



**BOSTON UNIVERSITY**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

**WRITING GUIDE**

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## Raison d'être

Good, clear writing is, for most historians and professional writers, more of a process than a God-given talent. It begins with a blank piece of paper (or computer screen) and ends with a clearly organized and persuasive argument in the form of a research paper, a published article, or a book manuscript.

History as a discipline is in its essence the discovery and interpretation of signs of the past as well as conventions of how to cite such evidence. It thus combines research (the search for historical evidence) and the organization of data into a convincing argument. Historical writing is one variety of written expression which seeks to inform and persuade the reader through the use of evidence organized around a central thesis or argument. Good historical writing is not merely description, though it may employ illustrations and appeals to the reader's imagination.

## Using Primary Sources and Secondary Works

The first question you should ask yourself when choosing a paper topic is: What question will the available sources allow me to answer? Starting from the question of what data you *can* collect will save you countless unhappy hours. Otherwise, you risk coming up with one great research topic after another, only to discover that you cannot readily gather enough information in Boston to address it, and meanwhile the due date is rapidly approaching....

Example: I am interested in writing a paper on the causes of the Great Trek in South African history, but most of the sources are in Afrikaans, a language I cannot read.

Suggestion: Shift the topic slightly so you are writing about how interpretations (in English) of the causes of the Great Trek have changed over time in relation to the changing political dilemmas in South Africa.

Historians commonly divide their sources into two categories: primary and secondary.

### Primary Sources

These are the historian's raw material: sources produced during the period you want to examine. They allow us to get as close as possible to the voices of the past. They include, conventionally, newspaper and magazine articles, letters and diaries, government documents, the transcripts of court cases, autobiographies.

Examples: an examination of attitudes towards domesticity in the early 20th century US (using the *Ladies Home Journal*); an investigation of when and why elite black women in South Africa became politically active (using autobiographies); a study of the ways anti-government writers expressed their views during a time of censorship (using articles in a literary magazine); an enquiry into motivations of the missionary-explorer David Livingstone (based on his published letters to his family and his published diaries)

Less conventionally, you can use the following as primary sources: lyrics, atlases, paintings and other works of art, oral histories, and folktales.

Examples: a comparative study of the images of two early modern Queens (Nzinga of Angola and Elizabeth of England) based on selected portraits; an examination of South African urban life through its changing musical styles and lyrics; a study of the attitudes associated with British imperialism through scrutiny of the photographs taken by colonial officers

A Note of Caution: Beware of thinking that fiction offers an unmediated window onto the past. Novels and plays offer an artist's interpretation of reality, often giving the illusion that their imaginations have not fundamentally shaped that image. For example, many say that James Michener is a good, and even undervalued, novelist on historical themes, but it would be a mistake to assume that his late twentieth-century visions of Hawaii or South Africa are devoid of flights of fancy commonly called artistic license.

As the first example above (the one of the Great Trek) indicates, primary materials may even include works by professional historians. Histories of other epochs reveal how intellectuals thought. The attitudes apparent in scholarly work may be especially useful if your goal is to recapture the perspective/world view of past intellectuals.

Example: What attitudes did historians writing in England during the late 19th century, characterized by popular pride in the monarchy, reveal about themselves and their times when they wrote about a problem in another era—such as the anti-monarchists in the English civil war of the 17th century?

### Secondary Works

These are books written about the past from the vantage point of another moment. They tell stories and interpret the meaning of events that the author usually did not live through. The historian who writes these works

has often done the work of sifting through the sorts of primary material listed above, has tried to make sense of them, and is passing on her interpretation to you in the form of a secondary work. Note that the nature of secondary sources is very diverse: some were written by professional historians, while others were produced by amateurs or journalists who simply read the secondary works produced by professionals and then set out to write a more popular and readable version of their stories.

A comparison of secondary works can constitute an interesting paper topic especially if the authors interpret the same period or problem quite differently.

Examples: What is the significance of the very different ways that Margaret Strobel, a feminist, and Ronald Hyam, an anti-feminist, interpreted the issue of sexuality in the British Empire? How do the political and class affiliations of Gertrude Himmelfarb, an American conservative, and David Cannadine, born into the lower middle-class in Britain, affect their different studies of class attitudes in British society at the turn of the century?

