

STATEMENT  
ON STANDARDS  
OF PROFESSIONAL  
CONDUCT

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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

STATEMENT  
ON STANDARDS  
OF PROFESSIONAL  
CONDUCT

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## Introduction to the 2003 Edition

Under its 1889 charter from the U.S. Congress, which specifically authorizes the American Historical Association to act “in the interest of American history, and of history in America,” the AHA bears a special obligation to address principles of conduct and practice among historians. Thus, in 1974 the Association established the Professional Division, the profession’s only elected body specifically charged with responsibility for ethical concerns. As such, the division has developed the following statement and addenda, which supersede the 1974 report of the AHA’s Ad Hoc Committee on the Rights of Historians. The Professional Division urges you to share this document with your students and colleagues, whether by ordering additional copies or photocopying this publication.

Readers should also take note of more specialized guidelines developed and adopted by other professional organizations. These include statements by four of the AHA’s affiliated societies: the American Association for State and Local History’s Statement of Professional Ethics; the National Council on Public History’s Ethical Guidelines for the Historian; the Oral History Association’s Oral History Evaluation Guidelines, which include principles and standards; and the Society for History in the Federal Government’s Principles and Standards for Federal Historical Programs. Copies of these publications are available through the headquarters of the respective organizations.

This edition of the *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* incorporates an amendment to Section 5 of the *Statement*, adopted by Council in January 2003. In May 2003, the AHA Council voted to end the practice of inviting and adjudicating formal complaints based on the *Statement on Standards*, so the “Addendum on Policies and Procedures” has been omitted from this edition.

The AHA Professional Division is embarking on a major revision of the *Statement on Standards*, and hopes to complete its work in 2004. Readers of this edition are urged to send any and all suggestions they may have for improving the text to Sharon K. Tune, Assistant Director, Administration, American Historical Association, 400 A Street S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003; phone 202-544-2422 ext. 101; fax 202-544-8307; email [stune@theaha.org](mailto:stune@theaha.org).



# Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct

*(Adopted May 1987; amended May 1990, May 1995, June 1996, January and May 1999, May 2000, May 2001, and January 2003)*

The historical profession is diverse, consisting of people who work in a variety of institutional settings and also as independent professionals. But all historians should be guided by the same principles of conduct.

## 1. Scholarship

Scholarship, the uncovering and exchange of new information and the shaping of interpretations, is basic to the activities of the historical profession. The profession communicates with students in textbooks and classrooms; to other scholars and the general public in books, articles, exhibits, films, and historic sites and structures; and to decision makers in memoranda and testimony.

Scholars must be not only competent in research and analysis but also cognizant of issues of professional conduct. **Integrity** is one of these issues. It requires an awareness of one's own bias and a readiness to follow sound method and analysis wherever they may lead. It demands disclosure of all significant qualifications of one's arguments. Historians should carefully document their findings and thereafter be prepared to make available to others their sources, evidence, and data, including the documentation they develop through interviews. Historians must not misrepresent evidence or the sources of evidence, must be free of the offense of plagiarism, and must not be indifferent to error or efforts to ignore or conceal it. They should acknowledge the receipt of any financial support, sponsorship, or unique privileges (including privileged access to research material) related to their research, and they should strive to bring the requests and demands of their employers and clients into harmony with the principles of the historical profession. They should also acknowledge assistance received from colleagues, students, and others.

Because historians must have **access to sources**—archival and other—to produce reliable history, they have a professional obligation to preserve sources and advocate free, open, equal, and nondiscriminatory access to them, and to avoid actions that might prejudice future access. Historians recognize the appropriateness of some national security and corporate and personal privacy claims but must challenge unnecessary restrictions. They must protect research collections and other historic resources and make those under their control available to other scholars as soon as possible.

