How to Write a History Paper

1. What is a history paper? A history paper is an essay. As such, it shares many characteristics with essays on other topics. Essays come in various shapes and sizes, and no two of them are alike. Each, though, expresses an opinion. A piece of writing merely describing something or explaining how something works, is not an essay. An essay always conveys its writer's viewpoint. In an essay, a writer never simply explains or describes. Instead, she makes an argument, and provides a reasoned array of evidence to back up her opinions.

Be careful with the word "opinion," however. A writer of an essay can have many kinds of opinion. He might have an opinion on world hunger, or on the budget crisis in Oregon, or on the outcome of the next Superbowl, even if he knows little about these subjects. He has a right to this kind of commonplace opinion, but this is not the kind of opinion contained in an essay. A writer might also have religious beliefs, or beliefs in specific political or economic systems, that one cannot test by ordinary intellectual processes. In this case, her opinion would be a matter of basic belief and not usually subject to systematic argument.

Systematic argumentation, though, is the point of an essay. Essays express the educated opinion of their writers. Historians form their educated opinions by examining and thinking about evidence of past conditions, causes, and effects. When a historian writes a book he is writing a long, extended essay presenting his opinion on his subject. As with all essays, he builds the points of his argument and arranges his evidence in such a way that will best put his ideas across. For the historian, her argument is her interpretation of the past--how and why events happened the way they did, and what those events mean to future times.

In your history papers you are to be your own historian.

To have and vigorously express an opinion in an essay, you must have an interest in your topic. For historical evidence, you will use the documents and readings in the course "packet," as well as all other materials at your disposal--lecture notes, the textbook, the monographs, et cetera. Reading and thinking carefully about this body of evidence must precede your writing. It is intellectually dishonest, and sometimes dangerous, to form opinions without having a firm grasp on source materials.

2. Structure of an essay. Since your history paper will be an essay, we must now begin to consider the structure of an essay, and how to write one. The introduction can be conceptualized as a triangle tipped on its side. It begins broadly and comes to a point. This point is your thesis. A thesis is a concise statement of your opinion, and has been called "essence of essay." Connected to the triangle at the point is the main body of the essay. This contains your argument and your evidence. It flows naturally out of your thesis, and proceeds point-by-point to the conclusion. The conclusion

begins where your last point left off. It then widens back out to the more general. This wide-narrow-wide structure expresses the purpose of the essay--to present an opinion on a small, narrow topic and relate it to the larger world, to life in general. If you cannot relate a topic to larger issues, it is not worth writing about. By the way, the thought process behind this structure is called inductive reasoning--the intellectual method that relates the specific to the general.

All formal essays written in English employ this structure. You should consider your history papers to be formal essays.

3. Essay structure: the introduction. The purpose of the introduction is to present your topic to your readers and then come to the point (your thesis). An introduction begins with a general statement concerning your topic and, with each succeeding sentence, focuses in on the thesis. The opinion expressed in the thesis was the result of reading certain materials, thinking about them, and coming to some conclusion about what they mean. The reading and the thinking came before the opinion, before the first word was ever written. This is essential.

4. Essay Structure: the main body. In the main body of the essay you will present your argument in detail, and lay out your evidence for your reader. No rigid structural rules exist on how to develop the main body, but here are a few guidelines.

(1). Begin by making concessions to any possible opposing points of view. This suggestion relates to the psychology of argument. Admit when your opponent is correct and you weaken his arguments. No one understands why this is so, it just is.

(2). Place points of your argument in causal order, if you can find one. In history, as in life in general, one thing usually leads to another. Reproduce that order in your essay.

(3). Group similar points together. If you can find no causal relationships, organize your points so you deal with closely related ideas together in the essay.

(4). Save your best point for last. Again, this relates to the psychology of argument. It is the logical equivalent to saving the cake until you have eaten the lima beans. Eat the cake first, and what follows will seem an anticlimax. The last point your readers encounter will be the one they remember best--make it your most powerful one.

(5). As you develop the main body of your essay, make the last sentence (or the last idea) of each paragraph lead naturally into the first sentence (or first idea) of the next paragraph. Often, this means picking up a word dropped, almost casually, near the end of the previous paragraph. Sometimes it means giving the reader a clue to what you will say next. Paragraphs beginning with "However," or "Moreover," or "On the other hand," or with other such devices, let the reader know you are about to qualify what you have just said with new information, or elaborate on what you have already outlined, or look at the subject from a slightly different point of view.

