

Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORIANS

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As the professional association of historians in the Netherlands, the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (KNHG) presents the following *Professional Standards for Historians* to all those who are involved in the creation or transmission of history in the Netherlands, professionally or otherwise.

These *Professional Standards* aim to help historians respect and protect the integrity of historical practice and promote the conditions for responsible public debate about the past. They are intended as a tool for education and prevention, as a stimulus for discussion about the basic principles of the profession, as a long-term strategy to combat abuse, and as a means of communicating the professionalism of historians to the outside world, including prosecutors and judges. They are not intended to freeze the profession or impose sanctions.

These *Professional Standards* are a comprehensive adaptation of the American Historical Association's 2023 *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* (itself the result of a focus on professional ethics dating back to 1974), tailored to the Dutch context. The *Professional Standards* are limited as much as possible to what specifically applies to the practice of history and should therefore be used in conjunction with the broader guidelines of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (see the *Concise Reading List* at the end of this document for more information). As the *Professional Standards* are the subject of ongoing discussion in the community of historians in response to new perspectives, problems, or challenges, this June 2023 edition will be revised regularly by the General Meeting of Members of the KNHG as necessary.

1. The profession

Historiography is a never-ending process in which people try to understand the past and its many meanings. During that process, a dialogue about and with the past takes place. This dialogue has been part of the human experience for thousands of years, but it has changed significantly over time. **Everyone interprets the past and talks about it, which means that everyone participates in creating historical narratives.** This makes historiography one of the most fundamental tools people use to understand themselves and their world.

Professional historians benefit greatly from this widely shared fascination with the past. Few fields are as accessible and engaging to the general public as history. People from diverse backgrounds have an interest in how the past is understood, because the past touches on the core of their identity and worldview. That is why history evokes emotions and controversies in public debate. People from different disciplinary backgrounds, such as journalists and amateur historians, also publish historical studies. Professional historians must therefore realize that they never have a monopoly on their own discipline, and that this is a strength

rather than a weakness. The openness of historical science is one of its most attractive aspects, allowing it to constantly renew itself and remain socially relevant.

What defines people involved in the creation or transmission of history? **Historians are those who study and interpret the past according to the rules of historical science.** They work in a wide variety of settings: in museums and libraries, in schools and academic institutions, in companies and organizations. Some earn their living exclusively from work related to the past; others practice historiography while earning their living in other ways. Nevertheless, historians share certain core values that guide their activities and inform their judgments as they contribute to the collective understanding of the past. These shared values for conducting and assessing research, developing and evaluating interpretations, communicating new knowledge, dealing with ethical dilemmas, and, not least, telling stories about the past, define the practice of historical scholarship.

2. Shared values

Historians constantly strive to improve our understanding of the past through **critical dialogue** – with each other, with the wider public, and with historical sources – in which historians question individuals and societies from the past in search of answers to urgent questions that were raised then and are raised today. To ensure the integrity of historical scholarship and practice, it is crucial that relevant new historical perspectives and hitherto underrepresented viewpoints are integrated into this dialogue.

Historians cannot do this work successfully without mutual **trust and respect**. By practicing their profession with integrity, they can earn a reputation for reliability. The trust and respect of both colleagues and the wider public are among the greatest and most hard-won achievements of historians.

Although historians disagree on many issues, they trust and respect each other's work if it meets basic requirements. All historians believe in respecting **the integrity of historical sources**. They do not fabricate evidence. Falsification and fraud violate the foundations on which historians build their interpretations of the past. A forgery undermines not only the forger's historical arguments, but also all subsequent scholarship based on that forgery. Those who fabricate, alter, ignore, remove, or destroy evidence make it difficult for historians, as well as the broader public, to ever fully trust their work again.

