

HOW TO WRITE YOUR HISTORY ESSAY

1. How to think about your question

The word "history" comes from the Greek word for "inquiry." Therefore a historical essay is not a bald chronicle of facts and events. On the contrary: like a scientific article, it identifies an issue or problem, explains how it will analyse the issue or resolve the problem, and then proceeds to do so, based on sound reasoning and verifiable evidence.

In planning your essay, your first task is to **identify a question or issue**. This is best done by finding a topic of interest to you, doing some preliminary reading around the topic, and then discussing viable options with your professor or TA. For example, suppose you are interested in warfare in the Renaissance/Early Modern period in Europe. Your *topic* is "warfare in the Renaissance". Using the Library catalogue and the databases (and consulting your Liaison Librarian, professor or TA), you find a few general works on early modern warfare, and spends a couple of evenings getting acquainted with your topic. You begin to formulate an idea: not only were armies in this period getting bigger and more professional, but they were beginning to be trained in a new way, using drill methods. This leads to a chain of questions: why was methodical, mass drill becoming so important? did it have anything to do with the development of hand artillery (muskets etc.)? or was it the emergence of citizen infantry armies? How were drill methods disseminated (did the invention of printing play a role? Protestant emphasis on literacy?)? What were the contemporary expectations of and attitudes towards these new military practices? were they resisted? Now, discuss this "menu" of questions with your professor or TA. Which one seems most interesting, and most feasible?

Your next step is to **clarify your question**. In so doing, it helps to think about what *kind* of question it is (is this a "why" question, *e.g.* Why was divorce so readily available in Rome? or is it a "what" question, *e.g.* Were the Vikings traders or raiders -- *i.e.* what were they?) You also need to think carefully about the *terms* of the question: *e.g.* if your question is: "Was Alexander the Great a creative military leader?" you have to define "creative", and to think of what that term might mean in the context of ancient warfare, and ancient political leadership.

Bear in mind as well that **answering a question is not the same as taking a side in a debate**. There are, of course, some points of resemblance: people have different views on how a question ought to be answered, and your job is to discover your own point of view and explain why you hold that point of view. This is your thesis, *i.e.* **the point of view which ties the evidence together in the most satisfying way**. Debaters *start* with a thesis, and then find evidence to defend it; historians *start* with the evidence and work towards a thesis. Don't try to force a thesis: steep yourself in the evidence, read up on the points of view offered by other historians, and then try to articulate the point of view which makes most sense to you, and which you are able to demonstrate makes most sense. Don't worry if you start your research without a clear thesis, or if you change your thesis in mid-stream. It is enough to start with a good question. Let the thesis come out of the material, and out of your own activity of thinking-through-writing.

2. Getting to a thesis

Here are some tips.

First, think out, *on the basis of your background reading on the subject*, **how you might answer your question**. For example, suppose your question is "Was becoming a nun a form of liberation for medieval women?" What evidence would persuade you one way or the other? Evidence that women chose or expressed preference for the cloister over marriage? or conversely, evidence that they felt imprisoned and disempowered as nuns?

Secondly, **consider limiting your scope to a "case study"**. For example, if your question is "Why did early modern Europe enclose Jewish communities in ghettos?" you might look at some global explanations for the ghetto phenomenon, and then test them by examining one ghetto in detail, *e.g.* the ghetto of Venice. Alternately, **consider a controlled comparison**, *e.g.* if you are considering the question "Why were the ancient Greeks so ethnocentric?" you could compare Greek attitudes to the Persians *versus* Greek attitudes to the Egyptians.

Thirdly, ponder your material and **look for a pattern that makes sense**. For example, if your question is "Did Matilda's bid to claim the throne of England fail because 12th century Europe could never accept a female ruler?", your reading could lead you to the following pattern: "Matilda's claim to the throne was never explicitly challenged because she was a woman; but the fact that she was a woman made it impossible for her to acquire the political allies she needed to assert that claim. In that sense, you could say that she failed because she was a woman." That is your thesis.

3. How to construct an answer

Answering historical questions is in some respects like arriving at truth in a court of law. We cannot revisit the past to obtain first-hand experience of historical events, any more that we can re-experience a crime. We must rely on *evidence* furnished by *witnesses*.

Evidence is furnished by two different kinds of witnesses, whose probity must be critically tested in different ways. If you were a trial lawyer or prosecutor, you would summon two kinds of witnesses:

1. First-hand witnesses of the crime or people with direct experience of the event and the actors.
2. Experts in various technical fields related to the events of the crime (doctors, ballistics experts, psychiatrists...)

