

## How to Write a History Paper

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**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 writers 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.

You will be writing an essay answering one of the topical questions put to you by the assignment. The choice of which one is up to you. Choose carefully. 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. Consider the following opening sentence:

**As one of many reform movements in antebellum America, feminism helped shape events leading to sectional conflict in the 1860s.**

This is a very broad statement. It relates a large and diverse social and intellectual movement to one of the major turning points in American history. The sentence suggests, though, the essay will have more to do with feminism than with sectional conflict. Mention of the Civil War may only lend weight to the importance of the topic. The next sentence will be decisive:

**As one of many reform movements in antebellum America, feminism helped shape events leading up sectional conflict in the 1860s. Indeed, activists claiming equal rights and equal dignity for women added to the radicalization of politics in the United States.**

Is the essay to be about radicals, then? Perhaps, but the Civil War reference has been dropped. The focus has narrowed to radicals. Read on:

**As one of many reform movements in antebellum America, feminism helped shape events leading to sectional conflict in the 1860s. Indeed, activists claiming equal rights**

and equal dignity for women added to the radicalization of politics in the United States. **But, in some respects, feminists were not radicals at all.**

Now the author is saying, after herself introducing the topic of radicalization, that feminists were not completely radical. She has, though, further narrowed the topic by admitting feminists were sometimes radical, but not always.

As one of many reform movements in antebellum America, feminism helped shape events leading to sectional conflict in the 1860s. Indeed, activists claiming equal rights and equal dignity for women added to the radicalization of politics in the United States. But, in some respects, feminists were not radicals at all. **They did not, for instance, call for new economic schemes to replace what was then becoming laissez-faire capitalism, nor did they often suggest, in their abolitionist writings, that black slaves were the complete equals of whites.**

Again, the author has narrowed his topic, this time by quickly dispensing with possible subject matter. The next sentence is the most important in the entire paragraph, and perhaps the entire essay:

As one of many reform movements in antebellum America, feminism helped shape events leading to sectional conflict in the 1860s. Indeed, activists claiming equal rights and equal dignity for women added to the radicalization of politics in the United States. But, in some respects, feminists were not radicals at all. They did not, for instance, usually call for new economic schemes to replace what was then becoming laissez-faire capitalism, nor did they often suggest, in their abolitionist writings that black slaves were the complete equals of whites. **Far from being completely radical, feminists often used traditional religious texts to support their arguments, and they grounded their claims to equality on a thoroughgoing Christian foundation.**

This final sentence is the author's thesis. This is the main point she will make in her essay. She must dedicate every word, sentence, and paragraph that follows to supporting this one thesis sentence. Some very long and complex essays (such as historical monographs) require far more elaborate introductions. They often will also have more than one thesis, though usually a perceptive reader can identify one of them as the most important. But for an essay of up to a dozen pages or so, this one paragraph introduction is entirely adequate. In fact, more could be wasteful of valuable space, and may cloud the point of what is to follow. For most history papers, limit your introduction to one paragraph.

One last point on the introduction and thesis sentence: 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.

**A Few Stylistic recommendations.** "Style," in the sense used here, does not mean self-expression of personality. Instead, it refers to generally recognized principles for relating your ideas and arguments in writing. Just as playing a musical instrument involves certain self-disciplines--tempo must be kept "accurate," hand and fingers must be held "correctly," attacks and releases must be executed in a certain way--writing also has disciplines. Likewise, many sports have "rules" and principles that an athlete ignores at peril to her skill and abilities. Coaches and trainers teach best ways of holding a bat or golf club, best ways of swinging a tennis or squash racket, and best ways of executing a forward pass. After musicians, athletes, and

writers learn, practice, and master the "basics," they sometimes carefully modify the "rules" to suit their particular needs and personalities. Many world-class musicians and athletes (and writers), however, never deviate from basic principles. Instead, they use those principles as tools for self-expression. The following style guidelines will help you express your ideas and arguments. In the process of doing so, you will be expressing important parts of yourself. Items 6 through 14 below contain specific stylistic suggestions.

**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. Eliminate unnecessary words.** Direct and easy-to-read writing uses as few words as possible to say what must be said. Adding (or failing to remove) unneeded words simply dilutes the meaning of your sentences. Consider this sentence:

Mary is a woman who likes to work hard.

It uses nine words to say,

Mary likes to work hard

or, simpler still,

Mary works hard.

The words "is a woman who" are completely unnecessary. We can assume Mary is a woman if we already know she is not, for instance, a five year old girl instead of an adult. "Who" is a pronoun and is not needed when a proper noun, in this case "Mary," has already been used. You can find many other examples of unneeded words in common expressions and phrases. Do your

best to remove them and your writing will greatly improve.