Such simple devices add only a few words to your essay, but they link your paragraphs together into an understandable whole.

5. Essay structure: the conclusion. The concluding paragraph of your essay is almost as important as the introduction. It is here you relate your thesis and main points back to the general world. To do so, simply reverse the narrowing process used to construct the introduction. You will want to restate your thesis early in the conclusion, and often using the very same words helps to tie the entire essay together in the mind of the reader. You can also use the conclusion to make personal points about your topic that, for logical reasons, you left out of the main body.

6. Avoid passive voice. Always make the subject of your sentences do something. Consider the following sentence:

John was punished by his father for stealing the candy.

In this example, John, the subject of the sentence, had something done to him. He was passive. Now consider this sentence, a revision of the first one:

John's father punished him for stealing the candy.

Here, the subject of the sentence is John's father, who is doing something, namely punishing John for stealing. Compare the first sentence with the second. You will sense that the second is more direct and stronger than the first. This sense is created by a complex psychology we need not bother with here. Suffice it to say that, whenever possible, use active voice instead of passive voice. Try to make the subject of each sentence act. Your writing will be forceful and vigorous when you do. Sometimes, however, you cannot avoid using passive voice, as when recasting the sentence in active voice also makes it horribly clumsy or unclear.

7. Make the paragraph the basic unit of your writing. Paragraphs should generally begin with a topic sentence. The rest of the paragraph should develop that one topic, making whatever explanations are necessary, and adding such details and evidence as needed. As noted above, it should usually end by alluding to the next paragraph's topic.

Technically, paragraphs can be any length. Within limits, each must be as long as required to fully discuss its topic. However, too great a length may tire your reader. If a paragraph threatens to fill an entire page of double-space type, you may want to see if it can be logically broken in two. It may, in fact, be long because it addresses more than one topic. If so, split the topics apart.

8. Keep to one tense. Do not change verb tense within any given paragraph. Many times you could write a paragraph in either the present tense or the **past tense**. Pick one and stick to it. Since your papers will be about a historical topic, you may wish to choose the past tense for most of your writing.

8. A few miscellaneous style issues:

(1). Always enclose commas and periods within quotation marks when they fall at the end of a quoted word, clause, or sentence. Example: "As everybody knows," the man said, "you gather more flies with honey than with vinegar."

(2). In spite of the practices of journalists, use a comma before "and" or "or" in a series of three or more items in a sentence.

The dog was large, brown, and smelly.

Do not fold, spindle, or mutilate this card.

(3). Spell out numbers ninety-nine and below. Those 100 and above can be spelled out or written as digital figures, but you must be consistent. Examples: He was thirty-three years old. He ran 230 miles last week.

(4). Do not spell out numbers associated with years or page references. You can spell out dates and clock times, but, again, you must be consistent:

3:00pm -or- three o'clock in the afternoon

22 February 1991 -or- the twenty-second of February, 1991

(5). Please remember, if you must use it at all, that "a lot" is not spelled "alot." Instead, you would do better by writing "many," or "plenty," or "several," or almost any word or phrase conveying the same meaning.

(6). Remember to observe the difference between "to," "too," and "two."

(7). Be careful to correctly use "its" and "it's." The first is a possessive pronoun, the second is a contraction of "it is." In formal writing (such as your history paper), avoid using "it's" or any other contraction.

(8). Distinguish between and properly use "their" and "there." Do not use "there" at all.

CITING SOURCES

A citation is the part of your paper that tells your reader where your source information came from. This is one of the most important elements to your paper. In order to evaluate your argument, your reader must be able to consult the same sources you used. Proper citing is crucial to making a credible and persuasive argument, and to conforming to professional standards of proof.

Use the note format. Citations in history papers can take the form of footnotes or endnotes. History papers should not use the parenthetic citation style common to literature and social science papers. These do not perform the other function of footnotes and endnotes, which is to provide space to clarify your use of complex data or arguments, expand on points you believe do not merit lengthy consideration in the body of your text, and to directly address the arguments of other historians.

