



University of Southern Mississippi, Department of History's

# History Writing Lab

464 Liberal Arts Building, 601-266-4086,

[historywritinglab.usm@gmail.com](mailto:historywritinglab.usm@gmail.com)

<http://www.usm.edu/history/writinglab.html>



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## Top 11 Tips for Writing History Papers

As you write your history papers, keep in mind the following list of writing tips that can improve your paper. Remember, though, that your professor is always the best person to ask if you have any questions or concerns.

### 1. Write in the simple past tense.

By definition, history is concerned with the past, and since you're writing about the past, you need to write in the past tense.

Incorrect example: Roosevelt *orders* the banks closed until auditors *verify* that they are solvent.

Correct example: Roosevelt *ordered* the banks closed until auditors *verified* that they were solvent.

### 2. Avoid the use of the pronoun "I."

Unless your professor instructs you otherwise, you should avoid the use of "I" in college writing, because it is too informal. Structure your essay so that your ideas come across clearly without having to state that they are your ideas.

Incorrect example: *I think that* the WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

Correct example: The WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

### 3. Know your audience.

Identifying your audience helps you determine what information and how much of it you will include in your essay. Your audience for a history paper is usually the professor or the teaching assistant who will grade it. This leads many students to assume that their audience is already familiar with most of the material. As a result, student writers often take shortcuts by failing to place information within its context, or by neglecting to define terms. Writing this way puts you at risk of providing insufficient information; when grading the essay the instructor is likely to assume that you are not familiar with the context or terms. One way to overcome this problem is to write your paper so that a general reader unfamiliar with the topic would be able to read and understand the essay. You might ask a friend who fits this description to act as your "ideal reader" and point out areas in your paper that are not clear or have other problems. If you have any questions, ask your professors about their expectations in this area.

### 4. Cite sources properly.

Historians generally use footnotes or endnotes—rarely do they use the MLA parenthetical style of documentation. For when and how to cite sources, **first** consult your professor, then look at reference works such as Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, or the HWL handouts "Documentation Rules," "Documenting Books," "Documenting Electronic Sources," and "Documenting Periodicals and Miscellaneous Sources." All of these handouts are available in the History Writing Lab.

### 5. Read your draft aloud.

Hearing your own words, or having someone else listen to them, can help you identify run-on sentences, awkward phrasing, and other problems that might otherwise escape your attention. This is one of the most effective ways to proofread your work before turning it in.

### 6. Avoid slang.

When writing a history paper, try to use formal (though not stilted) English, not conversational English. We do not write as we speak. Unless you are using a direct quotation that employs slang, do not use it; slang will ruin the tone of your paper. Also, avoid the use of abbreviations.

## 7. Avoid excessive use of the passive voice.

The passive voice often fails to identify who or what is performing the actions you are describing. Also, the passive voice tends to result in excessive use of various forms of the verb “to be,” which leads to wordiness. Phrasing sentences in the active voice allows you to use active verbs that are more descriptive and that enliven your writing.

Passive voice: *Many programs were created* to put Americans back to work.

Active voice: *The government created many programs* to put Americans back to work.

In the passive voice example, the reader does not learn who created the programs. Was it government, private corporations, or some other organization? The active voice clearly indicates where the programs originated.

## 8. Avoid the use of speculative terms.

Terms such as “possibly,” “probably,” “seems,” “may,” and “might” indicate weaknesses in your argument—you do not want to convey uncertainty to the reader. In some cases where evidence is almost completely lacking, you can use speculative terms, but when the preponderance of evidence points in one direction, do not use them.

Incorrect example: The “Bank Holiday” *probably restored* public confidence in the financial system.

Correct example: The “Bank Holiday” *restored* public confidence in the financial system.

## 9. Be sure pronouns agree with their antecedent.

If a pronoun replaces a plural noun, you should use a plural pronoun. When replacing a singular noun, use a singular pronoun. If you name several people in a previous sentence, be careful not to use a pronoun that could apply to any one of them; the reader won’t know to whom you’re referring.

Incorrect example: Two women, *Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins*, played crucial roles in the New Deal. *She* served as FDR’s secretary of labor.

Correct example: Two women, *Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins*, played crucial roles in the New Deal. *Perkins* served as FDR’s secretary of labor.

## 10. Omit needless words.

State your ideas as directly as possible. Excessive use of adverbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases can clutter a sentence, obscuring rather than amplifying your points. Many students load their papers with “filler” words in order to meet a minimum length requirement. This is obvious to the reader, and does more harm than good. It’s better to use additional evidence rather than additional words.

Incorrect example: The CCC kept many thousands of workers busily employed in constructing long hiking trails through America’s beautiful national parks.

Correct example: The CCC employed thousands of workers to construct hiking trails in national parks.

## 11. Vary sentence structure.

Blend brief, direct statements with longer, more complex sentences. This improves the flow of your paper and makes it more readable. Too many short sentences make your paper choppy and difficult to read. An endless string of long sentences confuses the reader.