I’ve been teaching Western Civ and the history of modern Europe for thirty-five years. Western Civ was the first lecture course I taught when I began my career at UCLA, and it was a real trial by fire. I’ll never forget walking into an enormous lecture hall, with five hundred students filling virtually every seat—the football players each taking up two. I had a small army of TAs, and we gathered for an informal—and very lively—seminar every week. I loved every minute of it and still do.

Tell us about the way you use biographies in your text.

I’ve found that one of the best ways to engage students is to present biographical sketches of interesting, exemplary people from the past. Students are fascinated to see that even the greatest—or most notorious—historical figures were also ordinary human beings. The point isn’t to dig up dirt on Marx or Bismarck or George Sand, but to show that as young men and women, they did the kinds of things modern college students do—party excessively, defy their parents, and choose the wrong romantic partners—or that, like so many of us, they were insecure and full of self-doubt.

The best way to keep students focused and engaged is to try to tell the best, liveliest (true) stories I can, while explaining from time to time that my own stories aren’t the only ones that can be told. Different interpretations will produce different stories. In the process, I have students participate actively in the class. I pepper my lectures with questions, give students problems to solve, and announce short writing exercises, which they have five minutes to complete. I sometimes divide them into pairs or small groups to facilitate intimate discussions as a prelude to a larger one with the class as a whole.

What are the biggest challenges instructors face when they teach the history of modern Europe?

Western Civ, like all history survey courses, is far from easy to teach. What’s hardest, of course, is to fit hundreds of years of complex history into a quarter or semester. What to emphasize? What to avoid? What shortcuts to take? How to put an already complex Western history into its larger international context? My answer has always been to choose one historical phenomenon each week—the state, empire, revolution, Enlightenment—and focus on the country or countries that, in a given time period, best exemplify what I want to discuss. Doing things this way avoids the problem of trying to pack information about a dozen or more countries within each slice of the chronology to be covered. The risk, though, is an overemphasis on the Great Powers to the exclusion of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. The antidote to that risk is our renewed understanding of the importance of the Ottoman Empire, which forces us to take Eastern Europe and the Balkans seriously—and from early on.

How else do you engage students?

The book’s unique and perhaps most important teaching and learning resource is the writing exercises at the end of each chapter. Let’s face it: most of our students don’t write very well. In general, they have been poorly served by the writing instruction that they received in high school. The faulty premise of that instruction is that students will learn to write by writing—and writing what supposedly comes most naturally to them, namely personal narratives. These narratives are then subjected to “peer editing”—editing by those no more adept than they are. Many students don’t feel comfortable writing about themselves, and personal narratives are just one, limited genre of prose. Outside of advanced placement courses, in which writing assignments are narrowly oriented to a test, there is little attention paid to analytical, expository writing—the kind of writing we historians want our students to do.

As a cultural historian, I was once distressed to see that students don’t respond all that well to cultural history. But then I realized that this disinterest stems from their having been shielded from the old-fashioned Great Man history and dull political narratives all too familiar to historians of a certain age. Students nowadays don’t need social and cultural history as an alternative to the now-extinct species of Dead White Men. Sociocultural history, novel as it was thirty to forty years ago, had a serious negative side. All too often, it downplayed major developments in politics, economics, ideas, warfare, and religion—the phenomena that distinguish so much of modern European history. Europe in the Modern World reinvigorates those phenomena while doing justice to social and cultural life.

The writing exercises that cap each chapter of Europe in the Modern World are designed as an antidote to the high school and college writing orthodoxies that have failed our students for so long. The writing exercises use the historical content of the chapters in which they appear, and they guide students, step-by-step, toward effective, polished expository writing in history and related fields. They teach students to construct strong sentences; write cohesive, logically ordered paragraphs; make arguments and support them with a series of subsidiary points; and even to create a short paper from materials we give them. By completing the writing exercises, which are self-propelled and include an online component, students will vastly improve their written expression while at the same time—and without additional effort—reviewing the material covered in each chapter.