



Department of History

History Lab

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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

- ★ 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.

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/>

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 Khrushchev’s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 30.

Know your audience

- ★ 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*