## Writing History

Historians may talk—they may lecture and debate—but they also write. They write textbooks summing up the most recent scholarship in a particular field, but good historians also contribute to that scholarship by analyzing the work of other scholars, establishing new questions that need to be answered, and attempting to supply answers to these questions through their own research and their insights into research performed by others. Historical understanding of a subject progresses only through joint effort, with each historian building upon the work of predecessors and, however thorough the work might be, leaving some things unanswered—perhaps as yet unasked—for those who come along later. When you take courses in history, we expect you, as students, to share in this process. We ask you to undertake a kind of apprenticeship in historical thinking. Learning to think like a historian means learning to write like one as well.

Certain types of assignment occur very commonly in history classes because they help you to develop the critical skills that are the tools of the historian's trade. These include the thesis statement, or "precis," the critical essay, and the research paper. The following discussion is intended to explain what is meant by each of these terms and how you should approach an assignment to write a thesis statement, a critical essay, and a research paper respectively. A word of warning: these are intended as general comments only. Pay close attention to the instructions your instructor gives you for each of your written assignments.

### The Thesis Statement

Every historical study, or monograph, makes an argument. It doesn't just tell you about a subject, it poses a historical question or problem and then attempts to resolve this problem. A thesis statement, or precis, is a very precise summary of a book's argument. It defines the central issue the author addresses, explains the historical problem the author has posed, and tells how the author resolves this problem. As you formulate the thesis statement, it may help to imagine yourself saying, "the author argues that . . .," even though you will not in fact always begin with exactly this phrase.

You should be able to sum up any book's argument in a good-sized paragraph. Precision of thinking is important here: hone the argument until you are certain that you have identified the key points the author wishes to make. Try to be as accurate and impartial as possible in summing up the author's argument. The thesis statement should not include your opinion of the book; that is the work of a book review.

The thesis statement is also the starting point for a book review, because understanding an author's argument is the first step in analyzing it critically. You cannot discuss an argument until you have established exactly what

it is, which is why writing a thesis statement for a book you have read is not only a valuable exercise in itself but is also a necessary first step to writing a book review or critical essay about the book.

## The Critical Essay

A book review is a good example of the critical essay assignment, but a critical essay could also be an examination of a document, or it could be an essay comparing two or more works of history. What these assignments have in common is that they ask you to (1) identify a historical problem; (2) analyze the evidence provided about the problem in a given book or document; and (3) write a critical commentary assessing this evidence and offering your considered opinion, or judgment, of it.

If you are asked to write a book review, for example, you will typically begin with a thesis statement summing up the author's argument. It is only fair, after all, to tell your reader what you have read before you offer an opinion of it. Most of the book review will then consist of an analysis of the author's evidence and the logic of the argument that he or she makes from this evidence. How does the author attempt to prove that the argument made in the book is valid? Do the historical documents or texts offered as evidence seem to substantiate this argument? Can you think of flaws in the argument—things the author has left out or taken for granted, things that can't really be proved from the kind of evidence offered?

At first these questions will seem daunting. You will ask yourself, "How can I pass judgment on something about which I know so little?" But soon you will learn that doing history is a kind of detective work. Looking for flaws in a chain of evidence often depends more on the skills of logic and reasoning than on any specialized knowledge of the material at hand. (These critical thinking skills, by the way, are why History majors are strong candidates for law school or for careers in business, where the ability to analyze complex data is prized.)

Once you have analyzed the evidence and explained in detail where you think the author's argument is convincing and where it is not, you have earned the right to offer a judgment of the book—not just "I liked it" or "I didn't like it" but rather a considered opinion of the book's merits and its shortcomings. What questions does the book satisfactorily answer and, sometimes equally important, what new and as yet unanswered questions does it raise?

The examination of a primary document also involves a movement from description (identification of a subject or argument) to analysis to critical judgment. You would normally begin the examination of a primary document by identifying just what the document is. Who wrote it and for what audience, and what is the basic content, or "story line," of the document? The second, or analytical, section of the essay attempts to dig beneath the surface of the document. Why was the document written? What is really going on here? Try to "decode" the messages implicitly given by the document's silences, as well as its words. Set the document into its historical context. What historical events or issues does it refer to, and what perspective does it offer on these events? Remember that information about the social status (and gender!) of the author and/or intended audience for the document can also provide clues to meaning.

Once you have analyzed the document and set it into context, it is time to assess its value as a source. No document is an impartial and transparent record of the past. Each, by definition, was written to preserve certain bits of information. Each, by extension, involved a process of selection that left other bits of information out. Only by thinking critically about both what was included and what was left out (and why) can you effectively evaluate a document's usefulness and reliability as a historical source.

