

Guide for Writing in History

About Writing in History

Common Approaches to Historical Writing

Historical writing should always be analytic, moving beyond simple description. Critical historical analysis examines relationships and distinctions that are not immediately obvious. Good historical writers carefully evaluate and interpret their sources; they link causes and effects; they assign significance to actors, ideas, and events; and they weigh competing explanations for all of these.

The analysis in your history essays can take a number of forms. At times, your focus will be on true historical analysis (how and why things happened); at other times, you will find yourself taking a more historiographical approach (considering how other historians have dealt with a topic, intervening in scholarly debates, or examining the impact of different schools of thought).

As you set out to craft your argument, keep a few things in mind:

- **What are you being asked to do?** Read over your assignment guidelines carefully. If possible, drop by your professor's office hours to bounce around some ideas and make sure you're on a good track.
- **Ask the right questions.** In general, questions that begin with "who," "what," "when," and "where" are best left to journalism (or some exams). To get into the complexities (and fun!) of historical thinking, come up with questions including "why" and "how." It can also be helpful to think in terms of change and continuity: how is an event different from what came before? What patterns or developments does it continue?

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About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

- About Writing in History
- Evidence in Historical Writing
- Common Types of Writing in History
- Conventions of Writing in History
- Citations & Formatting
- Common Errors in Writing in History

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

- **Start with your sources.** Historians rely on inductive reasoning, so build your argument from the ground up. Take a close look at some of your sources to see what jumps out at you: what’s intriguing? What’s weird? What seems to be inconsistent?
- **Be original.** Don’t simply accept conventional wisdom (or what was in the textbook). Question your sources. Question your assumptions—and the assumptions made by the authors you read. Be skeptical and curious, and you will likely end up with a strong and interesting argument.

If you are unsure of what a good historical argument looks like, find examples. Your professor might offer models of previous students’ work. You should also look at work by professional historians. Don’t worry—you won’t be expected to produce work at the same level as that published by an academic press! You should find, however, that the books and articles you read for your courses give you some examples of the way that scholars have approached a topic. Sometimes, you’ll have secondary sources that relate directly to your subject; other times, you may find yourself adapting a structure, approach, organization, or methodology.

Here are three excellent additional resources you can access online:

- Harvard Writing Center’s [“Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper”](#) is particularly helpful in thinking about approaches to historical writing and basic structures for historical arguments.
- Patrick Real’s [“Reading, Writing, and Researching for History”](#) offers great tips on how to read and interpret your sources, as well as some handy structure and style guidelines.
- Hamilton History Department’s [“Writing a Good History Paper”](#) is very useful in decoding common instructor comments. It includes some valuable suggestions for best practices—for what you should avoid.

Evidence in Historical Writing

History as a discipline is deeply rooted in finding and using evidence to support one’s arguments. Think of your essay as a court case and your evidence as the exhibits and witnesses with which you can persuade the jury (your readers). For every point you wish to make, you should have some grounds within the available evidence. One of the most common instructor comments on history essays is “evidence?” or “source?”—always explain **why** you are making a given claim.

Historians deal with two types of sources:

Primary Sources

Primary sources come from the historical moment under examination—these are your witnesses and artifacts. Common types of primary sources include newspapers, correspondence, memoirs, laws, official documents, and published works. Primary sources are the raw material of historical work and, where available, will give you some of your strongest support. Just as with a court proceeding, historical arguments try to establish how things may have happened, even with the assumption that this cannot be perfectly known (or even perceived at the time). So cross-examine your witnesses! Compare sources to each other to see what might be credible; think about what makes a particular source legitimate or authoritative for answering the questions you’re pursuing.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources come from scholars—your expert witnesses. Journal articles and books (usually from academic presses) are the most common types of secondary sources you will encounter. Secondary sources may be used to provide additional historical context for your essay. Even more importantly, secondary sources will alert you to the debates, disagreements, or major questions that historians grapple with in relation to a given topic. Just as with primary sources, challenge these experts: ask questions about their methods or their own sources; put them in conversation with each other and with your primary “witnesses.”

There are some cases where a source could fall into either one of these categories, depending on how you plan to use it.

Example: Sir Lewis Namier’s *Revolution of the Intellectuals* (1964) might serve as a secondary source about the European revolutions of 1848. It could just as easily provide primary source material for an investigation on European ideas about nationalism in the wake of WWII.

Some assignments will specifically ask you to stick to the course readings; others will require some research. The historical record is, unfortunately, incomplete and so you may occasionally find yourself wanting to argue something for which you have difficulty finding evidentiary support. Resist this urge and focus on what you can ably argue given the material available to you.