Historians respect historical sources but understand that their interpretation is constantly changing as historians analyze primary sources in light of the ever-growing body of secondary literature. By **primary sources**, historians mean all forms of evidence – not only written texts, but also artifacts, images, video, statistics, oral memories, the built and natural environment, and many other things – that have been preserved as witnesses to earlier times. By **secondary literature**, they generally mean all later interpretations of that past, based on the evidence in the primary sources. This distinction between primary and secondary sources is important to historians. Drawing the line between the two is much more complicated than it seems, because whether a source is primary or secondary depends largely on the questions historians ask of it. At the most basic level, historical professional practice requires that the integrity of primary and secondary sources be respected, that they be critically examined, and that historians contribute honestly to academic and public discussions about what these sources tell us about the past and about what they do not reveal.

An increasing proportion of sources from the recent past are being created and preserved in digital form, presenting new opportunities and challenges for archivists and historians. The use of digital technologies has led to a greater quantity and variety of data – including from earlier periods – that is easily searchable and available in online archives and on digital platforms. It has also enabled new research methods such as automated text analysis and data mining. And it offers new possibilities for the long-term preservation of sources. At the same time, managing the enormous number of digital sources also entails risks, such as vulnerability to loss or destruction because of technological obsolescence or the lack of adequate storage and backup systems. Furthermore, it is necessary to determine which digital sources should be preserved for future research and which can be deleted, and to ensure the privacy and security of sensitive digital sources.

Respect for sources also means leaving **a clear trail for future historians**. All changes made by historians when citing or using a primary source or published secondary work, whether digital or printed, must be noted. The ease with which digitized sources can be reproduced and consulted simplifies this practice, but makes careful citation even more important. That is why the **scholarly apparatus** – that is, bibliographies and annotations and the associated institutional repositories such as archives, libraries, and databases– is essential to historiography. It enables other historians and the wider public to verify the steps in an argument to ensure that they are justified by the sources. Good annotation also allows readers to identify gaps in historical sources that could cast doubt on a particular interpretation. This verifiability contributes to the reliability of historians' work. **The trust that other historians place in the work of their colleagues is crucial in academia**. Finally, the trail of evidence left behind by each individual historical work becomes an important starting point for later research on the same subject, thus making a critical contribution to the collective ability to ask and answer new questions about the past. For all these reasons, historians attach great importance to the **care** with which sources are used and documented. The sloppier their annotation, the more difficult it is for other historians to trust their work and the less reliable the profession will be considered.

A core principle of historical science that may seem counterintuitive to non-historians is the widely held belief among historians that **the honest practice of history can go hand in hand with taking a position**. Since people in the past often held views that differed greatly from each other – and from those held today – historians try to do justice to those views by seeing the past, to a certain extent, through the eyes of contemporaries. This is especially true when people in the past disagreed or came into conflict with each other, because an adequate understanding of their world must include their differences of opinion. **Diverse and conflicting perspectives are therefore part of the past itself and of historiography**.

Historians also regularly disagree about how to interpret the past, and sometimes these discussions even concern ‘basic facts’. This can be surprising to non-historians, especially when they believe that historians agree on a number of established facts and unchanging certainties. However, discussions among historians about each other's interpretations are vital to the development of the discipline. Differences of opinion can deepen and enrich historical understanding because they result in new questions, new arguments, and new lines of research. Historians rely on their own perspectives, but they also subject them to critical examination by testing them against those of others and having them commented on by other historians.

The most **fundamental premise of scientific historiography is that, within certain limits, we can indeed know and understand past worlds and earlier times, of which only traces remain in the present.** However, all knowledge must be situated in its temporal and geographical context. Interpretations and analyses of historical phenomena are also influenced by the values, interests, and beliefs of the historian. It is therefore desirable to consider different perspectives when studying the past. Absolute historical knowledge is therefore impossible.

Mutual respect, constructive criticism, and openness to ideas are crucial to sustaining ongoing dialogue among historians. **Historiography therefore thrives in democratic societies where freedom of expression, freedom of association, and academic freedom are respected and protected. Historians benefit from good citizenship in the society of which they are a part, so that free research and free debate are guaranteed and encouraged.**

Many dilemmas in historical professional practice can therefore be resolved if historians remain faithful to a few **core values**:

- They practice their profession with integrity;
- They respect their sources;
- They refer diligently to their sources;
- They acknowledge where and when they are indebted to the work of others;
- They respect and welcome well-founded dissenting opinions, even and especially when they subject these opinions to critical examination;
- They recognize that historical science is a collective endeavor that depends on mutual trust;
- They never betray that trust.

