



Department of History

History Lab

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Writing a History Paper

Imagine driving somewhere you have never visited before, and you forgot your phone or your GPS will not work! You have an idea of where you want to go, but you may never find it or you may drive in circles for hours. Writing a history paper can be a similar experience. You may start out with nothing more than the assignment sheet that the professor handed out in class. That gives you an idea of where you need to go, but it may not seem easy to get there. By following some simple guidelines, you can move steadily and effectively towards your destination.

The following example will guide you through the steps in writing a history paper.

Getting a Good Start

Identify the Professor's Question or Goals of the Assignment

For this example, the assignment is to write a 5-7 page paper in which you assess the effectiveness of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, using secondary sources supplemented with two primary documents (these general rules also apply to papers based entirely on primary sources).

Before you begin your research, it can help to rephrase the assignment in the form of questions you will need to answer. These questions are: Was the New Deal a success? Why was it a success or failure? In order to answer these, you will also have to consider two additional questions: What was the New Deal? What problems was it supposed to solve?

Begin Your Research

Reread the information on the New Deal in your textbook, and look for a list of suggested further readings at the end of the textbook chapter. If your instructor has assigned a primary source reader, recheck the material on the New Deal. Search the library catalog (<http://lib.usm.edu/>) as well as the article databases (http://libguides.lib.usm.edu/article_database_list). Read several different works to get a sense of how different historians have analyzed the New Deal's effectiveness. Take notes that will help you in formulating a thesis and creating an outline. **Be sure to record the sources of your notes so that you can cite them later.**

Formulate a Thesis

A thesis is the central argument of your paper, based on the evidence you discovered in your research. After reading several works, weigh the evidence and decide whether you think the New Deal was effective or not. Your answer to that question will be the thesis of the paper. In this case, you have concluded that while the New Deal did not actually end the Great Depression, and that some of its programs were not successful, the bulk of the evidence demonstrates that the New Deal did help to restore public confidence, promoted a partial economic recovery, and created many beneficial programs.

You state your thesis as follows: “Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it was a success in restoring public confidence and creating new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans.” **Write this down; you will have to state it in the first paragraph of your essay.** Also, use the thesis as the starting point of your outline, writing it at the top of your outline page.

Find Supporting Evidence for Your Thesis

You should have done most of the work in this area during your initial research. You may wish, however, to do further research to find additional information to strengthen your argument. Some examples might include statistics on the number of people employed in New Deal programs, and firsthand accounts of people who benefited from participation in those programs. When you find evidence that contradicts your thesis, do not ignore it! As a historian, you should present contradictory evidence, but show that the evidence that supports your views outweighs it. In this case, you find the following evidence in support of your thesis, and list each as a separate point in your outline:

1. The activity of Roosevelt’s first “Hundred Days” in office helped restore public confidence by showing that the government was actively seeking to promote recovery.
2. The “Bank Holiday” helped place the banking industry back on a sound footing.
3. Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) put Americans back to work and accomplished important projects that benefited the public.
4. The New Deal created Social Security, which helped millions of people at the time and has been crucial to many more millions of Americans since.

Although you may have found more evidence to support your thesis, remember that you cannot include everything in a 5-7 page paper. Limit yourself to the points you believe best support your thesis, in this case the four strongest points.

Opposing Evidence

In this case, you find two key pieces of evidence that partially contradict your thesis. List them in your outline:

1. The New Deal did not end the Depression.

2. The Supreme Court declared some New Deal programs unconstitutional.

You will touch upon these points briefly in your paper, but you do not want to spend too much space on them. Acknowledge and describe the evidence, but not in such depth that it undermines the evidence that supports your thesis.

You now have an excellent thesis and plenty of supporting information. In order to make the journey from your inspired thesis to a well-written essay, you will need to make an outline.

Make an Outline

In its simplest form, an outline need consist of nothing more than your thesis and a list of the supporting evidence. To this, you can add as much or as little detail as you need to remind yourself of the information you will include. **Do not get bogged down creating an overly detailed outline.** If you find yourself saying: “Now it’s time to move on to Roman numeral IV, Point C, Section 7, Subsection (f),” it means you have spent too much time outlining.

