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**History Writing Tips**

**The VERY basics**

\* Attach your pages together in the method prescribed by your professor or TA

* This generally means one staple in the upper left-hand corner \* Pay attention to your page formatting
* In most cases you should use either Calibri or Times New Roman
* In most cases you should use 12pt font
* Double space your essay
* Your name and class information should be single spaced
* Remove the extra space between paragraphs
* Use one inch margins on all borders – your professors and TAs can tell the difference
* Usually your name will not appear in the header – check with your professor or TA
* Spell your professor’s name correctly

**Use the simple past tense**

\* You are writing about the past, so you need to write in the past tense

* Incorrect: Roosevelt orders the banks closed until auditors had verified that they are solvent.
* Correct: Roosevelt ordered the banks closed until auditors verified that they were solvent.

**Avoid the passive voice**

\* The passive voice fails to identify who or what performed the action you are describing \* The passive voice results in excessive wordiness

\* See the HL guide on passive voice

* Incorrect: Many programs were created to put Americans back to work.
* Correct: The government created many programs to put Americans back to work.

**Avoid contractions**

\* This is formal writing, and in formal writing, contractions are not used

* Incorrect: Louis XIV didn’t like R.P.R.
* Correct: Louis XIV did not like Protestants.

**Avoid beginning sentences with conjunctions**

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\* While this can be used as a rhetorical device, it should be used sparingly.

\* Beginning sentences with conjunctions indicates that you are referring back to a previous statement.

* Make sure that you tie the sentence which begins with a conjunction to what you said before. \* In many cases it leads to passive voice.
* Because of this the monarchy was abolished.
* With this document parliament abolished the monarchy.

**Avoid using first and second person**

\* Neither the reader nor the writer were present at the event (in all likelihood)

\* Unless your professor instructs you to, refrain from using first or second person

* Incorrect: I am going to tell you why the WPA was a successful New Deal program.
* Correct: The WPA was a successful New Deal program.

**Names of historical figures**

\* Refer to people by their first and last names on the first mention, then their last names thereafter.

* Incorrect: Benjamin gave many life lessons in “The Art of Virtue.” Benjamin was wise.
* Correct: Benjamin Franklin gave many life lessons in “The Art of Virtue.” Franklin was known as a wise man.

\* In the case of monarchs always include their associated number – otherwise you could be talking about any of them.

* Incorrect: Louis said that all Protestant children had to be baptized as Catholic.
* Correct: Louis XIV said that all Protestant children had to be baptized as Catholic.

 There were nineteen kings of France named Louis! If you do not indicate to whom you
are referring, the reader is going to think you do not know.

**Avoid using too many qualifying terms**

\* Qualifying terms (possibly, probably, seems, may, might, etc.) weaken your argument \* Only use these terms when the evidence is almost completely lacking

* Incorrect: The bank holiday probably restored public confidence in the financial system.
* Correct: The bank holiday restored public confidence in the financial system.

**Vary sentence structure**

\* Blend brief, direct statements with more complex sentences

\* This makes your paper more readable. Too many short sentences make your paper choppy and stilted, while too many long, complex sentences can confuse the reader.

**Avoid run-on sentences**

\* A run-on sentence is one in which two or more independent clauses are run together without punctuation \* They may be fixed by adding punctuation, a conjunction, or by making two sentences

* Incorrect: In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and it declared that the British colonies in America were independent of Great Britain and that Britain no longer had a claim on the colonies.
* Correct: In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. In it, he stated that the British colonies in America were independent of Great Britain.

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**Avoid sentence fragments**

\* A fragment is an incomplete sentence

\* Each sentence should express a complete thought

* Incorrect: Being that Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote “The Social Contract.”
* Correct: Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote “The Social Contract.”
* In the incorrect example, the reader is looking for more information, whereas in the correct example, the reader understands that the thought is complete.

**Subject-verb agreement**

\* Make sure that the subject of your sentence agrees with the form of the verb you use

* If the subject is singular, use the singular form of the verb
* If the subject is plural, use the plural form of the verb
* Incorrect: The Protestants was angry about the revocation.
* Correct: The Protestants were angry about the revocation.