Common Types of Writing in History

Unless otherwise specified in your assignment prompt, all written assignments for a history course will need to **make an argument** and **support that argument with evidence**.

Most of the essays in history courses will be some form of review essay—that is, an assignment that is based on class readings and discussions. Many courses will also include some form of research project. Some of your assignments will specify whether you are to use primary or secondary sources, but most will likely ask you to use some combination of the two. Analysis of both sorts of sources is crucial to historical writing, but your approach to primary sources should be quite different from your approach to secondary sources. You will need to ask different sorts of questions about each type of source, and apply them in different ways to your own argument.

The following primary and secondary source analysis guidelines will help you engage with these two types of sources. In fact, you would do well to apply these questions and interpretive frameworks to all the sources you read, even when you’re simply preparing for class discussion.

Primary Source Analysis

A primary source analysis requires you to devote your investigation to one or more historical documents (or non-textual artifacts).

As you prepare a primary source analysis, make sure you can answer each of the following questions about your source(s):

1. Who produced this source?

What do you know about the author's background or experiences that could provide useful context? What assumptions does the author make? What biases are evident? What is the author's agenda? Who was the intended audience?

2. When and where was this source produced?

Was it created for a particular occasion? In what ways does it represent (or contradict) prevailing attitudes at that time and place?

Ex: A letter from a soldier written at the very beginning of WWI very beginning of WWI would likely be quite different from a letter written after three years in the trenches. Likewise, it matters a great deal whether the soldier was French, German,

American, or Senegalese.

3. How does this source compare to others you have encountered?

Is there disagreement (or agreement) between historical actors? Is there a change from earlier sources? How much does one source represent the individual author's views and how much does it reflect the broader context?

4. What presuppositions or assumptions do you bring to the text?

How is your reaction likely to differ from that of the source's contemporaries? Is there room for misinterpretation? How might you best guard against this? These questions should also be asked in reference to any other sources (primary or secondary) that interpret this one.

Secondary Source Analysis

A secondary source analysis asks you to explore the discussions of other scholars. Quite often, these sorts of essays will ask you to engage with historiographical thinking—though that word won't always be used (you've probably already committed historiography without knowing it!). The following questions can help guide your approach to your secondary sources:

1. Who produced this source?

In some ways, this is quite similar to the first question for primary sources. Here, however, you'll be concentrating a bit more on the author's expertise, training, and theoretical approach. For example, what sort of scholar is the author? A historian, a philosopher, a literary critic, and a political scientist might have very different approaches (and conclusions). Does the author identify strongly with a particular school of thought or methodological approach? (Is the author a Marxist? Does the author rely heavily on statistical analysis?)

2. What is the author's argument?

Just as you should be doing in your own essay, the author surely wrote to prove a particular point. Find the thesis to the source and pay attention to how the author supports this thesis throughout.

3. How is the source structured?

What is the logical flow of the text? What kinds of evidence are used? Pay particular attention to how the author uses primary sources. How does the author construct the argument? Are there individual points that you find compelling—or weak? Where might there be holes in the argument?

4. Why did the author write this?

Why does the author believe this argument is important or interesting? In what ways does the author claim to differ from other scholars on this topic? If you have access to other secondary sources, what additional differences do you see? Does the author point to a particular motive or inspiration for this work?

Mixed Source Analysis

This type of assignment will require you to use both kinds of sources—and the above guidelines for each still apply. In this case, however, you can use the two complementarily. A primary source might offer clear support for the interpretation of one of your secondary sources. A secondary source might provide context for a primary source—or might make an argument about a primary source with which you can agree or disagree.

Research Assignments

Research projects can come in many shapes and sizes. You might be asked to write a full research paper for one of your classes; in another, you might produce an annotated bibliography or a formal proposal. Historical research requires a mixture of primary and secondary sources.

Tip: One common pitfall is to select a topic for which you do not have access to sufficient source material. Be prepared to revise your topic and your research questions so that you are able to deal with them fully using the sources at your disposal. Remember that this is a problem faced by professional historians as well as undergraduate students!

Special Cases: Historiography and Capstone

Students in Historiography and Capstone receive detailed instructions for the final assignments for those classes. In both cases, the skills required to construct those essays will build upon work similar to the above assignment types: the Historiography essay could be considered a longer and more developed secondary source paper, while the Capstone project is a more substantial research paper.

