WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper

The Challenges of Writing About (a.k.a., Making) History

At first glance, writing about history can seem like an overwhelming task. History's subject matter is immense, encompassing all of human affairs in the recorded past — up until the moment, that is, that you started reading this guide. Because no one person can possibly consult all of these records, no work of history can ever pretend to be comprehensive or universal. At the same time, history's subject matter is partially irretrievable. Barring the invention of time travel, no scholar can experience the past firsthand or recreate its conditions in a laboratory setting. Historians must rely on the fragmentary records that survive from the time period under study, which necessarily reveal just part of the story. For these reasons, the guiding principles behind all historical writing must be *selection* and *interpretation*: the thoughtful selection of topics and questions that seem most interesting, and the responsible interpretation of sources in order to construct meaningful arguments.

Subjective decisions about what to include, what to exclude, and how to understand it make history writing manageable in the first place. No less importantly, they also make it controversial, because scholars are bound to disagree with the judgments of other scholars. You can think of history writing, then, as an ongoing argument or debate over this unavoidable process of selection and interpretation. Your first challenge as a writer is to find a way to enter this conversation.

Common Types of History Papers

History papers come in all shapes and sizes. Some papers are narrative (organized like a story according to chronology, or the sequence of events), and some are analytical (organized like an essay according to the topic's internal logic). Some papers are concerned with history (not just what happened, of course, but why and how it happened), and some are interested in historiography (i.e., how other historians have written history, specifically the peculiarities of different works, scholars, or schools of thought). Some papers emphasize social or cultural history, others political or military history, and still others intellectual or economic (or any other genre of) history. In undergraduate courses, you'll most likely notice a distinction between review essays (often based on your responses to assigned readings from the course syllabus) and research papers (typically requiring additional research in a library or archive on a topic of your own choosing). Different types of history papers naturally require different amounts of research, analysis, and interpretation.

Despite this variety, historical arguments often assume a common form. If you're struggling to develop an argument for your paper, you might want to rehearse one of the following rhetorical gambits (see next section). Think of these approaches as ready-made suits that you can try on and tailor for the purposes of your assignment. Once you decide on a workable argument, declare it to your reader in clear, succinct prose in your *thesis statement*. This initial statement of your thesis will almost always appear in the opening paragraph(s) of a shorter essay or the opening section of a longer paper.

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Familiar Arguments in Review Essays

- **Scenario #1:** Scholars have disagreed about my topic, and my paper explains why one party in the debate has been more convincing than the other(s).
- **Scenario #2:** Scholars have disagreed about my topic, and my paper demonstrates why the entire debate needs to be recast in a more meaningful direction.
- **Scenario #3:** Scholars have (more or less) agreed about my topic, and my paper argues for a different, better, or more nuanced interpretation.

Familiar Arguments in Research Papers

- **Scenario #1:** No one has written about my topic. Despite this scholarly neglect, my paper explains the significance of my research topic and offers a provisional interpretation of this new material.
- **Scenario #2:** A few scholars have written about my topic, but gaps and deficiencies in the literature still exist. My paper examines new or different evidence to correct these shortcomings.
- **Scenario #3:** Many scholars have written about my topic. Despite this attention, my paper calls for a reassessment of the existing literature based on recent findings, new methodologies, or original questions.

Think differently. Treat the conventional wisdom on your topic with a dose of skepticism. Question your own basic assumptions. For instance, were the "Dark Ages" really a period of intellectual stagnation in Europe?

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

If the prospect of making your own selections and defending your own interpretations sounds daunting, how do you position yourself to enter the conversation? Here are some tried-and-true strategies that historians often employ:

- **Unscramble your assignment.** Has your instructor already selected the salient documents or narrowed the field of possibilities? Build off this initial foundation as you develop an original argument. (For additional guidance, see the helpful handout by the Harvard Writing Center on "How to Read an Assignment.")
- **Ask the right questions.** Underclassmen, sometimes unfamiliar with the rigors of college history courses, often conceive of history as a descriptive record of what happened in the past (e.g., the U.S. Army Air Forces dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945). But interpretative questions — such as why and how certain events happened in the past — typically offer more fruitful subjects for exploration. For instance, in an essay on Japan's surrender at the end of the Second World War, students might want to ask why President Truman decided to use the atomic bomb against imperial Japan or how a confluence of specific factors led him to that epochal decision.
- **Start small.** Read a few documents closely with an eye for patterns or common themes. Do you see a way to reconcile these initial perspectives? As you read additional documents, does your original hypothesis (or simple hunch) hold up?
- **Start big.** Begin with a meaty question (see above), and locate sources that might help you answer it. Test potential answers against the evidence you collect.
- **Think about change (or continuity) over time.** Assign provisional bookends to your topic, and consider the passage of time from point A to point B. What changed? What stayed the same? Can you explain this outcome?
- **Think differently.** Treat the conventional wisdom on your topic with a dose of skepticism. Question your own basic assumptions. For instance, were the "Dark Ages" really a period of intellectual stagnation in Europe?

Sources for Historical Analysis

Whatever the assignment, all historical writing depends on sources. Once scholars have located a topic and formulated a set of historical questions, they turn to sources to begin answering them. Sources essentially come in two varieties:

- **Primary sources** are materials produced in the time period under study; they reflect the immediate concerns and perspectives of participants in the historical drama. Common examples include diaries, correspondence, dispatches, newspaper editorials, speeches, economic data, literature, art, and film.
- **Secondary sources** are materials produced after the time period under study; they consider the historical subject with a degree of hindsight and generally select, analyze, and incorporate evidence (derived from primary sources) to make an argument. Works of scholarship are the most common secondary sources.