The first-hand witnesses are there to **report what they experienced**; the expert witnesses are there to **evaluate this evidence in the light of their expert knowledge**. The court depends on first-hand witnesses for the elements of the story itself. But it will quickly learn that their accounts will not necessarily agree, due to deliberate or unconscious editing and distortion. In other words the "facts" they relate are embedded in "meanings" which shape those facts in different ways. To try to correct for this, the court depends on expert witnesses to evaluate the coherence and accuracy of the witnesses' stories. However, experts vary in quality, and have their own biases and agendas.

Likewise, historians listen to two kinds of evidence:

1. **Primary sources**: i.e. documents produced at the time of the event, by people involved with, close to, or contemporary with the event.

2. **Secondary sources:** i.e. the writings of later historians who have reconstructed and analysed the event.

The **primary sources** are the historian's first-hand witnesses. They were the people on the spot, and for all their prejudices and incoherence, they deserve our respectful attention -- because they are all we have! The **secondary sources** are the scholars who have evaluate the evidence of the primary sources, and try to understand what it means.

Notice that the best primary source is the one closest to the event, i.e. the **oldest** one; the most useful secondary source is likely to be the most recent beneficiary of the long historical debate, i.e. the **newest** one. The newest secondary sources are of course not always the best ones, but they are the best place to *begin*, because they represent the state of historical debate now. From the present, you can work backwards in time to other scholarly viewpoints.

You may find that your primary sources are embedded in your secondary sources: in other words, you have to rely on quotations from primary sources found in your secondary sources, because the full text of the primary source is unavailable to you (*e.g.* it is in a language you cannot read, or it has never been published apart from the quotation in the secondary source...). Finding your primary sources this way is quite legitimate, but be sure to cite them correctly in your footnotes (*e.g.* "Bartholomew of Salerno, commentary on Hippocrates' *Aphorisms*, quoted in Faith Wallis, *The Birth of Academic Medicine*, p. 401").

Avoid the following common mistakes:

- Do not write the history of your topic from the beginning of time. Get your reader into the story as quickly and directly as possible! Provide exactly the background information your reader needs to follow your exposition of the question, *and no more*.
- Avoid presentism, i.e. judging the experience of past generations in relation to the standards of the present. This is much the same as "Whig history", *i.e.* thinking of the past as an inevitable progress towards the (implicitly supreme and final) conditions of the present.

4. Footnotes, Bibliography, and References

Historians in North America normally use the *Chicago Manual of Style* as their guide to academic composition, and in particular, to formatting bibliographical references in footnotes and bibliographies. Updated editions of the *Chicago Manual* appear regularly, so it is convenient to consult the electronic version available through the Library website: go to <http://libraryguides.mcgill.ca/c.php?g=344953&p=2323288> and click on "Chicago Manual of Style" to expand. Though the full on-line *Manual* is the most complete and authoritative guide, it is often excessively detailed, especially for undergraduate essays. On the Library resource page mentioned above, you will also find a student-oriented version of the *Manual* -- an electronic version of Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations* (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html). Follow this guide in formatting your bibliographic citations, remembering that the layout and punctuation differ depending on whether the item is part of a footnote, part of a bibliography, or part of a reference list (if you are using parenthetical references). Always check with your instructor to determine which format -- footnote or parenthetical reference -- is preferred. The Library also offers free software which will download bibliographic references from electronic databases or the Library's

catalogue and automatically format them in Chicago Style. Seminars are also conducted by the Library on how to use these programs: see <http://libraryguides.mcgill.ca/citation>.

5. Evaluation criteria for essays

Apply this checklist to your finished essay:

5.1. The Question

- Did you analyse your question logically?
- Do you define the terms you will use?
- Have you refined and limited the question (e.g. selected a case for particular study, or a pair of instances for comparison...)?

5.2. The Evidence

- Are you using good-quality (up-to-date, scholarly...) secondary sources? Have you represented the views of the scholars you cite fairly and accurately? Have you engaged with their viewpoints?
- Do you use appropriate primary sources? Have you read these sources in a careful and informed way? Have you accounted for evidence which does not support your thesis?

5.3. The Argument

- Have you clearly articulated your point of view on the question you are addressing -- *i.e.* do you offer an answer to the question posed?
- Have you addressed alternative points of view?
- Is what you say true, and do you back it up with evidence?
- Are there no mistakes in your data (including dates, names etc.)?
- Do you organize your discussion logically and persuasively? In other words, do you take your reader step by step through the thought process from evidence to conclusion?
- Do your conclusions follow logically from your evidence? Have you avoided inconsistencies, internal contradictions, and *non sequiturs*?

5.4. The Presentation

- Is your essay written in clear, grammatically correct English or French?
- Is it free of spelling errors?
- Is the paper divided logically into paragraphs?
- Is the paper printed, double-spaced, with a suitable cover page?
- Are the footnotes/references and bibliography presented consistently and correctly according to the style conventions prescribed for this course
- Is your essay of the appropriate length? For example, an essay of around 12-14 pp. contains ca 3500-4000 words. Does your word/page limit include notes and bibliography.