Historical truth is a matter of perspective, and a great many historical debates have raged over how far a given source can be trusted. That is why it is important to learn to assess your sources critically, to ask whose perspective they represent and how far you can trust them. A document that is not what it first appears can still be a

useful source. Even a blatant forgery composed by a different person, at a different time, and for different purposes than it claims can be a precious source. The historian just has to turn the question around and ask what purpose the pretense served. Who would go to such an effort and to what end? Such questions offer a good starting point for a research paper.

## The Research Paper

A research paper is the result of original research into a historical problem. It is an unpublished version of the sort of research that historians publish as articles in specialized journals or as books called historical monographs. Webster's Dictionary defines monograph as "a learned treatise on a small area of study," which may sound pompous but serves as a good reminder that a research paper should not be too ambitious in the topic it takes on. Doing original research requires close analysis of historical sources and documents. If you choose too vast a topic, you will not be able to do the kind of close analytical work that is necessary to formulate an original argument and demonstrate its validity to your reader.

Research papers come in all shapes and sizes, but they have certain characteristics in common. They necessarily begin by setting out the historical problem that is their subject. The author explains why the problem is significant and suggests what we might learn from investigating it more closely. The body of the paper consists of the presentation and analysis of evidence concerning the problem. It leads the reader to view the problem from a certain perspective and to draw certain conclusions about it. The paper closes by reinforcing these conclusions with a clear restatement of how our understanding of the problem has been altered or refined by this investigation.

The best subjects for investigation in research papers come out of the reading of historical monographs. They are the questions that remain in your mind when you have thought deeply about what a book says and what it leaves unsaid. Ask yourself if it might be possible to answer these questions, and how you would go about it. What sort of evidence—what sort of documents or records—would be required to answer the question? Are they available to you, and do you have the necessary skills (the ability to read a foreign language, for example) to make use of them? If you can answer yes to these last two questions, you are in a position to begin some preliminary research. Seek out the documents you have identified and see if they do seem to contribute new insights into the problem you have defined. This initial research should result in the formulation of a provisional thesis for your paper. This is the initial formulation of the original argument that you hope to make with your research.

Before you get too far in the research, it is advisable to look at other secondary works—other books and articles—on the general subject that you are researching. Have other people already looked at the problem you have defined for yourself? If so, what have they said about it? If they have already written exactly what you had in mind to say, you had better give up on the project now. You don't want just to repeat what someone else has already said, especially if they have said it as well or perhaps even better than you can. If they have said something related to your thesis but different from it, you need to take their argument into consideration. Evaluate it, learn from it. Does it confirm your thesis, contradict it, or modify it in some way? Does the author use sources that you have not looked at but might find useful?

Your thesis will continue to evolve as you read more primary sources and secondary materials. Try to keep an open mind as you evaluate evidence. You want to prove your thesis. This means not just arguing for it but making it as solid as possible—as free from oversights and potential contradictions. These are the challenges but also the rewards of original historical research.

## Finding a Topic: An Example

In *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum argue that minister Samuel Parris provoked much of the factionalism that divided Salem and created a hostile atmosphere in which accusations of witchcraft could arise. One of Boyer and Nissenbaum's arguments here is that Parris, a failed merchant, obsessively denounced commercial activity and preoccupation with worldly affairs in his sermons, thereby exacerbating tensions already present between the prosperous mercantile society of Salem Town and the poorer agrarian residents of Salem Village. "The attraction which the mercantile world still held for [Parris]," the authors argue, "is revealed by the frequency with which he introduced commercial images into his sermons" (p. 162). They then cite examples of his admonitions that "spiritual concerns" should take precedence over "worldly business" and "carnal interests" (p. 162).

The careful reader may wonder here if it really is extraordinary for a Christian minister in Puritan New England to speak in such terms. Isn't it a minister's job to urge his flock to place spiritual values above worldly ones? Does Parris's use of commercial imagery reflect his "resentment against way of life which attracted him but at which he had failed," as the authors contend (p. 163), or is this language commonly used by Puritan ministers at the time? Was there a more general worry that nascent capitalism and the "lure of Mammon"—the pursuit of material wealth—were destroying the spiritual values of Puritan society? These are the sort of questions that can lead to an effective research project.

The student would begin by seeking to learn if Parris's sermons have been published and are available in local libraries (or, for the enterprising student, if the manuscripts can be consulted in a local archive). Finding that the sermons have been published and are readily available, the student would read them to see just how common images of money, trade, and capitalism appear to be and how they are used.