Certain kinds of research and conditions attached to employment or to use of records impose obligations to maintain confidentiality, and oral historians often must make promises to interviewees as conditions for interviews. Scholars should honor any pledges made. At the same time,

historians should seek definitions of conditions of confidentiality before work begins, press for redefinitions when experience demonstrates the unsatisfactory character of established regulations, and advise their readers of the conditions and rules that govern their work. They also have the obligation to decline to make their services available when policies are unnecessarily restrictive.

As **intellectual diversity** enhances the historical imagination and contributes to the development and vitality of the study of the past, historians should welcome rather than deplore it. When applied with integrity, the political, social, and religious beliefs of historians may inform their historical practice. When historians make interpretations and judgments, they should be careful not to present them in a way that forecloses discussion of alternative interpretations. Historians should be free from institutional and professional penalties for their beliefs and activities, provided they do not misrepresent themselves as speaking for their institutions or their professional organizations.

The bond that grows out of lives committed to the study of history should be evident in the **standards of civility** that govern the conduct of historians in their relations with one another. The preeminent value of all intellectual communities is reasoned discourse—the continuous colloquy among historians of diverse points of view. A commitment to such discourse makes possible the fruitful exchange of views, opinions, and knowledge.

## 2. Teaching

Communication skills are essential to historians' efforts to disseminate their scholarship beyond the profession. Those skills are not limited to writing books and articles but also involve teaching, which takes place in many locales—museums and historic sites as well as classrooms—and involves the use of visual materials and artifacts as well as words.

Quality in teaching involves **integrity** as well as competence. Integrity requires the presentation of differing interpretations with intellectual honesty; it also requires fairness and promptness in judging students' work on merit alone and a readiness to discuss their views with an open mind.

When so applied, the **political, social, and religious beliefs** of historians may inform their teaching. The right of the teacher to hold such convictions and to express them in teaching, however, does not justify the persistent intrusion of material unrelated to the subject of the course or the intentional use of falsification, misrepresentation, or concealment.

**Freedom of expression** is essential to the task of communicating historical thought and learning. To this end, historians should have substantial latitude in realizing their objectives, although they are obligated to see that their courses or other presentations reasonably correspond in coverage and emphasis to published descriptions.

### 3. Public Service

Historical knowledge provides a vital perspective in the analysis of contemporary social problems and political issues and at times may impose obligations on historians to enter policy arenas in which difficulties abound. Often the work of historians may be used by others in ways that historians find objectionable. Some may seek to make partisans out of professionals or to discredit them by charging that they are not qualified to speak on an issue or are biased.

Historians entering public arenas as political advisers, expert witnesses, consultants, legislative witnesses, journalists, commentators, or staff may face a **choice of priorities** between professionalism and partisanship. They may want to prepare themselves by seeking advice from other experienced professionals. As historians, they must be sensitive to the complexities of history, the diversity among historians, and the limits as well as the strengths of their own points of view and experiences and of the discipline itself and its specialties. In such situations, historians must use sources, including the work of other scholars, with great care and should be prepared to explain the methods and assumptions in their research and the relations between evidence and interpretation and should be ready also to discuss alternative interpretations of the subjects being addressed.

### 4. Employment

Although some historians are self-employed, most work for academic institutions, corporations, government agencies, law firms, archives, historical societies, museums, parks, historic preservation programs, or in communications. In such institutions, they are usually in a position to influence employment policies, and thus they at least **share responsibility** for any unfair policies. To the extent that they can influence policies in their employing institutions, the AHA encourages historians to do all they possibly can to persuade their employers to accept and enforce such rules as will best ensure **fairness in all decisions** about the appointment of historians and in all personnel decisions affecting the welfare of employed historians. If they are in an academic institution, they should urge the institution to accept the 1966 "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," jointly formulated by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. If in a nonacademic institution, they should urge the institution to adopt comparable standards.