Conventions of Writing in History

The most important rule in formatting your essay is to ensure that you conform to the guidelines given in the syllabus and/or assignment prompt. Just as your bosses will have different expectations in your later professional career, your professors will have differing requirements (and there may even be different expectations for two assignments in the same course). That being said, what follows are the most common stylistic conventions for historical writing.

- **Academic historians write in the past tense.** You may encounter works that use the literary present to discuss documents, but you are encouraged to stick to the past tense in your own work to prevent confusion or misuse. While it is true that the Declaration of Independence still “says” the same thing as in 1776, historians care more that it said what it did at the time.

- **Introductions should serve to frame your argument.** Your introduction may offer some background information to explain historical context or highlight a particular historical or historiographical debate. You might also begin with a brief, illustrative anecdote (articles written by historians in academic journals often use this as a way to hook the reader). You should certainly give the reader a sense of what your argument will be and how you will set about making your case. Poor introductions often suffer from one or both of the following faults: they are far too general or they are not clearly relevant to the essay’s body or central argument.

Tip: The best introductions are usually written (or substantially rewritten) once the entire essay has been drafted. Always be sure that the version of your thesis in the introduction reflects what you actually say in your essay. You should also check that you cover all the material you said you would (use all sources, methods, approaches that you invoked).

- **Conclusions should be more than a restatement of your argument.** You do want to return to your thesis and remind the reader how the essay has supported what you are arguing. The best conclusions, however, always push further. Tell the reader why your argument is interesting or significant—how might it apply in another case? What broader lessons might we draw? In what way does your argument affect an ongoing scholarly debate?
- **Don’t forget to number your pages!** This is a simple step for an author—and very important and useful to anyone reading or evaluating the work.

Citations and Formatting

All assignments for history classes at Southwestern should follow Turabian guidelines and use footnotes. Some of your classes may also require bibliographies—check your syllabus or assignment guidelines. You can find information about citation, including guidelines and models, in the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center.

Remember to cite ideas as well as quotations.

Example (quotation): Frantz Fanon claimed that, during decolonization, “the native bourgeoisie which comes to power uses its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners.”

Example (idea): Frantz Fanon warned against allowing native elites to set themselves up in the same repressive power structures that imperialism had created.

BOTH of these sentences require a footnote telling readers about the source where they can find this information.

Beware large block quotations: as much as possible, you should break these down and embed the most pertinent pieces within your own writing. Lengthy quotations leave you less room for analysis and interpretation—you also risk letting another author’s work outshine your own. A good rule to follow is to try to ensure that there are no full sentences entirely within quotation marks. *Exceptions:* Longer quotations may be appropriate in longer essays (usually involving original research) that require the reader to have a good sense of the original author’s specific wording and/or the specific context within the work.

Digesting the quotations within your own writing will help you with another important piece of writing for history: offering your own analysis of the quoted material. Do not drop quotations or ideas into your work without interpreting what you see as their importance and explaining how they relate to your argument. You must also introduce your quotations sufficiently: always be clear whom you are quoting (“Historian X argues,” “Historical Actor Y declared,” etc.).

For some assignments, you might use non-textual sources (usually images). These should be clearly labeled (and their source cited). **As with quotations, you should interpret and discuss any images; don’t leave them to speak for themselves.**



Example: This iconic image of the Third Estate carrying the First and Second Estates on its back **supports Abbé Sieyès’s idea that the members of the Third Estate were the only ones who contributed meaningfully to French society.**

Some types of factual information do not require citations. **Dates, locations, and basic biographical details are considered to be general knowledge.** If, however, you’ve discovered discrepancies—or even disagreement—about such facts, you should mention the controversy and explain which version you are following and why. Finally, **when in doubt, cite.** You are far less likely to be sloppy or to plagiarize if you are rigorous with your citations. Over-citing will never hurt you; under-citing can have serious consequences.

A Few Common Errors to Avoid

- **Lack of concrete argument:** If your thesis statement is not something that could be disagreed with, it is probably not a real argument (certainly not a strong one). A true thesis is not a statement of fact; rather, it answers a complex question. A strong thesis specifically addresses the “whys,” “hows,” and/or “so whats.”

NOT a thesis: Decolonization began in the 1950s.

Weak thesis: World War II caused decolonization.

Strong thesis: The experience of fighting fascism in World War II stimulated nationalist movements in Africa and Asia to push for independence.

- **Lack of evidence:** Support all of your points with detailed examples. Don't simply state that a document proves your point; tell the reader exactly **how** and **why** this piece of evidence applies to the argument you are making.

Bad example: Marx and Engels said that economic forces were the main drivers of history.