3. Scientific aspects

Integrity in the practice of historical scholarship requires, on the one hand, an **awareness of one's own biases** and, on the other hand, a **willingness to follow sound methods and analyses** wherever they may lead. Historians must carefully describe and argue their findings and make their sources available. In doing so, they must not omit evidence that contradicts their own interpretation. They must resist the false or incorrect use of evidence and attempts to ignore or conceal such false or incorrect use.

Historians are also committed to protecting important historical evidence (sources), wherever it may be located. Science depends on the dissemination of historical knowledge through many communication channels such as books, articles, education, exhibitions, films, historical sites, museums, legal memoranda, and testimonies.

Historians depend on free and equal access to archival, library, and museum collections. This means that they must guard against actions that could jeopardize access for future historians. Although historians recognize the legitimacy of restricting access to some sources for reasons of national security, property rights, and privacy, they must professionally oppose unnecessary and unjustified restrictions on the public availability of information. The profession requires the greatest possible accessibility to, and public discussion of, historical sources.

At the same time, there are limits to what historians themselves can disclose. This applies in particular to research involving living persons (interviews, oral history¹). In such cases, historians must respect the principle of **informed consent**. This is the principle that no one may participate in scientific research without a declaration of consent, which can be withdrawn at any time if desired. In many disciplines, such as the medical and social sciences, written consent is the norm (in medical science, it is even a legal requirement). For historians, informed consent means that they clearly explain the nature and purpose of the research to those involved, that they verify that they understand the information properly, that they record their consent in writing, and that, if necessary, they make agreements about the approval of quotations in a manuscript. In doing so, they must be aware of the (implicit) power relations between interviewer and interviewee.

In many cases, however, living persons do not play a role in historical research. The principle of informed consent does not apply directly in such cases, but it may apply indirectly. There may be express non-consent (e.g., a diary stating that it may not be read by third parties). If the sources are freely accessible, historians are not bound by such a prohibition, but they must explicitly weigh the importance of disclosure against it. The same applies to implied non-consent (e.g., sensitive information where it is reasonable to doubt whether the persons concerned or their relatives would have appreciated disclosure). Historians have a duty to weigh the importance of disclosure against implied non-consent.

Informed consent is therefore a less rigid and broadly applicable principle in historical research than in other branches of science. At the same time, historians are bound by other socially shared norms and values, which also apply in situations where the consent of those involved is not an issue. **Respect for human dignity** may be expected of historians at all times, as may ethical reflection on what such respect means in a specific case.

This is particularly true when historians deal with **issues of privacy and reputation**. When collecting personal data on living individuals, they must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). When writing about such living persons, there is a tension between the right to privacy and reputation of these persons and the right to freedom of expression, including scientific research, of historians. A balance must be struck between the two. Public figures, like everyone else, have a right to privacy and reputation, but less so than private figures ('ordinary citizens'). The importance of disclosure also increases rapidly as the events become more distant in time.

The situation is more complicated when it comes to the dead: the dead have privacy and reputation, but no *right* to privacy or reputation. However, the living do have moral responsibilities towards the dead, namely **duties of respect and protection**. These also apply to historians. Here too, the importance of disclosing facts must be weighed against possible disrespect towards the dead and against harming their surviving relatives (primarily their family) or the communities to which they belonged. Anonymization and pseudonymization are ways of protecting the privacy and reputation of the living and the dead, but have the disadvantage of making historical figures less visible and possibly causing them to lose appreciation. (For further explanation, see [*Privacy en reputatie: Een beknopte gids voor historici*](#) (in Dutch).)

¹ Historians who use oral history as a method are explicitly referred to the [Ethical Code of Oral History Netherlands](#), which was drawn up to promote the professionalization of oral history as a discipline.

