

The Basics of Historical Writing

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The historian's craft

A history paper is not an English paper. Duh. Writing a good college history paper is not the same as acing a high school history exam. Another duh. But what do these statements mean?

- When instructors assign you a paper, they expect you to show not only that you know a bunch of facts, but that you can **think about** history. That is, you need to interpret what you read.
- Questions: What happened? How? Why? Who was involved? When? What's the significance?
- **And, the most crucial question: what is your evidence?** Unlike an English paper, where you might read a novel and then expand on what that novel means to you, without necessarily having any other sources than the novel itself, a history paper requires you to show your evidence for any and all conclusions you draw.
- Another difference compared with an English paper is that if you are using a literary work (e.g. Gilgamesh) in a history paper, you are using it as evidence of what the society was like, what people thought important, etc. In other words the Gilgamesh and what happened in it is not your focus—what you want to know and talk about is what the epic says about the society in which it was written.
- **History papers are not opinion pieces.**
 - If you are writing about women in Puritan society, you probably should not include lengthy lamentations on how horrible it was for women or what nasty guys those Puritans were (or the reverse: if you think they were wonderful, that doesn't deserve lengthy comment either).

- You should not use phrases that only tell the reader about your opinions: i.e., don't say that historical actors should have done this or not done that, that it was stupid of them to believe in this or not understand that. This is not interesting, at least from a historical point of view. What is interesting is **why** the people you are talking about believed what they did and **how** that affected various things in their society.
- So, to harp on the Puritans again: don't focus on how incredible it is that they believed in the existence of witches. Instead, tell us how that belief functioned and how it informed and affected the Puritans' actions.
- Example: Let's say you've been asked to write a paper for a history class about the "English as an official language" proposition that just passed in Arizona. (Obviously, you probably wouldn't be asked to write about something that recent, but we'll ignore that for the moment).
 - What could be your central question? Let's say, why was it proposed and why did it pass?
 - What kinds of things would you need to find out? Well, at least some of the following: What are the exact terms of the proposition? Who proposed it? Who funded the campaigning for it? What other things do these groups/people advocate? Who opposed it? What arguments were advanced in favor of/in opposition to the proposition? Is the breakdown of the votes for/against regional? Can any conclusions be drawn from that? What about who votes (what ethnic groups, what social classes, etc)?
 - Serious pitfall: You are **not** supposed to be writing about whether you think English should be the official language of Arizona. That will probably show from your paper, which is fine; you are human and have opinions (although people debate whether there should be any indication of one's politics in academic contexts). But your opinions should not skew your thinking about the historical question, nor should you be writing about your opinions or using them in lieu of evidence.
- Another example: You've been asked to write about opposition to the Brown v. Board decision of 1954 (the Supreme Court decision that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.")
 - Again, you need to ask many of the above questions, or similar ones: who opposed it? how did they argue? who supported the decision? what did they do? what were their motives?
 - And again, you are **not** out to condemn either the decision or its opponents. The merits of the decision are not the topic of your paper—the

history of the opposition is. Here, too, you probably will have an opinion on the decision, but in a history paper your focus should be on trying to understand its significance and its relation to other events.

Step-by-step through a history assignment

The assignment

- Rule number one: **Read the assignment.** You'd be surprised how many essays get C's or D's simply because the student hasn't taken the time to read the question(s) and all the instructions. If you are being asked a question, you need to answer it! If the assignment says that you must have citations and a bibliography, then you must have them!
 - So, say the assignment is “Write a 2-3 page essay, answering one of the following questions. You must give specific examples and use multiple primary sources in support of your answer.
We have discussed how complex societies arose in the Nile, Tigris & Euphrates, Indus, and Yellow River Valleys. How did geography and topography influence the development of 3 of these complex societies?”
What should your paper include? What should you consider?
 - * Geography and topography—make sure you understand what these are! Also make sure you understand what the assignment means when it asks you to discuss how geography and topography influenced the societies.
 - * Specific examples. You can't simply say “geography and topography influenced these societies.” Rather, you need to select **specific** geographical features and explain what **specific** consequences/implications those has. For instance, you might talk about the Nile being the main source of water, how that drew people to settle around it, and how power was then centralized because people could not simply pick up and leave.
 - * Primary sources. This is the evidence (in addition to textbook information)!! So, you should give specific examples from primary sources about the significance of geography and topography (e.g. if you had something that really emphasized how the river was the source of life, you could use that).

Beginning work

Ok, so now you understand the assignment. Then what?