This information is not very useful in a vacuum; the student would still need to know whether other Puritan ministers addressed the same sort of themes in the same sort of language. This requires more intensive research. The student would need to consult secondary works about the Puritan ministry to gain more background on the seventeenth-century clergy, their education, and social position, and to learn the names of other ministers whose sermons might then be sought out for study. With persistence and imagination, the student might produce from this research an original paper on "The Lure of Mammon in the Sermons of New England's Puritan Ministers." The original inspiration for the paper, the student's questions about Samuel Parris as interpreted by Boyer and Nissenbaum, could be used effectively as an introduction to the research paper. The body of the paper would then consist of an analysis of Parris's sermons and those of other ministers. Depending on the content of these sermons, the conclusion would then argue either that Samuel Parris was distinctive in his preoccupation with worldly wealth or, more likely, that condemning the pursuit of material gain was part of the stock-in-trade (to borrow a commercial metaphor) of the Puritan ministry.

## The Writing Process

The writing process may differ somewhat from person to person, but the steps each of us takes are remarkably similar. The elements of the process include:

### Outlining

Plan the basic elements of your argument to support a central idea or thesis. Some writers may choose a classic outline format with major headings and sub-headings while others may prefer something less formal. Your outline will help you organize your data; laying out your evidence in an outline format may also help you develop or sharpen your thesis.



## **Drafting**

From your outline you can begin to write a first draft, by building paragraphs that advance your argument and evidence step by step toward a conclusion. A first draft breaks the ice and helps you think about how your evidence actually fits together. Don't expect it to be a perfect document; its main job is to give you a base from which to work. A first draft may change only a little from its original form or it may change dramatically, but it serves to get the process of writing off the ground.

## **Revising/Learning to Edit Your Own Work**

A first draft may get to the end point of the argument but likely needs clarity along the way to marshal the evidence effectively. Once you have a first draft in place you need to begin the process of sharpening your argument with good, clear topic sentences for each paragraph and key transition sentences between sections and paragraphs. As you revise, look for examples of weak writing such as passive voice, wordiness, and subject-verb disagreement. The following ideas may help you in the process of revising.

## **Knowing Yourself as a Writer**

Become familiar with your own habits, strengths, and foibles. Writers don't work at their peak efficiency at all hours of the day. Determine which times of the day are easiest for you to write, and reserve those times. Save more mechanical tasks such as checking footnotes or reading assignments for times when you are less efficient in writing. Learn to recognize your own worst habits (e.g. passive voice, certain patterns of wordiness, or words you chronically misspell) and spot them when they appear in your writing. We all have such tendencies but good writers learn to catch them before they reach the public eye.

## **Proofreading**

Good proofreading can eliminate the annoying mistakes that get in the way of a reader's appreciating a good, clear argument. Such mistakes include typographical errors, misspellings, repeated words (not always picked up by a spellcheck program), and subject-verb disagreements. Sometimes it is difficult to proofread a project you have worked on through several drafts. You may wish to have a friend read a paper for you or give some time between a draft and your proofreading (if you have the luxury of time before the deadline). Obviously, it helps if you have planned your work to allow time for proofreading.

## **Sharp Writing Reflects Clear Ideas**

If you find that your writing is a struggle or is wordy and unwieldy, it may simply be an indication that you do not yet have a clear argument in mind. Think through your thesis and evidence again or draw up a new outline. Murky, obtuse writing generally indicates a lack of clarity in the ideas themselves. Have a clear sense of the goals of your writing assignment and be sure that your paragraphs and transition sentences point the reader toward your conclusion.

## **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is intellectual theft and is punishable by expulsion from the university; consequently, it is of fundamental importance that you understand precisely what plagiarism is, how it can occur, and why it is wrong.



In general, plagiarism consists of stealing other people's ideas and words, and passing them off as your own. This appears in its grossest and most flagrant form in the direct copying of whole papers (whether borrowed from a friend or purchased from a "paper-mill") or in the replication of chapters, articles, or passages from published materials. But subtler forms of plagiarism exist too. Piecing together snippets of material from a wide number of sources is one example. Taking others' ideas or interpretations, but not necessarily their specific wording, can also be plagiarism.