How footnotes work. Each time you quote a work by another author, or use the ideas of another author, you should indicate the source with a footnote. A footnote is indicated in the text of your paper by a small arabic numeral written in superscript. Each new footnote gets a new number (increment by one); do not repeat a footnote number you've already used, even if the earlier reference is to the same work. The number refers to a note number at the bottom of the page (or following the text of the paper, if you are using endnotes). This note contains the citation information for the materials you are referencing.

What must be cited? You must acknowledge the sources of quotations, paraphrases, arguments, and specific references you may use. You need not cite sources to what most would generally consider common knowledge, like the fact that Lincoln won the Presidential election of 1860. But you must cite your source for any claim that appears to contradict common knowledge, like that Lincoln won the southern states in that election (since he wasn't even on the ballot in most southern states, this claim is controversial and must be supported). And you must cite matters of interpretation, such as an author's ideas in *why* Lincoln

appealed to so many voters. If you are in doubt about citing "common knowledge" information, err on the side of citing; even unintended failure to cite sources constitutes technical plagiarism.

Should I use footnotes or endnotes? Either of these is fine. Most history books are now produced using endnotes, which are commonly thought to provide cleaner looking pages. Most history professors, however, prefer footnotes, so they can quickly check sources. Especially if you have a computer word-processor, which makes the task easy, you should try to use footnotes.

What should I cite?

The easiest and most important rule to remember is: when in doubt, it is better to cite a source than to not cite a source. In avoiding plagiarism, it is always wiser to choose more rather than less information.

In a research paper for history, you generally need not cite common knowledge. Common knowledge may be considered any information readily available in any encyclopedia. Common knowledge may be comprised of basic historical facts, such as dates of events and place names. For example, everyone knows that the Battle of Gettysburg occurred from July 1-3, 1863, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. No need to include the source of this basic information.

Arcane or debated facts of the past, however, need to be cited. These are not readily accessible facts, agreed upon by all. No one knows when exactly Jesus Christ lived, so if you include set dates for his birth and death, you need to cite the author who claims to know these things.

As this suggests, you must cite all information that constitutes another author's interpretations or arguments. Remember, the point of citation is to acknowledge the sources of ideas that are not your own, and to provide a path back through your research so other scholars can check your work. If you do not include citations, your reader cannot know where your ideas came from,

and cannot check controversial statements you might make.

Matters of historical interpretation are particularly important to cite. Let's consider the Gettysburg example again. The date and place of the battle are common knowledge no one would think to dispute. But what about the argument that the Confederacy lost the battle primarily because General Longstreet failed to flank the Union forces on the left? Or that Confederate cavalry general J.E.B. Stuart was the primary cause of defeat because he failed to stay close to the Confederate army? Or that Union Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain saved the Union by protecting the Union's left flank at Little Round Top? All such claims are debatable points of interpretation. They are not facts of the past, but arguments. If you incorporate such claims by other authors in your paper, you must cite your sources.

How much to cite?

Remember to include a source citation every time you use the ideas or words of another author, either directly (through quotation) or indirectly (through paraphrase). The only exception is common factual knowledge of the variety found in encyclopedia.

Some papers, particularly those that require less argumentation and analysis on your part, are drawn almost wholly from other sources. In such instances, you might find yourself citing a source for virtually every sentence. Sometimes, it might be the same source. In these cases, it is acceptable to include one footnote for the entire paragraph. Make sure, however, that every page of the source used is referenced in the footnote. You may not do this if your information comes from several sources, or if the paragraph is interrupted by a quotation.

Guides

Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Manual to Writing in History*, 3rd ed.
Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed.
Research and Documentation Online (online guide from Bedford/St. Martin's Press) <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/resdoc/history/footnotes.htm>

Guides for citing standard electronic sources

A Brief Citation Guide for Internet Sources in History and the Humanities <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/about/citation/>
Online! from Bedford's/St. Martin's Press <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/index.html>
Citing Electronic Sources (from the Library of Congress) <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/resources/cite/index.html>

Online styles manuals with examples of Turabian format abound. Their quality can vary (be particularly watchful for those that do not include samples of Chicago-style citation). Here are a few reliable ones:

Turabian Documentation <http://library.austincc.edu/research/guides/turabian/turabian.htm>
Turabian Examples <http://www.ithaca.edu/library/course/turabian.html>
Turabian Citation Guide <http://www.hsu.edu/dept/lib/e_resources/e_library/citation_styles/turabian/turabian_online.htm>