- Formulate a number of questions and hypotheses. To continue with the above assignment, you could e.g. ask:
 - What kinds of geography and topography were important? Well, rivers. What else?
 - What differences, if any, were there between the three societies you picked? Did these relate to geography and topography? How?
- Jot down your questions and hypothetical answers to them. Then go back to your texts (including primary sources!) and read them with an eye toward the assignment. Make note of information you can use in building your essay.
- Formulate a working thesis. This does not have to be your final thesis, but you need something to work with in order to keep focused.

Organizing

Once you think you have enough information and evidence, start organizing what you will write.

- Outlines are handy, since they are visual representations where it is usually easy to notice if something is seriously missing or comes in a weird order, but you can use whatever works for you. The important thing is to **think about** organization.
- If the essay is short (say, under 4 pages), you could formulate a one-sentence synopsis of each paragraph. If it's longer, try to build a good outline instead.
- If you know you're good at organizing as you write (which really means you have something of an outline in your head rather than on paper) there's no point to doing paper outlines just for the sake of doing them. However, in this case you really need to be sure you can keep everything in your head—and you might give outlines a try anyway.

Writing

One writing guide I saw called this step “filling in the outline”—which really makes you realize that the initial draft **is not the final draft**. When you initially begin to write, you are simply producing a raw version of what will eventually be your paper.

- Writing is personal, so do what works best for you: spew out all you know on paper and then begin editing, or if you prefer, craft each paragraph to near-perfection as you go.

- The important thing is to keep in mind **what your point is**—in the assignment above, there’s no reason to begin rambling about things that are not related to geography and topography, let alone about societies other than the three you are focusing on. Nor should you provide a long description of what geography and topography are and what kinds of effects they might potentially have in different societies at different times. In other words, **keep it focused!**

Editing

This is arguably **the most important part** of your writing process. Not simply because it’s where you can catch those spelling errors and grammatical mistakes, but because once you have everything down on paper you can see whether it makes any sense.

- Make an outline based on your draft. Do this especially if you didn’t do it before writing: this is your chance to check that your paper is well organized.
- Read through your paper. Be on the alert for spots where you
 - are providing opinion instead of argument
 - are saying something that does not clearly tie into your thesis
 - don’t provide enough evidence to support your argument
 - commit common grammatical or spelling errors
- After reading your paper, see whether your thesis still works. Do you support it in the body of your essay? If not, should you change the thesis or the body paragraphs? Have you come up with better ideas for a thesis?
- Make sure that the introduction and conclusion efficiently introduce/sum up your paper, and that your thesis is easily identifiable and sufficiently specific. (In the example above, “geography and topography influenced all three societies” would probably not be a sufficiently specific thesis).
- **If you want to write a good paper, you probably need to edit it AT LEAST twice.**

Basic grammar and style issues

Common grammatical errors

- However—cannot be used the same way as “and.”

- Sentence fragments—each sentence needs to have at least a subject and a verb. These are especially common when students begin a sentence with “Despite. . .” or “Although. . .” —be sure you complete the thought!
- Referents: this, it, they—it has to always be clear to the reader what these refer to. Also, referents must agree with the thing they refer to. So, you can’t say for example “The United States joined World War II because they thought the Nazis had to be defeated.” Who thought? If you mean the United States, that’s an “it” (and countries don’t really think, either, so that’s another problem with this sentence). If you mean “the Americans”, say so.
- Tense changes—don’t jump between past and present tense. Keep it consistent. It’s fine to use both, but they need to be used appropriately: for instance, “AuthorX argues that in the 1950s, nobody believed in Santa Claus.” This sentence uses both past and present tense, but it is clear that *in the present* AuthorX argues something about something that *happened in the past*. What you can’t do is write something like “In 100 A.D., the Martians landed in Rome, scaring many people. The Romans start running around frantically. They are trying to hide, but the Martians found them nevertheless.”

Style

“Style” encompasses everything from avoiding unclear, awkward formulations to using forceful verbs rather than boring adjectives and adverbs.

- Rule number one: everything needs to make sense, and make sense right away. Assume your reader is lazy and won’t bother to read anything twice.
- Keep it simple. It’s much better to be simple to the point of childishness than to construct complicated sentences whose meaning is not clear.
- Do not use unnecessary jargon! Do not use a word if you are not sure of its meaning!
- Don’t be wordy. Avoid constructions that insert unnecessary words (the fact that, whether or not, etc). Always be on the lookout for words and sentences you could cut.
- Avoid colloquialisms (lots of, they figured, pretty much, gonna, etc.).