The word "plagiarism" derives from a Latin term. In ancient Rome, a *plagiarius* was a sea-pirate who kidnaped children and either held them for ransom or sold them as slaves—the lowest form of criminal whose crime obviously harmed the children themselves but also threatened the future development of the whole society. Keeping that derivation in mind helps to explain why the academic world regards plagiarism as so serious an offense. In intellectual life, ideas are our stock-in-trade, our capital, our means of exchange; and to the extent that all intellectual work builds on the work of others, stealing another person's ideas represents a capital offense against the idea and its creator, and also undermines the entire process of intellectual development for the academic community.

Just as significantly, plagiarism harms the perpetrator too since it subverts the very reason why one attends a university—namely, to receive an education. Education, after all, especially in a field like History, doesn't consist of compiling and memorizing discrete facts, but in training the mind to think about all that data in a way that produces insights that carry meaning. In copying someone else's work you cheat yourself of the opportunity to think and therefore to learn. Let's be blunt: even if you successfully plagiarize your way through four years of college and emerge with a 4.0 GPA on your transcript, you'll still be stupid because you'll only know how to cheat, not how to think.

Two simple steps provide the best way to avoid plagiarism: first, understand what it is and why it's wrong. But just in case there's still any doubt, here is H. Martin and R. Ohmann's definition of plagiarism, as quoted in the *Arts & Sciences Academic Conduct Code* (found the BU website at <http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/undergrad-resources/code/#II>):

The academic counterpart of the bank embezzler and of the manufacturer who mislabels products is the plagiarist, the student or scholar who leads readers to believe that what they are reading is the original work of the writer when it is not. If it could be assumed that the distinction between plagiarism and honest use of sources is perfectly clear in everyone's mind, there would be no need for the explanation that follows; merely the warning with which this definition concludes would be enough. But it is apparent that sometimes people of goodwill draw the suspicion of guilt upon themselves (and, indeed, are guilty) simply because they are not aware of the illegitimacy of certain kinds of "borrowing" and of the procedures for correct identification of materials other than those gained through independent research and reflection.

The spectrum is a wide one. At one end there is a word-for-word copying of another's writing without enclosing the copied passage in quotation marks and identifying it in a footnote, *both* of which are necessary. (This includes, of course, the copying of all or any part of another student's paper.) It hardly seems possible that anyone of college age or more could do that without clear intent to deceive. At the other end there is the almost casual slipping in of a particularly apt term which one has come across in reading and which so admirably expresses one's opinion that one is tempted to make it personal property. Between these poles there are degrees and degrees, but they may be roughly placed in two groups. Close to outright and blatant deceit—but more the result, perhaps, of laziness than of bad intent—is the patching together of random jottings made in the course of reading, generally without careful identification of their source, and then woven into the text, so that the result is a mosaic of other people's ideas and words, the writer's sole contribution being the cement to hold the pieces together. Indicative of more effort and, for that reason, somewhat closer to honest, though still dishonest, is the paraphrase, an abbreviated (and often skillfully prepared) restatement of someone else's analysis or conclusion, without acknowledgment that another person's text has been the basis for the recapitulation.

The second step has just been illustrated: that is, cite your sources whenever you present material that is not your own. You do this generally by providing footnotes or endnotes.

A general rule of thumb dictates what information requires noting: you need not cite sources for purely factual information that is commonly known. Examples of this sort of information would be: "Charles Darwin is best remembered for his theory of evolution"; "Leo Tolstoy's best known novels are *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*"; "Marxist theory calls for the destruction of capitalism"; "Women in the United States received the right to vote in 1920"; or "American involvement in Vietnam escalated during Lyndon Johnson's presidency." In practical terms, the information contained in general textbooks qualifies as precisely this sort of "common knowledge" and does not require footnoting. You should, nevertheless, always rephrase this information so that it appears in your own words—doing so not only helps assure your intellectual honesty, but also exercises, and thereby improves, your writing ability.

Facts and ideas that lie outside the "common knowledge" domain, should you use them in your writing, require citation. This doesn't mean, though, that every sentence must carry a footnote. Imagine, for example, that you are writing a research paper based on the diaries and letters of a group of nurses during the Civil War. Their personal experiences can hardly be considered "common knowledge," yet to burden every factual statement about them with a footnote would be tedious. Rather, a common sense approach suggests that you should footnote every *direct quote* from the nurses' letters and diaries, as well as any *interpretation of their experiences* made by another writer that works its way into your paper. That's a good, safe starting point. Beyond this, though, you need to exercise caution and good judgment. Any factual information about these nurses that comes from a source other than the letters and diaries, for example—such as from a book about nursing corps in general—needs to be cited.