**8. Be authoritative.** When you write an essay you are stating and arguing your opinion. However, avoid weak phrases like: "In my opinion," or "It seems to me." Consider this:

In my opinion, John is completely wrong.

Why not just say, simply and emphatically,

John is completely wrong.

Your reader already understands you are stating your opinion. However, the psychological effect of prefacing your opinions with phrases like "In my opinion" is to weaken the impact of those opinions. It sounds as if you are unsure of yourself or that you are equivocating. Moreover, by doing so you are adding unnecessary words further weakening your sentences. To make your writing and opinions seem sure and authoritative, present your ideas as simple declarations. If John is wrong, just say so--emphatically--then back it up with evidence.

**9. 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.

**10. 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. Read the following paragraph carefully:

In her essay, "The Great Lawsuit," Margaret Fuller says women were treated as inferiors. Men are always trying to prescribe for women their proper role in society. Fuller says women will have to find for themselves their true place in the world, and look within themselves for inner strength.

This paragraph contains three verb tenses: past, present, and future: "Margaret Fuller says [present] women were treated [past] as inferiors." "Men are [present] ... ." "Fuller says women will have [future] to find ... ." What problems do this kind of tense change create? First of all, some of what this paragraph relates is false. Technically speaking, Margaret Fuller can't say

anything--she is long dead. It is true, on the other hand, she said a great many things in the past. It is here the decision must be made concerning what tense the paragraph will be written in.

The next sentence could present the writer with a problem. On the one hand, Fuller said "Men are always trying to prescribe for women their proper role in society." However, you may believe what Fuller said in the past is still true and, therefore, you may want to cast the sentence in the present tense. **DO NOT DO IT.** Tense changes confuse your reader, and sometimes cloud your meaning. You have time to tell the reader what you think about Fuller's subject in relation to today's realities if you wish to, but this sentence is not the best place to do so.

The last sentence is difficult as well, but the one paragraph-one tense rule makes the whole look like this:

In her essay, "The Great Lawsuit," Margaret Fuller said women were treated as inferiors. Men were always trying to prescribe for women their proper role in society. Fuller said women had to find for themselves their true place in the world, and look within themselves for inner strength.

Each sentence in this paragraph now works as a unit, each cast in the same tense. Readers appreciate this kind of consistency.

**11. Vary your choice of words.** Do not use the same word or phrase too often, either in the same paragraph or in the same essay. Consider the following selection:

John Blassingame spent a great deal of time presenting the variety of plantation life in the antebellum South. Rather than present plantation owners as great villains, he showed how some of them showed a great deal of compassion toward slaves. He also presented antebellum life from the perspective of the slaves, and he showed how some of them were able to preserve some of their ancestor's way of life.

You will notice the annoying repetitions of words and phrases: "a great deal" [twice], "great" [thrice], "present" or "presenting" [thrice], "plantation" [twice], "show" or "showed" [thrice], "life" [twice] and "antebellum" [twice]. Avoid this kind of duplication or triplication. English almost always provides plenty of words to substitute for those already employed. Here is the same paragraph with new words inserted:

John Blassingame spent a great deal of time presenting the variety of plantation life in the antebellum South. Rather than portraying planters as great villains, he showed how a number of them exhibited considerable compassion toward slaves. He also described society in the pre-Civil War South from the perspective of the bondsmen and women, and he detailed ways in which many were able to preserve some of their ancestors' culture.

Notice all duplication has been eliminated, except for common articles ("the," etc.) and prepositions ("in," "of," etc.). The paragraph is more interesting because of the word variation. Use a thesaurus (Roget's in dictionary form is cheap and easy to use) to find synonyms instead of

droning on with the same worn-out word.

**12. Never use "there"--ever.** "There" serves no purpose in a sentence except as a preposition--an indication of location. In response to the question, "Where"?, you might answer, "there." This is acceptable, but you might just as well, or better, say "in Louisiana" or "in the South." Look at this simple declarative sentence:

There are three coins in the fountain.

In this context, what does "there" mean? It has no meaning and no definition. As noted earlier, you should ruthlessly eliminate words that contribute nothing to the meaning of your sentences. Why not just write:

Three coins lie in the fountain.

This sentence says the same thing as the first, but it does so with one less word, and with no meaningless words. It also has the virtue of being cast in the active voice. Eliminating "there" from any sentence will force you to rewrite it in active voice.

**13. Use "that" very sparingly.** "That" is another word having no clear definition. Like "there," "that" can be used as an indirect reference. In response to the question, "which book?," you might response, "that book." Again, you would do better to write "the book on the table," or "the book with the blue cover." The real problem with "that" is that it frequently adds needless words to a sentence, weakening it:

Blassingame showed that slaves were sometimes treated with compassion.