Fairness begins with recruitment. Historians have an obligation to do all possible to ensure that employment opportunities in the field are widely publicized and that all professionally qualified persons have an

equal opportunity to compete for any openly advertised position. This means not only the placement of job notices in appropriate publications (for example, the Chronicle of Higher Education, AHA's Perspectives, or other more specialized professional placement newsletters) but also the inclusion in such notices of a completely accurate description of the position and of any contingencies, budgetary or otherwise, that might affect the continued availability of the position. An institution should not deceive possible candidates by omitting qualifications or characteristics that favor certain candidates over others (for example, a preference for unspecified minor fields). If an employer decides to alter a job description or selection criteria, the institution should readvertise.

Fairness also involves equal treatment of all qualified applicants and procedures that are considerate to all applicants. For example, an employing institution should promptly acknowledge all applications and, as soon as practicable, inform applicants who do not meet the selection criteria. Likewise, it should keep competitive applicants informed of the progress of the search and promptly notify those who are no longer under consideration. It should do everything possible to accommodate finalists in arranging interviews, including the payment of expenses, where appropriate. Finally, it should ensure that those who conduct interviews adhere to professional standards by respecting the dignity of candidates, focusing their questions on the qualifications needed for the position, and avoiding questions that violate federal antidiscrimination laws.

Employment decisions always involve judgments. But, except in those cases in which federal law allows a specific preference, institutions should base hiring decisions as well as all decisions relating to reappointment, promotion, tenure, apprenticeship, graduate student assistantships, awards, and fellowships solely on professional qualifications without regard to sex, race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, veteran status, age, certain physical handicaps, or marital status. Hiring institutions should also not inquire into a candidate's citizenship. A candidate's right to work in the United States should not be asked about until such information becomes relevant to concluding a contract. A written contract should follow a verbal offer in a timely manner. Once signed, a contract should be honored by all parties as both a legal and ethical obligation.

Once employed, any person deserves the professional respect and support necessary for professional growth and advancement. Such respect precludes unequal treatment based on any nonprofessional criteria. In particular, it precludes any harassment or discrimination, which is unethical, unprofessional, and threatening to intellectual freedom. Harassment includes all behavior that prevents or impairs an individual's full enjoyment of educational or workplace rights, benefits,

environment, or opportunities, such as generalized pejorative remarks or behavior or the use of professional authority to emphasize inappropriately the personal identity of a student or colleague. Sexual harassment, which includes inappropriate requests for sexual favors, unwanted sexual advances, and sexual assaults, is illegal and violates professional standards.

Historians should receive promotions and merit salary increases exclusively on the basis of professional qualifications and achievements. The best way to ensure that such criteria are used is to establish **clear standards and procedures** known to all members of the institution. For example, academic historians need to know the relative weight given to scholarship, teaching, and service, as well as the value given to different forms of these activities, and how, taken together, they affect decisions about retention, tenure, or promotion. An institution should have an established review process, should offer candidates for promotion or merit raises opportunities to substantiate their achievements, should provide early and specific notification of adverse tenure or promotion or salary decisions, and should provide an appeal mechanism.

Of particularly grave concern to historians are those institutional decisions that lead to disciplinary action—most important, questions of suspension and dismissal, because they may involve issues of academic freedom. All institutions employing historians should have clearly written policies governing both the grounds for disciplinary action and the procedures to be followed. Those procedures should embody the principles of due process, including adequate mechanisms for fact-finding and avenues for appeal. Academic institutions should adhere to the AAUP's 1940 "Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure." Other institutions that employ professional historians should provide a comparable standard of due process.

Historians who work **part time or as adjunct or temporary faculty** should receive compensation in proportion to the share of a full-time work load they carry, including a proportionate share of fringe benefits available to their full-time colleagues; they also should have access to institutional facilities and support systems, including research support, and should be eligible to apply for relevant tenure opportunities. Employers should offer multiyear contracts to those likely to remain part-time for extended periods, and those individuals should have the attendant obligations of participation in governance and administrative tasks and access to the same procedural protections as full-time employees. Non-tenure-track employees also should be represented on the appropriate advisory and governing bodies, such as faculty senates.

## 5. Credentials

Historians are obligated to present their credentials **accurately and honestly** in all contexts. They should take care not to misrepresent their qualifications in c.v.'s and in grant applications.

