be asked to develop a thesis statement that presents your main argument. Here is an example from a recent HIS 199 final:

   “A main component of the debate between liberals and conservatives in U.S. politics since the 1930s has been over how much involvement the federal government should have in the lives of Americans. Based on the historical record, which do you think has proven to be more effective in promoting the best interests of U.S. society, a more involved or less involved approach by the federal government? Why? Again, be sure to clearly define what you mean by ‘effective’ and give specific, detailed examples to support your argument.”

   To answer this question, you would need to go beyond simply stating whether a more or less involved federal government is preferable. You also need to explain why. If, in studying for this exam, you had memorized a long list of government initiatives to improve the lives of Americans, you would be able to give detailed examples. However, to do well on this question you need to go further and address the “why” question.

4. Compare your textbook to your class notes. Add details to your class notes.

5. Write summaries of sections in your book, create concept maps, or make timelines. Don’t rely only on flashcards.

6. Don’t just memorize facts. Consider the significance of the event. Ask yourself why it happened, how it’s related to events that preceded it and events that occurred afterward.

7. When you have to memorize information, develop mnemonics (memory devices, such as silly words or phrases, or associations) to memorize material.

8. Consider what questions your professor might ask. Write possible questions and then see if you can answer them.

9. If your test will include an essay, write possible essay questions and then write a response. Time yourself to see how long it takes to frame a thesis statement, organize and develop supporting details, and proofread an essay.

10. Form a study group. Some helpful guidelines are at http://www.niagara.edu/oas/learning_center/study_reading_strategies/student.htm.
11. **Begin at least 3-4 days in advance.** You really can’t prepare adequately for a HIS 199 exam by studying the night before.

12. **Briefly review what you studied the day before.** Do this every day. By the last day, you will have studied the first day’s material multiple times.

13. **Take periodic breaks.** Give your brain time to absorb what you studied.

14. Get a **good night’s sleep** before the exam, and eat a **nutritious breakfast**

15. **Take the time, at the beginning of the exam, to read the directions and possible essay questions thoroughly.** Be sure you understand what the question is asking.
Writing assignments will vary from section to section of HIS 199. But all sections will require you to write what is called an argumentative or persuasive essay.

Remember, the central goal of this assignment is to take a position and defend it. Do not make the mistake of presenting a narrative rather than an argument. To write a better essay, allow plenty of time and prepare thoroughly before you begin to write. Examine the question and really think about the position you will take. Then think about how you would convince someone that your position is correct. Make an outline of your argument, showing your main points and the facts you intend to cite to support each point. Consider your outline carefully. Are the points in the most logical and effective order? It is much easier to see the overall structure and move things around when they are still in outline form.

When you are sure of your basic argument, you can begin to write. Remember: your first draft is a draft. Nobody does it perfectly the first time. Rewrite and rewrite some more. Strive for clarity. Don’t let your sentences get too involved, and avoid using words that you don’t really understand. Watch for irrelevancies that detract from your argument. Nevertheless, don’t forget to address possible objections to your argument.

Remember that a good essay:

1. is well written. Words are well chosen and sentences are well constructed. Sentences and paragraphs transition smoothly.

2. is coherent and logically structured.

3. is free of grammatical and mechanical mistakes.

4. makes clear in the introduction the argument being advanced.

5. provides historical evidence to support assertions. This is important. Let the evidence carry the weight of your paper. Merely declaring something to be true doesn’t make it so. Your evidence is what will convince the reader that your argument is valid.

6. acknowledges multiple viewpoints and anticipates objections effectively.

7. is analytical and not a mere recitation of facts, dates, and events. However, sufficient narrative description should be provided to place the argument in context. If you mention a specific historical event, or a person, or a document, provide enough description of the event, person, or document, for the reader to understand what you are talking about. Remember, you can’t persuade readers of the validity of your argument if they don’t understand the evidence.

8. employs primary source materials as supporting evidence when appropriate. A few examples include:
   - quotes or firsthand accounts from people who participated in an event
   - public opinion polls
   - population, employment, and other statistics
   - official documents (speeches, the text of legislation, etc.)

9. accurately quotes, paraphrases, summarizes, and cites sources and makes it clear when information, opinions, or facts come from a source as opposed to coming from you.

10. For further ideas, consult the “Using primary and secondary sources when writing a history essay” section of the “HIS 199: Using Secondary Sources in History” handout on the Academic Support website.

Be sure to start your paper early enough so you can visit the Writing Center, http://www.niagara.edu/writing-center/.