Good example: By asserting that the National Assembly “abolished feudal property in favor of bourgeois property,” Marx and Engels reinterpreted the causes and consequences of the French Revolution to emphasize social and economic factors over purely political ones.

- **Lack of analysis:** Make sure you get beneath the surface of things. Be critical, and keep in mind that critical thinking is sophisticated, but not necessarily negative—critical minds can, in fact, still agree! Do not parrot your sources; rather take the time to deconstruct them, figure out what they are really about, **why** they say what they do, **how** they make their case. Always discuss the significance of the points you raise, tell the reader exactly why things are interesting and/or important.

Example: The 1917 Corfu Declaration proclaimed that the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes “constitute[] but one nation.” **This notion of uniting disparate groups into a single polity went against the overwhelming current of breaking multinational states apart in the aftermath of the First World War.**

- **Lack of counter-arguments:** The strongest essays take the time to consider what others might argue—or have argued—against their thesis or supporting points. Explain why another author's interpretation is less compelling, or why a particular primary document should be understood in a different way. This type of analysis comes most naturally when doing comparative work (contrasting two sources), but can serve any type of historical writing.

- **Vagueness:** Avoid empty generalizations, truisms, or broad unsupported declarations. These are most often found in essay introductions, where students launch into grand, sweeping claims. Statements like these are uninteresting—and often untrue upon deeper reflection. Get as specific as possible in your thesis, your supporting points, and your characterization of your evidence.

Tip: If you have a sentence that begins with “Throughout history,” “Since the beginning of time,” “All humans,” or “Everybody knows,” you are most likely committing this fault.

- **Unclear actors:** Clarify who did what. Use specific nouns where possible. Make sure that your pronouns agree with their grammatical antecedents. Avoid overusing the passive voice, which can give the impression that there are no clear actors or agency.

Passive voice: The legislators of the Bolivian Constitution were given instructions on how to frame its content.

Active voice: Bolivar instructed the Constitutional Congress how to frame the new constitution.

- **Sloppy chronology:** Most of your assignments will focus on interpretation over recitation. **That is, we care how you think about things, not merely what you know about them.** This does not, however, mean that the facts don't matter. Double-check your dates in particular: you don't want to waste time building an argument where Idea A caused Event B...if Event B occurred first.

Tip: To keep the timeline clear for yourself and your readers, you can give dates in parentheses for events, publications, reigns, lifetimes, etc.: Qin Shi Huang (260-210 BCE), Suleiman I (r. 1520-1566), Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), the Algerian War (1954-1962).

Another tip: When referring to decades or centuries, do not use apostrophes: 1760s, 1800s. A corollary: spell out numbers smaller than one hundred; “twentieth century,” not “20th.”

- **Tangents:** Every point in your essay should support your argument; every sentence in your paragraphs should advance the point you are trying to make. Cut out pieces that are irrelevant. Cut anything that doesn't serve a clear purpose in your essay. If you make a really interesting point, but can't integrate it into the logical flow of your essay, you should cut that too (but make a note to yourself, in case it's useful later on!), or figure out how to rework your argument and structure so that it does fit.
- **Jargon:** Formal writing does not need to be stuffy. As much as you work to clean your writing of the above informality flaws, don't over-correct so as to become stilted and pretentious. Avoid relying on jargon. In particular, don't name-drop theories or theorists without good reason. **Writing that is over-wrought or overly-complicated usually cloaks weak ideas or sloppy analysis. The most important thing is that you are clear.**
- **Anachronism/presentism:** Be careful not to judge historical actors by contemporary standards or to assume that they knew, understood, or had access to ideas and resources that only existed after their time. In particular, avoid moralizing: cheap condemnation and self-righteous assertions will not take you into productive historical analysis.

Example: You won't get very far by being outraged that most political thinkers of the Enlightenment did not concern themselves with questions about slavery. A better line of inquiry might be to ask what further changes occurred over the course of the eighteenth century to encourage the rise of abolitionism.

- **Lack of proofreading:** Take the time to read over your work! Correct spelling errors (including the ones that spellcheck won't catch, like "form" instead of "from"); double-check your grammar (be especially careful with mistakes your instructors have already highlighted in previous assignments); make sure that your argument flows and that your thesis, introduction, and conclusion all reflect the body of your essay; read your essay aloud to catch run-on sentences, awkward constructions, and uneven transitions.
- **Informality:** In your essays, ~~don't~~ do not use contractions. Avoid colloquialisms or slang ("Gandhi was groovy!"), popular abbreviations ("FWIW"), and overuse of first-person pronouns ("I, "we").