The responsibility of historians to document the research process transparently and diligently also applies when working with **digital sources and datasets**. When historians use digital sources, both born digital (e.g., emails) and digitized (e.g., scans of archival documents), they must make their references to these sources as permanently traceable as possible, for example by mentioning a persistent identifier (PID). When using digitized sources, they must also report that digital reproductions have been used.

Historians generate data based on sources – digital and non-digital, primary and secondary. These include, for example, compiled datasets, photographs, or notes. As a rule, this data must be published as Open Data. Deviations from this rule are only justified when compelling interests, such as legal restrictions or ethical considerations, make this necessary. Historians are not required to disclose personal notes, unless this is necessary to verify historical work. When publishing their data, historians strive for **transparency**. They therefore document the choices and methods behind the data collection, processing, and interpretation so that others can understand the working method, find the data, reproduce it, and possibly reuse it (the FAIR principles: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable).

The increased accessibility of historical sources through digitization and online availability also entails responsibilities for historians. Together with archival institutions, which do a great deal of work in digitizing sources, they must commit themselves to clarifying and contextualizing digital sources. Digitization is a process in which choices are made about selection, form, and accessibility. Historians are accountable for this process, for example by using data envelopes: modular appendices that provide information about the origin, annotation, and possible sensitivities of datasets. Historians must also critically reflect on the social impact and privacy issues associated with the disclosure of sources. Collaboration with archives and institutions must be aimed at the sustainable and ethical use of digital sources.

Finally, historians must **report** any **financial support**, sponsorship, or unique privileges (including special access to research materials) obtained during their research, as these privileges may distort their research results.

4. Plagiarism

The honest practice of history means that historians acknowledge their debt to the work of other historians. This applies to careful referencing of both primary sources and secondary literature. Copying someone else's work and presenting it as your own is plagiarism. **Plagiarism** violates the 'archive' of historical sources by failing to disclose the secondary sources that contributed to a particular argument. It is a form of fraud that violates the trust on which the profession depends.

Stealing another author's work and presenting it as your own is plagiarism and a serious violation of scientific ethics. Plagiarism undermines the credibility of the plagiarist as well as the profession. It is an infringement of the property rights of the plagiarized author and the copyright holder. Its discovery can therefore lead not only to sanctions (such as exclusion from a history program, refusal of promotion, or termination of employment), but also to legal action. **Rejection and exclusion by the professional community are the most severe penalties for plagiarists.**

Plagiarism takes many forms. The most obvious abuse is copying other people's sentences word for word without quotation marks, citations, or source references. More subtle, but equally plagiaristic, is the appropriation of concepts, data, or notes, disguised in new sentences, or referring to a borrowed work in a note at the beginning of the text, but then making extensive use of it without further source citation.

In textbooks, encyclopedia articles, broad syntheses, and some public presentations, the permissible degree of reliance on earlier scholarship, as well as the standards for citation and other forms of attribution, may differ from what is expected in monographs or articles. But even there, historians must indicate the sources of recent or unusual findings and interpretations that are not yet part of the knowledge widely shared within the profession. And while some forms of historical work are less suited to explicit source citation (e.g., films and exhibitions), every effort should be made to acknowledge the scholarship that informs such work in captions and credits or colophons. **The best way to avoid accusations of plagiarism is to always be explicit, thorough, and generous in acknowledging intellectual debt.**

Historians must also always **acknowledge the help and work** of colleagues, students, research assistants, memory activists, interviewees, and others, and give proper credit to their collaborators.

All historians, whether professional historians, students, or amateurs, are obliged to oppose deception and plagiarism. This obligation applies in particular to teachers who lead student seminars. They play a crucial role in shaping the image that young historians have of scientific ethics and intellectual integrity. It is therefore the task of teachers to ensure that these seminars also serve as training in scientific integrity. After graduation, historians must rely primarily on vigilant self-criticism. Throughout their working lives, historians must question the claims to originality made by their work and the credit it gives to others.

The first line of defense against plagiarism is preventive: historians need to learn habits that protect them from plagiarism. The standard defense of plagiarists – that they were misled by hastily made and inadequate notes – is only plausible in a working environment that tolerates sloppy work. A basic rule of good notetaking is that every researcher must make a careful distinction between exact quotation and paraphrasing.