Because of space and time constraints, you will not be able to marshal an exhaustive body of evidence. Instead, think carefully and critically about what evidence to include, what to exclude, and how to frame your analysis. Make sure to consider reasonable counterarguments.

Note that many sources can serve as either primary or secondary sources, depending on your topic and particular frame of reference. Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, for instance, can represent a secondary source (if your topic is imperial Rome in the first millennium) or a primary source (if your subject is imperial Britain in the eighteenth century, when Gibbon wrote his masterpiece). Regardless of such categorization, you should treat any source with a critical eye. Sources do not answer historical questions on their own; they yield evidence only after a process of interrogation and analysis.

A Historian's Use of Evidence

Students unfamiliar with historical analysis often confuse sources with evidence. Sources, at best, provide raw materials (metaphorical straw and clay) that scholars fashion into evidence (bricks) to assemble a historical argument (structure). In order to collect this evidence, historians interrogate sources by reading closely and asking critical questions:

Who produced this source? Is the author's biography (i.e., viewpoints and personal background) relevant to understanding this source? Was the author biased or dishonest? Did he or she have an agenda?

When was this source created? **Where**? Is it representative of other sources created at the same time? In what ways is it a product of its particular time, place, or context?

Why did the author produce this source? For **what** audience and purpose? Did the author make this purpose (or argument) explicit or implicit? Was it intended for public or private use? Is it a work of scholarship, fiction, art, or propaganda?

How does this source compare with other sources you have analyzed for this assignment? Does it privilege a particular point of view? Incorporate or neglect significant pieces of evidence? Structure its argument according to similar (or different) time periods, geographies, participants, themes, or events?

Although your teachers will expect a persuasive thesis statement, they will ultimately judge your argument's success on the collection, organization, and presentation of its evidence. Once again, *selection* is essential. Because of space and time constraints, you will not be able to marshal an exhaustive body of evidence. (Don't worry! Even if you had a lifetime to devote to this project, you could never be exhaustive.) Instead, think carefully and critically about what evidence to include, what to exclude, and how to frame your analysis. Because issues of selection and interpretation are at the heart of most historical disagreements, make sure to consider reasonable counterarguments to your thesis. Effective essays anticipate the reader's likely responses and address (if not reconcile) contradictory pieces of evidence, rather than simply ignoring them.

Conventions of History Writing

Historians not only disagree about interpretations of the past; they also disagree about proper ways of writing about the past. Each historian writes (and, for your more immediate purposes, evaluates) essays according to his or her own preferred criteria. Before you embark on your project, consult the assignment prompt once again, and make sure that you understand its directions. If you are unclear about the expectations for your essay, ask your instructor for clarification. Above all else, listen to your instructor's guidance, even if it means disregarding the advice offered in this guide.

Nonetheless, professional historians have generally agreed on a number of conventions, or practices, that distinguish history writing from writing in other academic disciplines. As you compose or revise your history paper, consider these guidelines:

- **Write in the past tense.** Some students have been taught to enliven their prose by writing in the "literary present" tense. Such prose, while acceptable in other disciplines, represents poor historical thinking. Since all historical events (including the composition of primary and secondary sources) took place at some point in the past, write about them in the past tense.
- **Avoid vague generalizations.** Historians value specificity, not equivocal phrases like "once upon a time" or "people always say that…."
- **Avoid presentism or anachronisms.** Resist the temptation to relate all historical arguments or concerns back to the present. Rather, investigate the past on its own terms. Take care not to jumble the chronological order of events.
- **Treat your historical subject with respect.** Aspire to understand, rather than judge, the past. Remember that historical actors were not privy to contemporary values or assumptions and that no historical generation (including our own) is perfect.
- **Paraphrase if you can, quote if you must.** Many students rely on quotations as a crutch, missing an opportunity to develop their skills of historical analysis. Instead, quote sparingly. When you do quote, introduce the source and context of every remark for the benefit of an unfamiliar reader.
- **Provide necessary context.** Good historical writing involves active commentary and rigorous engagement with the material. As a historian, you are responsible for interrogating sources, interpreting evidence, and reporting your findings about the interplay of text and context.
- **Employ a responsible and consistent citation style.** Historians generally use footnotes or endnotes (in keeping with the Chicago humanities style) to provide references or supplemental information, though some assignments might allow parenthetical citations. Remember that your credibility and integrity as a scholar is at stake. See Gordon Harvey's *Writing with Sources* and Kate L. Turabian's *Manual* for detailed instruction.
- **Write in a formal, academic voice.** Avoid using the first or second person (e.g., "I" and "you"), and shy away from passive sentence constructions. Phrases such as "I think" or "in my opinion" are redundant in expository writing.
- **Proofread, proofread, proofread.** Your readers will thank you.

FOR FURTHER READING

Students interested in additional practical guidance on the challenges of writing history should consult the following sources:

- Harvey, Gordon. *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008.
- Marius, Richard, and Melvin E. Page. *A Short Guide to Writing About History*. 6th ed. New York: Longman, 2006.
- Rael, Patrick. "Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students." Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 2004. http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/.
- Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2006.
- Storey, William Kelleher. *Writing History: A Guide for Students.* 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers.* 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.