Beneath the thesis statement, note the contents of the introduction. Then indicate that you will follow with a paragraph of background information on the Great Depression; remember that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal, you need to identify what problems the New Deal was intended to solve.

Next, under each item of supporting evidence, list the points you wish to cover. Do the same for the contrary evidence. If you think it will help, note where you will place statistics or quotations.

Choose the quotations that best support your thesis. Quote directly (word for word) when the quotation clearly and succinctly states the point you wish to make, or illustrates a point you have made. When the quotation is wordy or provides only basic facts, you will want to paraphrase (restate in your own words) the material (of course, you must cite paraphrases just as you would a quotation). You should also paraphrase to avoid overuse of quotations: **your paper should not be a series of quotations linked by an occasional transition sentence.** Finally, indicate how you will conclude your essay.

A Completed Outline May Look Like This

Thesis: Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it was a success in restoring public confidence and creating new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans.

- I. Introduction
 - a. Introduce the topic in a way which will grab the reader’s attention
 - b. State thesis
 - c. Review the main evidence points
- II. Background
 - a. Problems of the Depression the New Deal tried to solve
 - i. Sense of despair
 - ii. Collapse of financial system
 - iii. High unemployment

- iv. Shrinking economy
- III. Supporting evidence
 - a. Restored public confidence
 - i. Sense of Roosevelt's concern for the people
 - 1. Quote from woman on FDR's first radio address
 - ii. Flurry of government activity in Hundred Days
 - b. Improved America's financial health
 - i. Bank holiday
 - ii. Created agencies like FDIC to protect people's savings
 - c. Reduced unemployment
 - i. CCC put people to work at productive tasks such as building park facilities
 - 1. Quote from CCC worker
 - ii. WPA put people to work and performed needed construction tasks
 - 1. Number of people employed by WPA
 - d. Created Social Security
 - i. Provided immediate benefits to the elderly
 - 1. Amount of assistance in the first five years
 - ii. Has become the cornerstone for senior citizens' financial security
- IV. Opposing evidence
 - a. Did not end the Depression
 - i. WWII did, but the New Deal reduced the Depression's worst effects
 - b. Unconstitutionality
 - i. Some New Deal programs, like the Agricultural Adjustment Act were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, but Roosevelt was trying to find a solution
- V. Consider the larger implications
 - a. For this example, you might include
 - i. Legacy of the New Deal
 - ii. Impact of WWII on the American economy
 - iii. Growth of social programs in postwar America

If you are having difficulty with the research process or writing the paper, there are many places you can find help.

Your professor, TA, or a History Lab consultant can help you with any part of this process.

Additionally, research librarians are happy to help you find resources. You can e-mail them questions, chat, or make an appointment with a research librarian at <http://www.lib.usm.edu/services/forms/askalib.html>.

Furthermore, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) is available 24/7 if you need to look something up. Purdue OWL's web address is <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

Tips for Writing History Papers

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

- ★ Fails to identify who or what performed the action you are describing
- ★ Results in excessive wordiness
- ★ See the History Lab 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 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.

Avoid the Use of Qualifying Terms (or the Overuse of Such 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
 - Too many long, complex sentences can confuse the reader

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: The united body would have to stick together for effectiveness.
 - Correct: Society needed to unite for effectiveness.
 - Incorrect: Peter the Great ordered that all guys in Russia shave their beards and moustaches.
 - Correct: Peter the Great ordered that all men in Russia shave their beards and moustaches.
- ★ 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/>

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 actually 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.

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
 - This leads 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 for a general reader
 - When writing, try to pretend that the professor or TA does not know anything about the subject
 - Ask a friend who is unfamiliar with the subject to read your paper
 - 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.
- ★ Read your paper out loud and mark every place you stumble with a pen – then go back and look for grammatical/style errors/issues.
- ★ This is one of the most effective ways to proofread your paper

Cite Your Sources

- ★ Check with your professor as to citation format; most historians use Chicago style.
- ★ If you do not cite your sources correctly, you will technically be plagiarizing even if you do not intend to cheat.
- ★ The History Lab can provide you with formatting guides
- ★ You may also consult
 - *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*