

Carleton University

Department of History

**NOTES ON WRITING A  
HISTORY ESSAY**

## Notes on writing a History essay

*These are general guidelines for writing essays in the Department of History. You should ensure that your instructor does not have specific requirements that differ from those set out here.*

### What is a History essay?

Instructors assign essays to give you the opportunity to study a specific subject and to develop conclusions of your own about it. The main objects of the exercise are to get you to think about the subject and to reach conclusions based on relevant evidence and the creation of a logical argument.

Essay topics are generally framed as questions to be answered or problems to be analyzed. For example, the essay topic "Assess the relative importance of political and economic factors in the origins of the French Revolution" asks you to decide which were more important in explaining the outbreak of the Revolution: political factors or economic factors. Some instructors may ask you to devise your own essay topic to give you an opportunity to study a problem you find particularly interesting. It is important to frame your topic as a question or problem so that you do not write an essay that is simply descriptive or a narrative of events.

**There is no single "right answer" to any question posed in an essay assignment in History.** The conclusions you come to might be judged more or less "right." What is important is not only the conclusion you reach but also the evidence and arguments you use to support it. In the example of the essay on the French Revolution, you could make a case that (a) political factors were more important than economic, (b) economic factors were more important than political, (c) political and economic factors were so closely connected that it is impossible to discuss them separately, or (d) other factors (such as social) were more important than either political or economic. The evidence you collect will lead you to one of these conclusions.

Although there is no single "right answer" to a question in History, there are "wrong answers." You could not successfully argue, for example, that political or economic factors were totally irrelevant to the origins of the French Revolution and that the Revolution was caused by a particular conjunction of the stars and planets.

**The important thing to remember is that you are asked to assess evidence and to present an informed point of view, not merely to give an opinion.** Reaching conclusions in History is not the same as having an opinion about a movie or whether apples taste better than oranges. Historians use agreed-upon rules of evidence and argument. They select information relevant to the problem they are analyzing, they apply the evidence fairly, and they argue logically. They do not decide on a conclusion in advance and then present only the evidence that supports it while concealing evidence that contradicts it.

When you write an essay you are required to practice the same rules as professional historians: to collect all relevant evidence, assess it fairly, and use it to construct a logical argument with a conclusion that expresses the weight of the evidence. If you were writing the essay on the origins of the French Revolution you would find some historians arguing that political factors were most important while others argued for the primacy of economic factors. As you read their respective

works, weigh up their arguments. Even though you might find each side has valid points you will probably find that, overall, one side has a stronger case.

Do not try to guess which argument or conclusion your instructor favours and then write an essay that supports his or her position. Nor should you simply repeat the views expressed in the books and articles you have read while preparing the essay. Your instructor already knows what those authors have written and she or he wants to read **your** argument and conclusion.

Do not be put off by the fact that historians do not always agree. It is very easy to throw up your hands and think, "If professional historians can't decide, how can I?" But the fact that professional commentators and journalists disagree on how to interpret current events does not stop you from having a point of view on politics, and neither should you be deterred from reaching a conclusion in a History essay because historians disagree. It is part of your academic training to assess the validity of arguments without being overwhelmed by the judgments of others.

**Much more important than references to professional historians is your own judgment, as long as it is supported by the evidence.** Your essay should demonstrate a range of factual evidence. You should also show that you are aware of alternative conclusions to the one you have adopted and you should explain why you have rejected them. There is no need to be dogmatic in stating your conclusion. Do not be afraid to use words like "probably" or "apparently" to indicate that you wish to qualify or nuance it.

You must be very careful to set out the argument (or "thesis") of your essay, usually in your introduction. History often seems to be a story, a sequence of events or "narrative," and it is all too easy to fall into the trap of writing an essay that is no more than a recounting of a series of events with a brief opinion tacked on at the end. It is important to remember that a History essay is an exercise in developing a strong argument and an interpretive position based on the fair use of solid and relevant evidence. In the French Revolution essay, for example, it would be useless to give a narrative account of the origins of the Revolution that did not explicitly weigh political and economic factors. You might occasionally need to provide a narrative of a little-known or controversial sequence of events, but this would usually be done in order to provide material for analysis.

### **The process of writing an essay**

Writers write in many different ways. Some discipline themselves to write so many words a day while others wait for "inspiration." Some do all their research before they start writing while others begin to write while they are still doing research. You will find your own style and method, but some general rules for essay-writing at the undergraduate level are pretty universal, especially given that you have to meet a deadline.

The first thing is to know what your essay is about. This seems obvious but often students fail to read the essay question carefully. A poor understanding of the topic will almost certainly lead you to write a poor essay. Re-read the question or topic carefully before you start your research, again before you begin to write, and a third time when re-reading your first draft. If you have any doubt about what the topic involves, ask your instructor before you start work on the essay.