The second line of defense against plagiarism is repressive and applies to institutions that punish plagiarism. All institutions employing professional historians are required to establish procedures that clarify and enforce their ethical standards. Institutions have a responsibility to uphold the integrity and reputation of their staff by investigating allegations of plagiarism promptly and impartially and imposing appropriate sanctions where necessary. Penalties for misconduct should be proportionate to the offense.

All historians share the responsibility of upholding high standards of intellectual integrity. When assessing manuscripts for publication, reviewing books, or evaluating colleagues, scholars must assess the honesty and reliability with which the historians in question use primary sources and secondary literature. Historical scholarship thrives in an atmosphere of openness, which must also include careful investigation and public discussion of intellectual dishonesty.

5. The transfer of knowledge

Teaching is fundamental to the practice of history. It takes place not only in classrooms, but also in museums and historical sites, in documentaries and textbooks, in newspaper articles, on websites, and in popular books. Whether it takes place in the classroom or in the public domain, education ensures that the past remains part of the living memory of the present. This contributes to good citizenship, which is crucial to the democratic character of societies in which the work of historians can flourish.

Good teaching involves conveying information **carefully**, always placing it in context to explain its broader significance. Teaching with integrity means presenting competing interpretations in a balanced and intellectually honest manner. This promotes an important goal of education: to spark the interest of those encountering a new historical topic for the first time and to help them understand that **historical scholarship is a process of lively inquiry**, not a passive collection of accepted facts.

The political, social, and religious beliefs of history teachers necessarily influence their work, and they have the right to hold and express such beliefs. However, this does not justify falsification, concealment, or misrepresentation. Furthermore, teachers must take into account that students and other listeners have the right to argue why they disagree with a particular interpretation or point of view. Students should be made aware of the multitude of causes and the diversity of interpretations. Within the limits of the historical subject being studied, the free expression of legitimate and well-founded differences of opinion should always be a goal. Teachers, for their part, should judge students' work solely on its merits.

6. Public debate

Since **accurate facts and well-founded interpretations contribute to the historical awareness that is essential for open debate and citizenship**, historians regularly have the opportunity to publicly explain the implications of their knowledge for the present. It is one of the privileges of the profession to share historical insights and interpretations with a wider audience. The institutions that employ historians must recognize the importance of this. On the one hand, historians should not be subject to institutional or professional censorship solely for the content of their beliefs and activities in the public domain, but on the other hand, they should not falsely present themselves as spokespersons for their institutions or professional organizations when they are not authorized to do so. Nor should they invoke their authority as historians on subjects outside their expertise.

Historians who engage in public debate have a responsibility to represent the best practices of the historical profession through their actions. This means that they must strike a balance between their desire to express their views and their responsibility to uphold the standards and values that underpin their professional authority as historians. This challenge can be particularly complex for public historians, who often have to be accountable on multiple levels in their daily work, and for activist historians who advocate for a particular cause.

Public discussions about complex historical issues inevitably **simplify** aspects of those issues. While it is perfectly acceptable for historians to share their own views with the public, they should also seek to demonstrate how historians link evidence to arguments in order to arrive at fair, nuanced, and responsible interpretations of the past. The desire to ‘score points’ should never tempt historians to misrepresent the past or the historical method.

Historians working in government agencies, businesses, and non-profit organizations, as well as those who occasionally serve as political advisors, experts, public intellectuals, consultants, forensic experts or witnesses, journalists, or commentators, may be faced with a choice between professionalism and partisanship. As historians, they must be sensitive to the complexity of history, to the diversity of historical interpretations and, in addition to the strengths, also to the limitations of their own points of view.

7. Reputation and trust

Historians are obliged to present their **achievements** carefully and honestly in all circumstances. They must ensure that their qualifications are not misrepresented in their curriculum vitae, in job applications, or in public. Historians may not list degrees or honors they have never earned, appointments they have never held, articles or books they have never written or published, or misrepresent their creative or professional work under the completed achievements section of their curriculum vitae.