The status of a book, article, or other publication that is still in the production pipeline is often an important piece of information for search committees, tenure/promotion review committees, and fellowship committees. Yet the profession has no standardized terminology for works in progress, often rendering their status unclear. The AHA suggests the following lexicon.

- “In Press”: the manuscript is fully copyedited and out of the author's hands. It is in the final stages of the production process.
- “Forthcoming”: a completed manuscript has been accepted by a press or journal.
- “Under contract to . . .”: a press and an author have signed a contract for a book in progress, but the final manuscript has not yet been submitted.
- “Submitted” or “under consideration”: the book or article has been submitted to a press or journal, but there is as yet no contract or agreement to publish.

Historians should not list among the completed achievements on their c.v.'s degrees or honors they have never earned, jobs they have never held, articles or books they have never written or published, or any comparable misrepresentations of their creative or professional work.

# Statement on Plagiarism

(Adopted May 1986; amended May 1990, May 1993, May 1995, and January 2002\*)

## 1. Identifying Plagiarism

The word *plagiarism* derives from Latin roots: *plagiarius*, an abductor, and *plagiare*, to steal. The expropriation of another author's text, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism and is a serious violation of the ethics of scholarship. It undermines the credibility of historical inquiry.

In addition to the harm that plagiarism does to the pursuit of truth, it can also be an offense against the literary rights of the original author and the property rights of the copyright owner. Detection can therefore result not only in academic sanctions (such as dismissal from a graduate program, termination of a faculty contract, or denial of promotion or tenure) but in legal action as well. As a practical matter, plagiarism between scholars rarely goes to court, in part because legal concepts, such as infringement of copyright, are narrower than ethical standards that guide professional conduct. The real penalty for plagiarism is the abhorrence of the community of scholars.

Plagiarism includes more subtle and perhaps more pernicious abuses than simply expropriating the exact wording of another author without attribution. Plagiarism also includes the limited borrowing, without attribution, of another person's distinctive and significant research findings, hypotheses, theories, rhetorical strategies, or interpretations, or an extended borrowing even with attribution. Of course, historical knowledge is cumulative, and thus in some contexts—such as textbooks, encyclopedia articles, or broad syntheses—the form of attribution, and the permissible extent of dependence on prior scholarship, citation, and other forms of attribution, will differ from what is expected in more limited monographs. As knowledge is disseminated to a wide public, it loses some of its personal reference. What belongs to whom becomes less distinct. But even in textbooks a historian should acknowledge the sources of recent or distinctive findings and interpretations, those not yet a part of the common understanding of the profession, and should never simply borrow and rephrase the findings of other scholars.

Plagiarism, then, takes many forms. The clearest abuse is the use of another's language without quotation marks and citation. More subtle abuses include the appropriation of concepts, data, or notes all disguised in newly crafted sentences, or reference to a borrowed work in an early note and then extensive further use without attribution. All such tactics reflect an unworthy disregard for the contributions of others.

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\*This statement is based on an earlier version prepared by John Higham (Johns Hopkins University) and Robert L. Zangrando (University of Akron).

## 2. Resisting Plagiarism

All who participate in the community of inquiry, as amateurs or as professionals, as students or as established historians, have an obligation to oppose deception. This obligation bears with special weight on the directors of graduate seminars. They are critical in shaping a young historian's perception of the ethics of scholarship. It is therefore incumbent on graduate teachers to seek opportunities for making the seminar also a workshop in scholarly integrity. After leaving graduate school, every historian will have to depend primarily on vigilant self-criticism. Throughout our lives none of us can cease to question the claims our work makes and the sort of credit it grants to others.

