

A Quick Guide For Beginners Writing History Papers

Structure

1. Have a thesis

The single most important part of a history paper is the thesis. The thesis is the central argument of your paper. In general, your thesis statement should be 1-2 sentences long and should be found at the end of your first or second paragraph.

a. Come with a question.

Theses are usually the answers to questions. If, for instance, you were to ask the question, “Why did Harvard try so hard to maintain its colonial identity beyond the colonial period?” you might come up with the thesis “Harvard’s commitment to ‘colonial’ architecture in the nineteenth century was part of its attempt to distinguish itself from Old World colleges and assert the distinctiveness and superiority of American higher education.”

b. Theses are by nature debatable.

A fact is not a thesis. Although all are true, none of the following are acceptable theses: “Harvard College is in Cambridge, Massachusetts.” “Harvard College was founded in 1636.” “Harvard College’s architecture has changed over the centuries.” Although theses much be supported by facts, the thesis itself is your interpretation of those facts.

c. Theses are specific.

Avoid broad generalizations which tell your audience little about your subject. For instance, the sentence “Harvard College invented its distinctive architectural style” is much too vague to make an effective thesis. “Harvard College’s buildings represent the persistence of a ‘colonial’ attitude toward education that Harvard maintained well into the Nineteenth century” however, is a debatable and specific thesis.

d. Avoid Counterfactuals.

A counterfactual is an argument based on events which didn’t happen. For instance, one might be tempted to argue that “If Harvard College had been founded after 1776, its post-revolutionary architecture would have been very different.” Although it is often tempting to make use of counterfactuals to “prove” a point, historians are limited to analyzing what did happen as opposed to what might have happened.

2. A Well-Organized Body

The body of the paper is where you flesh out your thesis and present your evidence. Most people find it helpful to outline before beginning to write. It is important that you move logically from point to point as you move from paragraph to paragraph. Each of your paragraphs should contain a central idea. This central idea should be expressed in a topic sentence which is usually the first or second sentence in a paragraph. Many people find it helpful to string their topic sentences together after completing an essay. This should produce a coherent paragraph beginning with your thesis statement.

3. Introduction and Conclusion

Papers which lack coherent introductions and conclusions tend to start in the middle and trail off at the end. It is important that you bracket your paper with an introduction which sets out your thesis and a conclusion which sums up your argument.

Content

1. History papers have to do with the past.

This may sound obvious, but many are tempted to critique historical actors in light of modern values or to point out where people in the past went “wrong.” Although a comparison of modern and historical practices can sometimes be useful, in general, historians try to take the past on its own terms. We are primarily interested in understanding the past rather than critiquing it.

2. The answer is in your head.

History is by its very nature a creative enterprise. Many people believe that if they could just find the right piece of information in their documents, they would find the “answer” to their paper. Information from documents is absolutely crucial to the writing of history since it provides evidence, but the interpretation of that evidence is what makes a paper valuable. Interpretations can only come from your own analysis of evidence. If the “answers” were really in the documents, we would all compile anthologies rather than writing papers.

“The Devil’s in the Details”

1. Writing in the past tense

Unlike many other disciplines, historians follow the convention of writing in the past tense. There is one exception to this rule, when a document itself is the subject of your sentence, you should use the present tense. The rationale is fairly simple. The people about whom you are writing acted in the past. They are dead. The documents they produced, however, survive and continue into the present. Therefore, “Nathaniel Hawthorne **included** many references to the persistence of the past in Nineteenth-century Salem in *The House of the Seven Gables* BUT “Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* **includes** many references to the persistence of the past in Nineteenth-century Salem.”

2. Those pesky footnotes.

Footnote superscripts should be placed at the end of sentences rather than at the end of quotations. If you need to cite more than one source in a footnote, separate your sources by a semi-colon (“;”), but include both sources under the same footnote number.

3. Writing centuries.

Most people have been taught that contractions are inappropriate in formal papers, but many remain unaware that century numbers must also be written out. “Eighteenth century” is considered appropriate in formal papers. “18th century” is not. A century should be written differently depending on whether the author is using it as an adjective or a noun. “Eighteenth century” is a noun. “Eighteenth-century” is an adjective.

4. Avoid the passive voice.

Sentences written in the passive voice convey only half as much information as those in the active voice. They tell readers about the object of the sentence but avoid conveying information about the subject. Readers need to know “who did what to whom.”

5. Style matters.

The point of writing is to convey information to a reader. It is important, therefore, to write clearly so that the reader can understand your arguments. Spelling and grammatical errors are distracting to the reader. Remember, spell-check is your friend, but it is no substitute for proof-reading.

6. The proverbial “intelligent but uninformed reader.”

When writing, historians usually imagine their ideal reader to be intelligent but ignorant. In practice, this means that although you should assume that your reader can follow logical arguments, you should not assume that he or she is already familiar with your subject matter. Introduce ideas, fact, and events as though your reader had never heard of them. Don’t start in the middle.

Footnoting with Style!

Footnoting is necessary in three cases: 1. When quoting directly. 2. When referring to an idea other than one's own. 3. When reporting facts which are not considered "common knowledge."

Historians use a standard footnoting style which may be found in *The Chicago Manual of Style* or Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. The basic forms (with examples) are given below. Please pay attention to periods and commas because these make your footnotes easier to read. I have placed titles in *italics*, but underlining is also acceptable.

1. Books

Author, *Title* (Place of Publication: Publisher, date), page number.

Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

2. Journal Articles

Author, "Title of article." *Journal* vol. number, issue number (date), page number.

James Axtell, "The Vengeful Women of Marblehead: Robert Roule's Deposition of 1677." *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 4 (Oct 1974).

3. A short work found in a larger work.

Author, *Title of Short Work*," in *Title of Larger Work*, ed. Editor (Place of Publication: Publisher, Year), page number.

John Augustus Stone, *Metamora, Or The Last of the Wampanoags* in *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909*, ed. Richard Moody (New York, The World Publishing Company, n.d.).

4. Newspapers

Newspaper (Place of Publication), Day Month Year.

Boston Daily Advertiser (Boston), 3 June 1887.

5. Web sites

[type of source]; available from www.abc.xyz; accessed XX Month 2003.

or in real terms:

[slide]; available from <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/slides/new-england-kitchen.jpg>; accessed on 4 March 2003.

The more information you can include the better, for example:

JS Ingram, *The Centennial Exhibition* (reprint Arno Press, 1976) [slide]; available from <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/slides/new-england-kitchen.jpg>; accessed on 4 March 2003.

6. Second reference.

You should use full citations the first time you refer to a particular work. All references after the first may be given as author, page number (e.g., Axtell, "The Vengeful Women of Marblehead"). Please note that historians no longer use "*ibid.*"