Eliminate "that" and the sentence retains its meaning and gains some strength:

Blassingame showed slaves were sometimes treated with compassion.

Notice here, though, the needless use of the preposition "with." The sentence could be simplified further to:

Blassingame showed slaves were sometimes treated compassionately.

Two words have been eliminated from the sentence but every bit of its meaning has been preserved. It has become a better sentence. You will sometimes have to use "that," but make sure every time you do it is necessary.

**14. Vary the length of your sentences.** A paragraph made up of sentences all the same length and type is dull and boring. Sometimes, such paragraphs have a clipped sing-song quality that distracts readers. This is a good example:

Andrew Jackson was a shrewd politician. He knew how to appeal to public opinion. He built his career on military success. He was popular with western voters. He also had friends in the South. He opposed South Carolina nullification. Still, he supported states' rights.

This paragraph has no variation in length or rhythm. Each sentence has ten, eleven, or twelve syllables, and each is a simple declarative, except the last. Here is one possible rewrite:

Andrew Jackson was a shrewd politician. He knew how to appeal to public opinion, and he built his career on military success. He was popular with western voters but he also had friends in the South, though he opposed South Carolina nullification. Still, he supported states' rights.

This new paragraph has substantial variation in sentence length. For this reason, it is easier to read. Another rewrite can illustrate a different failure of variation:

Andrew Jackson was a shrewd politician and he knew how to appeal to public opinion. He built his career on military success and he was popular with western voters. He also had friends in the South, though he opposed South Carolina nullification. Still, he supported states' rights.

Here, the first three sentences are the same length and cadence. Only the last rescues the paragraph from ponderous dullness. To add interest to your writing, vary sentence length.

**15. Make sure pronoun references agree in type and number.** Indefinite pronouns (words referring to unspecified things or people) such as another, anybody, everyone, nobody, someone, something, no one, nothing, are singular and you must treat them as such in your sentences. Consider:

Everyone said they would come.

Though this sounds like everyday usage, the sentence is grammatically incorrect. "Everyone" is singular, as implied by the word fragment "one." "They" is a collective pronoun-- it refers to more than one person and is, therefore, plural. On the other hand:

Everyone said he would come

is grammatically correct, since both pronouns are singular. However, you might object to this sentence on the grounds that it is gender specific. "Everyone" might be male or female. "He" is always male. You can get around this problem like this:

Everyone said he or she would come.

This refers to both genders properly in the singular. You could just as properly write:

Everyone said she or he would come.

Neither "he or she" or "she or he" would likely offend anyone, but both may seem a bit clumsy. Another approach, one which might be controversial, is to use "he" if you, the writer, are male, and "she" if you are female. Still another approach might be to alternate between "he" and "she" within a single piece of writing. No simple answers can be found for this problem as the English language has few neuter (non-gender) pronouns. You will have to decide for yourself the best method to use. DO NOT, however, use

he/she, she/he

or worse

s/he.

You should not use non-alphabetical symbols like the slash mark to replace words. No obvious pronunciation for either of these compounds comes to mind, and they both look as if they belong in a government report, or a legal contract, instead of in an essay.

**16. Do not use redundancies.** Remove words that repeat the meaning of an associated word. The following are a few examples (highlighted words are unnecessary):

a distance of six miles  
 advance forward  
 at the present time  
in addition, he also  
free gift  
false illusion  
 another one  
 inside of  
future prospects  
 an actual fact  
past history  
usual custom  
equally as good as  
 outside of  
 small in size  
 retreat back

Notice each of the underlined words either repeats the meaning of the other word or words in the phrase, or has no meaning at all. "A distance of six miles" can be reduced to "six miles." Six miles is a measurement of distance, so the word "distance" is repetitious. Likewise, all gifts are free, all illusions are false, all customs are usual, all facts are actual, and all history took place in the past. Again, remove all words that contribute nothing to your sentences.

**17. 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.

**A final word of encouragement.** In your history papers *you* are to come to your own conclusions about the topic at hand and then argue for *your* interpretation by presenting specific evidence to support *your* ideas. What does this mean? It means just "learning" the material (reading through the text and packet, reviewing lecture notes) is not enough. *You* must also *think* about the material in a critical and analytical way. *Knowing* is the purpose of learning, *understanding* is the purpose of thinking. We study history to gain understanding.

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## **Recommended Reading**

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 5th ed.  
U/Chicago Press, 1985.

Horgan, Paul. *Approaches to Writing*. 2d ed. Wesleyan University Press, 1988. See especially  
Part One.

In addition, any general textbook for an English composition course will contain many valuable suggestions for writing good essays.