

Haverford College
History Department
James Krippner

Pointers for Writing Papers

1. What makes a good history paper?

Good history essays combine the abstract and the specific, the theoretical and the empirical, into a well-reasoned analysis supported by verifiable evidence. The method is both deductive and inductive. This means that a good history essay is more than just a collection of “facts” about a bygone era or individual, and also transcends a mere reflection of prior beliefs or convictions. Rather, a good history essay makes an informed critique, one that incorporates a specific body of data and refines prior conceptualizations into new or stronger arguments. Your history papers will be evaluated on three levels:

- a) Conceptualization--were the concepts and insights at the heart of the analysis clear, perceptive, well thought out, original?
- b) Evidence--does the author demonstrate knowledge of the evidence relevant to the issue(s) discussed, and does the author successfully use the relevant evidence, even when it apparently contradicts the line of argument?
- c) Synthesis and Integration--does the essay integrate concepts and ideas into a well-reasoned and forcefully presented whole?

2. Use of evidence and footnoting.

A historical argument is more effective and intellectually honest when supported by footnotes or other references. Normally, you should verify the source(s) you use for quotations, for data not generally known or accepted, or for a line of argument, insights, or conclusions borrowed from another author as a part of your argument.

Footnotes should provide everything that the reader needs to know to verify your sources. This means author, title of publication, place and date of publication, and relevant page numbers. Which of the various footnote styles you choose is less important than consistency of footnote style, to enhance clarity and readability, throughout a given essay.

3. Quotations and Plagiarism.

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else’s work as your own. Even if unintended or unconscious, it casts doubt on an author’s integrity.

When you use a passage from another author, you must either quote directly or paraphrase, i.e., express the idea in your own language and in wording substantially different from the other author. Slightly changing the wording of an original passage does not constitute paraphrasing. By the way, quotations are most effective if used sparingly, especially if you are quoting other authors rather than primary historical documents or actors. (The exception would be if you were writing about other contemporary authors, as in the case of a book review.)

Plagiarism also occurs when one author borrows a line of argument or key idea from another without acknowledging the intellectual debt. These types of references must be acknowledged and footnoted.

Plagiarism is extremely serious. An author who plagiarizes corrupts their integrity. At a minimum, I will insist that any student found guilty of plagiarism flunk the course.

4. Style vs. Content.

Sometimes a brilliant analysis compensates for poor writing style, but the distinction between style and content is not always so rigid. If the language used to express an idea is vague, sloppy, or unclear, how can the reader assess the merit or content of the idea itself? Writing in clear and readable style enhances an author's ability to communicate precisely what they have in mind. It may also force the author to sharpen their own thinking. If you decide that style is utterly irrelevant, you decide to throw away one of a writer's most basic skills.

One special problem to bear in mind while writing is the tendency of many students to overuse the passive voice (the "to be" verb). The habit allows a writer to avoid analyzing who does what to whom. If overused, the passive voice creates less vivid and active images for the reader. Consider the following hypothetical example and revisions:

"Indigenous people were overworked and abused, and death itself was common."

Note the dull and vague quality of this sentence. Who abused the indigenes, and why did death really threaten them? Consider the following revision:

"Spanish entrepreneurs brutally overworked and abused the indigenous people condemned to work in the dim and poorly ventilated shafts of the mines. Many succumbed to disease, accident and death itself."

We now have a more vivid, informative and precise portrait, although some vagueness limits the reader's understanding of labor, types of diseases, etc. The language conveys action and sequence, and defines the actors and situation more clearly than the first example. If this were a relatively minor point in the overall argument, perhaps we would

stop with the first revision. But if this passage plays a major role in the essay, perhaps we would decide that we can do better still, and that the passage merits longer length. Consider the following:

“Spanish miners demanded that indigenous people hammer out hundreds of pounds of ore from flint-hard rock in poorly ventilated shafts lit by candlelight. They then hauled the heavy loads hundreds of feet up rickety rope ladders to the surface. The laborers emerged--hot, sweaty, and thirsty--into the cold mountain air. The regimen of overwork and abuse condemned many such natives to accidents, respiratory diseases and other ailments, and often, death itself.

By paying deliberate attention to style, one avoids lazy descriptive passages and vague analysis. The results sharpen both the analysis and the ability to communicate it. The point is not that a writer should never use the passive construction. Rather, a writer should use such constructions deliberately and selectively, when it truly serves to render a mood, convey an idea, connect parts of a sentence, etc.

One more tip: If a sentence gets very long and awkward, try breaking it into two (or even three!). This may save you from a tangle of subordinate and dependent clauses, clauses of clauses, clauses of clauses of clauses, etc.

5. Planning and follow through.

Good writing is hard work. Using outlines or other planning mechanisms, and following through by revising a first draft instead of handing it in immediately, can make an enormous difference for some people. And it helps to write or type the draft in a way that eases revision (e.g., typing triple space or writing on every other line). All final drafts must be typed, or computer printed, and double-spaced. All students are responsible for making a “hard” or printed copy of their papers. If your paper is lost, you will be responsible for providing a copy.

As always, students are encouraged to talk to the instructor about any questions they may have.