

History Writing



"We cannot know history well unless we write about it. Writing allows us to arrange events and our thoughts, study our work, weed out contradictions, get names and places right, and question interpretations." – Richard Marius

The following points, which apply to most history assignments, are the cornerstones of strong historical writing. There will be varying nuances to every history assignment, but these are good rules of thumb to keep in mind.

Developing the Paper

- **Thesis**

The argument you are making is the *single most important part* of a history paper. A history paper has to rigorously qualify and define its thesis. We write to tell readers something new about the past. We provide both information from our sources and our own argument about what the facts mean. Find something puzzling in the evidence and try to solve it. Ask a question and try to answer it (The Writing Center handout on developing a thesis talks about this in detail.).

- **A sharply focused and limited topic**

No one can cover the entire sweep of the Inca empire or the making of clocks or the effects of World War I in a ten page paper. Make the argument specific. Limit your topic enough to let you study your sources carefully and think about them thoroughly. A limited topic could be medical responses to the influenza epidemic of 1918, or compromises in the building of the Museum of the American Indian, or the destruction of the New York City oyster beds.

- **Primary and secondary sources**

Support your thesis with airtight background information. When you build an argument, think of ways readers could contest it and answer those counterarguments. Follow your argument with so much information that it appears indisputable.

You will need sources for your information: your thesis is your idea, but you need evidence to prove it. *Primary sources* are the texts nearest to any investigation – immediate witnesses and first hand accounts. *Secondary sources* are always written *about* primary sources. For a paper about Harry S. Truman, Truman's letters are primary sources. So are his speeches, congressional records, his wife's letters, and any impressions from his time in the White House. Articles or biographies about him are secondary sources. Primary sources can also include photographs, paintings, sculptures, statistics, geography, and interviews with people who have direct experience with your subject – interviews with people who knew Truman, in this example, not with professors or authorities who have studied him.

- **Citations**

You also need to *cite* your sources: to give them credit and to make sure your readers know where your evidence comes from. If your sources have authority, they will give your paper authority. Information presented without citations looks like an opinion without any foundation. It can also look like plagiarism.

Writing the Paper

- **Presenting the evidence**

A good paper begins with a problem or a question – something out of balance, some tension to be resolved or explained. It tells a story and makes us relive the experience that it describes. Set the scene *quickly*, reveal a tension to be resolved and set out in the direction of a solution.

Essays are examples of reasoning. The most respected essays set things in order and make sense of them. Try to show readers that by reading your work they will learn something new or see old knowledge in a new light. Trust your ideas and argue your case. Sift through your sources and choose reliable ones. When you make a general statement, immediately support it with a source.

- **Leave out the “I”**

Unless a professor asks a “what do you feel about... and why” question, a history paper is an analysis, not an opinion. You want to construct your argument around your evidence, not around whether you like what the evidence proves. Bringing in a personal perspective weakens your argument. It makes your research look like a hunch you had instead of facts you have gathered. Leave out phrases such as: “I think”, “To me”, “You see”, or “We”. Instead, say everything as if it were clear and obvious and follow up with a citation.

Don’t choke an essay with emotions. The best way to give judgment on people in the past is to tell what these people did or said. Trust your readers. If you describe terrible things, readers can see the evil.

- **Contrary evidence**

The evidence in history rarely stacks up entirely on one side of an issue. You do not weaken your case by recognizing views different from your argument. In fact, you strengthen your own argument by showing readers you know all the facts. They will believe you if you deal with those contradictions honestly, but they will not believe you if you pretend that contradictions do not exist.

- **An end that reflects on the beginning**

The first and last paragraphs of a good essay reflect some of the same thoughts. The end comes back to the beginning, but it does more than repeat word-for-word points the paper has already made. At the end, look back at the tension you began with and the argument you have made to resolve it (The Writing Center’s handout on conclusions may be useful if you have more questions here.).