But just as important as the self-criticism that guards us from self-deception is the formation of work habits that protect a scholar from plagiarism. The plagiarist's standard defense—that he or she was misled by hastily taken and imperfect notes—is plausible only in the context of a wider tolerance of shoddy work. A basic rule of good notetaking requires every researcher to distinguish scrupulously between exact quotation and paraphrase. A basic rule of good writing warns us against following our own paraphrased notes slavishly. When a historian simply links one paraphrase to the next, even if the sources are cited, a kind of structural misuse takes place; the writer is implicitly claiming a shaping intelligence that actually belonged to the sources. Faced with charges of failing to acknowledge dependence on certain sources, a historian usually pleads that the lapse was inadvertent. This excuse will be easily disposed of if scholars take seriously the injunction to check their manuscripts against the underlying texts prior to publication.

The second line of defense against plagiarism is organized and punitive. Every institution that includes or represents a body of scholars has an obligation to establish procedures designed to clarify and uphold their ethical standards. Every institution that employs historians bears an especially critical responsibility to maintain the integrity and reputation of its staff. This applies to government agencies, corporations, publishing firms, and public service organizations such as museums and libraries, as surely as it does to educational facilities. Usually, it is the employing institution that is expected to investigate charges of plagiarism promptly and impartially and to invoke appropriate sanctions when the charges are sustained. Penalties for scholarly misconduct should vary according to the seriousness of the offense, and the protections of due process should always apply. A persistent pattern of deception may justify public disclosure or even termination of an academic career; some scattered misappropriations may warrant only a formal reprimand.

All historians share responsibility for maintenance of the highest standards of intellectual integrity. When appraising manuscripts for publication, reviewing books, or evaluating peers for placement,

promotion, and tenure, scholars must evaluate the honesty and reliability with which the historian uses primary and secondary source materials. Scholarship flourishes in an atmosphere of openness and candor, which should include the scrutiny and discussion of academic deception.

## **Advisory Opinion Regarding the Harassment of Job Candidates**

*(Adopted May 1989)*

Several disturbing instances of “academic mugging” have come to the attention of the AHA Professional Division. By this term, the division means the practice of individuals attempting to influence the appointment process by, for example, refusing to cooperate with a candidate if he or she is appointed, circulating rumors or other unsubstantiated derogatory information, and pressuring a candidate by phone or mail. The division finds such actions inappropriate and counter to professional standards of conduct that should at all times govern historians in their relations with one another.

## **Statement on Interviewing for Historical Documentation**

*(Adopted May 1989; amended January 1998)*

Interviewing has become commonplace in historical research focusing on the 20th century, but unfortunately it is often done and used without proper attention to professional obligations. When they conduct interviews, individual historians too often fail to adhere to the standards now well established in more formal oral history programs and projects. Historians should recognize that in interviewing they are creating historical documents and that entails special responsibilities to ensure future access for both verification and research by others. The AHA’s *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* (adopted 1987) establishes basic obligations for historians who engage in interviewing, which are detailed on pages 1–2 under the heading “Scholarship.”

Recognizing the need for more specific guidelines, the AHA’s Professional Division consulted with representatives of the Oral History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Society of American Archivists. The following guidelines resulted from that discussion and are drawn from statements adopted by the Oral History Association and the Society for History in the Federal Government:

1. Interviews should be recorded on tape but only after the person to be interviewed has been informed of the mutual rights and responsibilities involved in oral history, such as editing, confidentiality, disposition, and dissemination of all forms of the record. Interviewers should obtain legal releases and document any agreements with interviewees.
2. The interviewer should strive to prompt informative dialogue through challenging and perceptive inquiry, should be grounded in the background and experiences of the person being interviewed, and, if possible, should review the sources relating to the interviewee before conducting the interview.
3. To the extent practicable, interviewers should extend the inquiry beyond their immediate needs to make each interview as complete as possible for the benefit of others.
4. The interviewer should guard against possible social injury to or exploitation of interviewees and should conduct interviews with respect for human dignity.
5. Interviewers should be responsible for proper citation of oral history sources in creative works, including permanent location.
6. Interviewers should arrange to deposit their interviews in an archival repository that is capable of both preserving the interviews and making them available for general research. Additionally, the interviewer should work with the repository in determining the necessary legal arrangements.
7. As teachers, historians are obligated to inform students of their responsibilities in regard to interviewing and to encourage adherence to the guidelines set forth here.