**Make sure pronouns and antecedents agree**

\* If a pronoun replaces a plural noun it should be plural

\* If a pronoun replaces a singular noun it should be singular

* Incorrect: After consulting his advisors, Franklin D. Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping end the Depression. They immediately presented these programs to Congress.
* Correct: After consulting his advisors, Franklin D. Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping end the Depression. He immediately presented these programs to Congress.

\* If you name several people in a previous sentence, refrain from using a pronoun that could apply to any one of them

\* It confuses the reader

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

**Avoid colloquialism (slang)**

\* It ruins the formal tone of your paper

\* Unless a direct quote uses slang, refrain from doing so.

* Incorrect: Louis XIV wanted to keep all his nobles hanging out together so they would be ineffective.
* Correct: Louis XIV gathered all his nobles at Versailles, keeping them occupied in frivolous pursuits.

\* Documents do not talk, authors do.

* Incorrect: The essay “What is Enlightenment” states that men are immature.
* Correct: Kant stated that men are immature in his essay “What is Enlightenment.”

\* The writing center at the University of South Florida has a good resource to help you figure out what qualifies as slang: <http://www.lib.usf.edu/writing/wcnews/colloquial-language-and-slang/>

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**Quote marks**

\* Use quote marks when you are quoting a source, not for emphasis.

* Incorrect: Bossuet was an “old school” thinker.
* Correct: Bossuet was an old school thinker.

\* Use quote marks to indicate that you are repeating someone else’s words.

* Incorrect: According to Brian LaPierre the canonization of hooliganism as a crime against the Soviet social order took victimhood away from the abused, insulted, and accosted individual and applied it to society at large.
* Note: By definition, this example is plagiarism.
* Correct: According to Brian LaPierre “the canonization of hooliganism as a crime against the Soviet social order took victimhood away from the abused, insulted, and accosted individual and applied it to society at large.”1

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**Omit unnecessary words**

\* State your ideas as directly as possible.

* Excessive use of descriptive words (adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases) can clutter a sentence, which obscures your points

\* Do not use filler words to meet minimum length requirements

* It is obvious to the reader
* It can harm your grade \* Use more evidence, not more words
* Incorrect: The CCC kept many thousands of workers busily employed in constructing long hiking trails through America’s beautiful national parks.
* Correct: The CCC employed thousands of workers to construct hiking trails in national parks.

**Avoid bombastic statements**

\* This changed the world forever! \* The world was never the same.

* Do you have proof?
* Did it affect more than just the area of the world about which you have been writing?
* It is better to avoid these types of statements altogether. \* This gives us the great government we have today!

\* This allowed us to get a black president.

* Did the events in question lead directly to the present?
* Unlikely.
* It is best to avoid trying to tie events to the present unless your professor instructs you so to do.

1 Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Kruschev’s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 30.

**Know your audience**

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\* Allows you to determine how much information you need to include in your essay \* For a history paper, your audience is usually a professor or TA

* This leads students to assume that the reader knows a great deal about the topic
* Students often fail to place information in context as a result of this

 It also leads to a failure to define terms, which can lead to providing insufficient
information

* Insufficient information leads the professor or TA to assume that the student is unfamiliar with the context or terms \* You can overcome this by writing your paper with a general reader in mind
* When writing, try to pretend that your reader does not know anything specific about the subject
* Ask a friend who is unfamiliar with the subject to read your paper, so they can tell you which information is unclear to them

\* As always, ask your professor or TA if you have any questions in this area

**Read your draft out loud**

\* Hearing, or having someone listen to, your words can help you identify problems that may otherwise escape your attention.

\* This is one of the most effective ways to proofread your paper

\* Do NOT rely only on the spelling and grammar check functions in your word processing program

* It can and does miss items that are words, but are used incorrectly.
* Lead/lead/led or two/too/to or their/there/they’re

**Cite your sources to avoid plagiarism**

\* Check with your professor as to format (Chicago style footnotes, parenthetical citations, etc.) \* The History Lab can provide you with formatting guides

\* You may also consult the style guide for your class one of the following books

* *The Chicago Manual of Style*
* Kate L. Turabian *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*
* Mary Lynn Rampolla *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*