Knowing what to footnote and what not to footnote in historical writing isn't an exact science, and you'll learn best by experience. But if you keep in mind the seriousness of plagiarism, and if you let your writing be guided by a conscious desire to be fair to the work that others have done, you should manage to avoid trouble. Scholarly work, like any other form of human interaction, depends upon trust—specifically, trust that the other person is speaking honestly about his or her ideas, feelings, opinions, and abilities. When such expressions are dishonest, not only does meaningful communication cease but genuine and significant harm is done to the human relationships involved in the exchange.

## Style

Student Complaints:

But this is a *history* class, not an English class...  
I am a *good* writer! Why do you have so many hang-ups?  
But what about my argument? Aren't you grading *that*?  
I got a C- because of grammar? No one else cares about it!

Remember: Freedom of expression does not mean that the reader must follow you. Of course you have the right to write what you want, how you want, but the point of writing is to communicate ideas. Be careful that your faulty style does not impede your ability to communicate.

As a reader you have undoubtedly run into sentences that stop you cold because they do not make sense. Although the ideas may be simple, the presentation is so poor that you have to read the words again, and again, before you can begin to get their drift. As a writer, you cannot expect readers to grope for the meaning you intended to convey. Efficient writing makes effortless reading. It never calls attention to itself.

—Claire Kehrwald Cook, *Line by Line*

“Style” might be the wrong word for the following rules and suggestions, because each of you should develop your own personal voice. Before you are allowed to express yourself, the English language demands conformity to accepted practices. An awkward style may not bother the writer (she knows what she means to say), but it can drive a reader crazy. Readers know what you want to say only by the marks on the page.

## **Conform to standard English conventions.**

You learned to avoid these common grammatical faults once, but you have probably forgotten them. So, here is a gentle reminder:

**Misplaced modifiers:** Queen Elizabeth read the speech, which was handed to her by the 71-year-old Lord Byron, with the aid of half-moon glasses.

Is the speech balanced on a pair of glasses? How did the glasses aid the passing of the speech? The glasses belong to the Queen, and they have aided in the *reading* of the speech, not in the *passing*, but the placement of this phrase confuses the meaning. Keep modifiers (including adjectives) close to the noun they modify.

**Unbalanced series:** “The proposed transmission line is ugly, unsafe, and an environmental danger.”

In a series, all things must agree. “Ugly” and “unsafe” are adjectives; “an environmental danger” is a noun. All three must agree (i.e.: “environmentally dangerous”).

**Subject-Verb Agreement:** “The ability of the players seem extraordinary.”

The subject is “ability” (which is singular) not “players” (which is plural). The verb “to seem” must also be singular = “seems.”

**Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement:** “With groups like the Gaelic League, Ireland was moving away from the cultural influences of England, and rediscovering their past culture.”

In this sentence, “their” refers back to “Ireland.” “Their” is plural, but “Ireland” is singular. The pronoun must be the same number as the thing it refers to, so “their” must become “its” (unless you think of countries as female, in which case it would be “her”). The writer became confused because “cultural influences” is plural, but the pronoun is not replacing “cultural influences,” it is replacing “Ireland.”

## **Avoid flabby sentences.**

The most common overall error in writing lies in the vague category of “wordiness.” Usually the writer chooses long, complicated phrases when clearly constructed, briefer ones would do just fine. Less is almost always more when it comes to writing. Wordiness abounds in our culture, especially in technical, bureaucratic legalese and jargon. Simple sentences sound unimpressive to untrained ears, while verbose ones ring “smart.” Your goal is supple, fluid writing with the right mix of long and short sentences. Many of the writing faults that follow contribute to flabby papers.

## **Use strong verbs and keep history in the past tense.**

At the heart of every bad sentence is a weak verb. Use real verbs instead of overusing the verbs “is” and “was” which bore the reader, add little to the meaning of the subject, and limit you stylistically. Always aim for muscular language—those words that pack a punch and waste no space.

Strong verbs often hide in verbal phrases. Unpack flabby clauses and a real verb emerges:  
is indicative of = indicates

has an influence on = influences  
is capable of = can  
makes an assessment of = assesses  
makes use of or utilizes = uses  
gives consideration to = considers  
is a benefit to = benefits  
assists in the...of = helps

Use the simple past tense when referring to past events. The “historical present” tense over-dramatizes the narrative. The paper ends up sounding breathless and theatrical: “Abraham Lincoln would come to regret his decision to go to the theatre that evening...” or “Fours days later, Adolf Hitler marches into Poland and World War II begins....”