Certain interview research may be governed by the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (codified at 45 CFR 46). Such research may require prospective review by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as written informed consent of the interviewee. Additionally, institutions engaged in biomedical or behavioral research are likely to have internal policies that also pertain to interview research. Historians should be cognizant of and comply with all laws, regulations, and institutional policies applicable to their research activities. Before beginning any research that may include oral history interviewing, historians should contact their IRB for policies and regulations governing the use of human subjects in research projects. They will also find it useful to read and follow the the Oral History Association's *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines* (Oral History Association Pamphlet Number 3, revised September 2000), which includes principles and standards. See also *Oral History and the Law* by John Neuenschwander (Oral History Association Pamphlet No. 1, 2nd ed., 1993), which provides sample release forms.

# Statement on Discrimination and Harassment in Academia

*(Adopted May 1991)*

The American Historical Association encourages educational activities to counter incidents of racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic behavior (including speech) on school campuses, and also encourages school administrators to speak out vigorously against such incidents. At the same time, the Association disapproves of efforts to limit or punish speech on university campuses. We condemn the violation of academic freedom and First Amendment rights to free speech as well as the harassment and vilification to which some faculty and students have been subjected.

# Advisory Opinion Regarding Conflict of Interest

*(Adopted May 1991)*

A conflict of interest arises when an individual's personal interest or bias threatens or appears to threaten to compromise his or her ability to act in accordance with professional or public obligations. Historians frequently encounter such situations as participants in some form of peer review—for example, reviewing grant applications, vetting manuscripts for publication, evaluating annual meeting program proposals, or selecting prize or award recipients. Historians should identify and, where appropriate, recuse themselves from any decisions or other actions in which a conflict of interest or the appearance thereof arises; they should avoid situations in which they may benefit or appear to benefit financially at the expense of their professional obligations. An individual should normally refuse to participate in the formal review of work by anyone for whom he or she feels a sense of personal obligation, competition, or enmity.

# Statement on Diversity in History Teaching

*(Adopted May 1991)*

Course offerings and textbooks in history, whether for K–12, undergraduate, or graduate classes, should address the diversity of human experience, recognizing that historical accuracy requires attention both to individual and cultural similarities and differences and to the larger global and historical context within which societies have evolved.

# Advisory Opinion Regarding Age Discrimination

*(Adopted June 1996)*

The AHA's Professional Division has found troubling evidence of age discrimination within the history profession. The division is particularly concerned about discrimination against older applicants both in position announcements and in the hiring process. More specifically, the division is concerned about departments trying to narrow the applicant pool through the use of age-restrictive criteria in job descriptions or arbitrarily eliminating otherwise qualified candidates because of age. No one should be denied the opportunity to pursue a career in history because of his or her age.

When a department or institution decides to confine its search to younger applicants, it discriminates against two groups. One is made up of older individuals who earned their doctorates during the job shortages of the 1970s and 1980s, have since held a variety of temporary and part-time positions, and are interested in entry-level positions that offer the possibility of tenured status. Although their teaching experience and often impressive publications might be expected to give them an advantage in the search process, they sometimes find themselves dismissed without interviews as "overqualified." The other group that suffers age discrimination is made up of those who have earned their degrees later in life and thus are recent Ph.D.'s but no longer young. Such candidates have received the same training as their younger colleagues and have benefited from more extensive life experience, yet search committees sometimes tend to be biased against those whose lives do not fit traditional patterns. By eliminating well-qualified candidates simply because of age, search committees lose valuable opportunities to enrich their departments and institutions.

The Professional Division opposes the use of hiring criteria that discriminate against qualified candidates on the basis of age. The use of such criteria at any stage in the search and hiring process is unprofessional and may constitute age discrimination, which is illegal.