The status of a book, article, or other publications that are still in progress is often important information for committees assessing applications, (permanent) appointments, promotions, or grants. However, the professional group does not have **standardized terminology** for publications in progress, which often makes their status unclear. KNHG proposes the following **lexicon**:

- “*Submitted*” or “*under consideration*”: the proposal, book, or article has been submitted to a publisher or journal, but no contract or agreement for publication has been signed yet.
- “*Under contract with ...*”: a publisher and an author have signed a contract for a book in progress, but the final manuscript has not yet been submitted.
- “*To be published*”: a completed manuscript has been accepted by a publisher or journal.
- “*Printing*”: the manuscript has been fully edited and is no longer in the author's hands. It is in the final stage of the production process.

Historians must be aware of potential **conflicts of interest** that may arise in the performance of their professional duties. A conflict of interest exists when personal interests or bias may compromise the ability to act in accordance with professional obligations. Historians may encounter such situations when participating in some form of peer review – for example, when reviewing books, assessing grant applications, approving manuscripts for publication, evaluating program proposals for annual meetings and conferences, or selecting winners of prizes and awards. They should consider whether there is a conflict of interest or the appearance of one and, if so, refrain from making decisions or taking other actions. They must avoid situations in which they have or appear to have a financial advantage to the detriment of their professional obligations. They must normally refuse to participate in the formal evaluation of the work of someone to whom they have a personal obligation, with whom they have a strong friendship or enmity, or with whom they are in direct competition.

KNHG encourages all historians to take their professional responsibilities very seriously, to defend them, and to advocate for integrity, fairness, and high standards throughout the profession.

Short reading list (in Dutch)

1. History and related sciences

Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap (KNHG)

Dossier: open science (knhg.nl).

Koninklijke Vereniging Archiefsector Nederland (KVAN)

Beroepscode voor archivariissen (1997).

Nederlandse Vereniging van Archeologen (NVvA)

Gedragscode voor beroepsarcheologen van de NVvA (2001).

Het handvest (1995).

2. Science in general

Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW)

Academische vrijheid in Nederland: Een begripsanalyse en richtsnoer (2021).

Gedragscode belangenverstrengeling (2008).

Gedragscode voor gebruik van persoonsgegevens in wetenschappelijk onderzoek (2003).

Goed voorbeeld doet volgen: Het nieuwe erkennen en waarderen volgens de Jonge Akademie (2020).

Richtlijnen voor historisch-wetenschappelijk onderzoek in opdracht (2007).

Sociale veiligheid in de Nederlandse wetenschap: Van papier naar praktijk (2022).

Vertrouwen in wetenschap (2013).

Vrijheid van wetenschapsbeoefening in Nederland (2018).

Wetenschap op bestelling: Over de omgang tussen wetenschappelijk onderzoekers en hun opdrachtgevers (2005).

Wetenschappelijke integriteit (2010).

Wetenschappelijk onderzoek: dilemma's en verleidingen (2005).

Zorgvuldig en integer omgaan met wetenschappelijke onderzoeksgegevens (2012).

Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO)

Code omgang met persoonlijke belangen (2019).

Gedragscode belangenverstrengeling NWO (2010).

Universiteiten van Nederland (UvNL) (1985–2021: Vereniging van Universiteiten, VSNU)

Code goed bestuur universiteiten (2017, 2019).

Gedragscode voor gebruik van persoonsgegevens in wetenschappelijk onderzoek (2005).

Handreiking aanpak bedreiging en intimidatie van wetenschappers (2021).

Nederlandse Gedragscode Wetenschapsbeoefening: Principes van goed wetenschappelijk onderwijs en onderzoek (2004, 2005, 2012, 2014).

Statement VSNU over proctoring (2020).

Universitaire gedragscode met betrekking tot marktactiviteiten (2006).

KNAW, NWO, UvNL

Nederlandse gedragscode wetenschappelijke integriteit (2018).

Notitie wetenschappelijke integriteit: Over normen van wetenschappelijk onderzoek en een Landelijk Orgaan Wetenschappelijke Integriteit (2001).

Other

UM Citation Guide: A Guide by FEM (2022).