### **Do not overuse the passive voice.**

One of the weakest of all constructions is the passive voice. In general, it’s best to avoid using the passive voice in historical writing. The passive voice avoids identifying authorship and agency and thus runs counter to the historian’s goal of discovering agency and explaining cause.

Refresher on the passive voice: Instead of the wonderfully powerful “John threw Sarah the ball” the passive would say “The ball was thrown to Sarah.” Poor John falls screaming into the black hole of passive voice oblivion.

More examples: “A good time *was had* by all. Pizzas *were eaten*, songs *were sung*, dances *were danced*, teachers *were slandered*, and cabs *were hailed*.” If you can ask the question “by whom?” after the verb, then you surely have a passive verb. If you are prone to this serious fault, circle the verb “to be” throughout your paper. Then see whether a past participle verb follows (i.e.: thrown, argued, eaten, sung, slandered, hailed, danced). If so, you probably have a passive verb!

A common example of this verb form is when a writer uses the passive voice instead of “I” in an introduction. The writer thinks that historical writing forbids the following sentence: “I will argue that the English Revolution created a working class.” To avoid using the first-person pronoun (I), the author chooses the passive voice instead: “It will be proven that the English Revolution created a working class.” Most historians would prefer the “I” to the pedantic passive. You can avoid both pitfalls by simply making the argument: “The English Revolution created a working class.”

Preparation for the inevitable bores the reader. Phrases such as “this paper will attempt to show” or “in this paper I will prove” sound lily-livered. You wrote the paper, do not cast doubts in the reader’s mind by “attempting” anything. Just do it.

### **Cut prepositional phrases.**

Prepositional phrases multiply quickly and tend to weaken your style. Many are simply unnecessary: “In the year 1917, in the country of Russia, the leaders of the Bolshevik Party compelled the members of their country to revolt against the inheritors of the Czarist regime.” With some careful editing, you can tighten that wordy mess: “In Russia in 1917, the Bolshevik leaders compelled their countrymen to revolt against the Czar.”

Cutting the stuff within prepositional phrases also refreshes the sentence:

by the implementation of = by implementing  
in the creation of = in creating  
through the examination of = through examining

in the discussion of = in discussing  
for the purpose of exploring = to explore  
in connection with = about  
in the eventuality that = if  
in view of the fact that = since  
in the process of actually doing = by

### **Leave useless crutch phrases behind.**

Empty phrases weigh down writing. Some words sound intelligent but destroy the brevity of your narrative. Too numerous to list, the following are just some of the excessive baggage: case, character, the fact that, factor, instance, level, nature, and quality. Learn to spot them and eliminate them immediately.

The remark seemed hostile *in character* and offended George Washington.  
The teamsters carried their complaint to *the level of* the top management.  
Because *of the fact that* the development ran into delays...  
The principle assets of the European bank were monetary *in nature*.  
The production was *of inferior quality*.  
In *the instance of* our first production our mistake was faulty casting.  
Stalin relied on *the factor of* surprise to give him an advantage.  
The Native Americans showed a greater *degree of* interest in the outcome.  
very, truly, actually, basically, really... are almost always needless

### **Choose bargain words.**

Vivid words convey your ideas better than lifeless ones and they take up less space. Try to get the most communication for your words. Trudge, amble, lumber, stride, and lope all refer to a type of walk, but mean more than "walk." Sometimes vivid language sounds silly and the writer should be careful not to pack sentences with flowery language (unless, of course, you are writing Romantic poetry). Choosing descriptive language allows you to "show" the reader your meaning rather than "tell" her. Does "bad" adequately describe the taste of your Aunt Tessie's Christmas fruit cake? (how about tasteless, repulsive, crumbling, nauseating, revolting...) Are Arnold Schwarzenegger's biceps big? (No, they are gigantic, enormous, huge, monstrous, massive, even grotesque...)

### **Do not dilute your quotations.**

Particularly in historical writing, elaborate introductions to quotations can drain them of their force. Usually these phrases have an apologetic tone which suggests that the reader doubts your decision to include each quotation. Sometimes, these empty additives mask a weak transition in your argument. They also state the painfully obvious. Eliminate them.

A prime example was...  
The concept of free speech brings us to the next important and unique aspect of...  
We can see that the following quote tells us what...  
Another instance where such a reality existed...  
By using this statement we can understand that...  
This is truly significant because it shows that...  
This is the epitome of the way that...  
This important and famous quote suggests that...  
By quoting...we are able to get a sense of the...  
In this quote we are again reminded of...

If the reader cannot figure out your choice, then you have not used it well. These phrases provide short-cut transitions and introductions which limit your creativity as a writer and destroy the reader's interest level.

## **Avoid sweeping assertions.**

Do not belittle history by stating the dreadfully obvious—“throughout history men and women have lived and died.” If you referred to some statement as obvious, then you can probably omit it. Many introductions include over-generalized, vague arguments that often have little to do with the specific topic of the essay. For example: “Many events in American history involve decisions involving crucial philosophical debates. Often, the leaders divide over the best tactics to solve that debate—some radical, some conservative. The questions are always intriguing, and the resulting literature very interesting....” Blah, blah, blah. Get to your point!

Rambling around your topic is fine for a rough draft, but your finished papers should present your thesis clearly and succinctly in the first part of the paper. Just imagine reading this first paragraph: “Revolutions involve death and destruction. People died left and right during the Russian revolution because of the incredible fighting on all sides. Poor people, rich people, working-class, and elite all suffered as people always do during a revolution....” The rest of the paper is sure to be as unfocused, un compelling, and uninteresting as the introduction.

Remember: You may not use abstract terms without defining them. For instance, “democracy,” “freedom,” “propaganda,” and “feminism” need further explanation before you can use them freely.

## **Try not to gush.**

Profound admiration for historical characters might motivate you to write well, but it should not cloud your prose. For example: “Such a stirring line is only more evidence of the courage embedded deep in Joan of Arc, like that inside all those who fight against conformity only to be cruelly crushed by it in the end.” It is not your job to judge, praise, or condemn your subjects. Write compelling *analyses* that excite both reader and writer, but leave your raw, emotional *opinion* in your head.

## **Consider your audience.**

Debates over politically correct language have tarnished many educators’ efforts to question words and their meanings. Words possess extraordinary power, and you must acknowledge that power before you write. Whether you approve of the PC language or not, certain words connect to stereotypes that many people find at least unhelpful, and at most offensive. If you write a paper about homosexual culture in early twentieth-century Britain, and choose to use “fag” and “dyke” to describe the people you study, then you risk alienating your reader. Writing about “Indians” or “tribes” may suggest an unfamiliarity with current scholarship in the field. Slang words and profanity elicit strong responses from your reader. If you are willing to accept those reactions, then you are certainly free to use “offensive” language. Gender-neutral language also attempts to include more readers. Female readers often find it jarring to see only male pronouns.

## **Accepted Bibliographic Style**

Citations and bibliographies provide important clues to the rest of the historical community, and the department expects you to adhere to a consistent style. Two different guides offer help in constructing citations, and the department accepts either, but you must be consistent:

*Chicago Manual of Style*

*A Guide for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Kate Turabian)

Both of these guides are widely available to purchase at new and used bookstores; the “Turabian” is significantly less expensive (\$10.00) than the hardcover Chicago Manual (\$30.00).

Mugar Memorial Library has many copies of each, as do most public libraries.



Examples of footnote and bibliography styles:

### Book

Footnote: <sup>1</sup>Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (Chicago, 1993): 143.

Bibliography: O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

### Journal Article

Footnote: <sup>4</sup>John Thornton, "Central African Names and African-American Naming Patterns," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 50 (1993): 745.

Bibliography: Thornton, John. "Central African Names and African-American Naming Patterns," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 50 (1993).

### Primary Source Book, edited & reprinted

Footnote: <sup>1</sup>Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (New York, 1984): 266.

Bibliography: Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984.

### Article in a collected work

Footnote: <sup>23</sup>B.W. Highman, "Terms for Kin in the British West Indian Slave Community," in Raymond T. Smith, ed., *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, 1984): 67.

Bibliography: Highman, B.W. "Terms for Kin in the British West Indian Slave Community," in Raymond T. Smith, ed., *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

### Mechanics

Papers submitted for final reading should comply with standard mechanics:

Margins should be 1" and fonts should allow for approximately 250 words per page (point size 10 or 12).

Do not play with fonts or margins in order to adjust paper length—all your professors have computers too (you are not fooling anyone).

Short papers (2-5 pages) usually do not require a cover page, but make sure your name and ID number are on the paper.

### The University Writing Center

All writers benefit from having helpful readers. The Writing Center offers private writing fellows for the asking! It is located in the Undergraduate Resource Center on the fourth floor of the George Sherman Union).