It is best to start your research with some general background reading before you begin to consider the specific topic. This will familiarize you with the general subject and allow you to put the more detailed information in a broader context. If you were writing on the origins of the French Revolution, start with a textbook and read the chapter on the background to the Revolution. Then move to the more specialized sources, taking careful notes on any material you feel might be relevant. Note the source and page reference for the notes you make. This will save you the time and trouble of tracking down references later. Be particularly careful when you copy material you might want to quote. **Always use quotation marks around material you copy directly from your sources.** If you confuse your own notes with direct quotations you might inadvertently commit plagiarism (discussed below).

Devise a system of organizing your notes that you find sensible and appropriate to the topic or the length of the paper. You might take notes on file cards, using a new card for each topic. Alternatively you might use a separate electronic document for each source you consult. You can then devise a method for marking separate topics in each document. Over time you will develop the system you find most successful.

Do not worry if you seem to be making a lot of notes. It is better to have more material than you need than to discover too late that you have too little. By the same token, do not feel compelled to use every note you have made. When writing an essay it is just as important to know what to leave out as what to put in. You might find that some information that seemed important when you took notes turned out to be irrelevant or marginal. Use only what you really need to support your argument.

While doing the research, remember that you are interested in both the factual information contained in your sources and the interpretations of the various writers. Read carefully and critically so that you learn to distinguish these two elements, and keep track of them separately in your notes. Try to be aware of the approach or bias of the works you read. The introduction to a book will generally give you an indication of its author's approach, such as whether she or he believes that the subject is best explained by economic or by political conditions.

### **Planning your essay**

Plan the essay *before* you begin to write. Never attempt to write an essay "off the top of your head." Your reader will quickly recognize a poorly organized essay.

The first step is to re-read all your notes to remind yourself of the data you have collected. You should then decide on the major points and what your overall argument or thesis will be. Organize the material that supports your argument or illustrates the major points. If you find that you are missing evidence for a specific point, go back to the books and articles you used or locate new ones and do some more research.

Ask yourself if your research has uncovered any conflicting points of view. Decide how you want to handle these ideas. You might present the reader with a synthesis of them, you might discuss each separately, or you might simply choose to present the argument you found most convincing.

Choose an organizational scheme. Is it more appropriate to approach the topic chronologically or thematically? Would a comparison be helpful? If you are presenting a complex argument, make sure the points are made in a logical way. In what order should your points be made? Which themes should receive the most attention?

Then write the outline. Use point form to list your main ideas, with headings and subheadings as appropriate. State your thesis at the beginning of the outline and make sure that the points you make support it. One effective strategy is to place your most important points first and last where they will have the most impact on the reader. Errors in logical progression or awkward changes of topic will appear more clearly in an outline, so take time to consider what you have written. Some instructors will look over your essay outline if you have it ready well before the deadline.

### **Writing your essay**

If you have prepared a good outline, writing the essay might involve not much more than filling out the points you have set down. Writing generally takes longer than you anticipate, however, and you should not leave it to the last minute so that you have no choice but to submit the first draft as your finished essay.

**Your essay should have an introduction, body, and conclusion.** The introduction should set out your argument and provide other information that will help the reader. For example, it might include a reference to a debate among historians or point out that you have used a particular or unusual source. The body of the essay sets out your specific arguments with supporting evidence and illustrations. In general each paragraph should contain one major point or illustration. In the conclusion you should summarize your argument.

When the first draft is finished, read it over using the following checklist:

- Have you made your intentions and your thesis clear to the reader?
- Have you defined all important terms?
- Have you included any irrelevant or unnecessary material? Have you repeated yourself?
- Have you forgotten any important points?
- Have you checked the spelling, punctuation and grammar, particularly in areas where you are uncertain?
- Have you provided footnotes where necessary, and are your footnotes or endnotes complete and accurate? If in doubt verify the references in the original sources.
- Is the essay the right length as set by your instructor?
- Have you prepared a complete and accurate bibliography?

**Never write only one draft.** The most experienced and brilliant writers go through several revisions before their work is ready for others to read. It is often very helpful to put the first draft aside for a day or two. Looking at it with a fresh perspective will help you spot weaknesses in organization and content.

**Proofread the paper one final time before submitting it.** This is essential even if you use a computer that checks spelling because the computer will not tell you when you have confused one correctly spelled word with another. It will let you write "He went their" and "They were not aloud to go." It is difficult to proofread your own work and you might ask a friend to check your

essay for errors in spelling, grammar, and the format of your notes and bibliography.

## Style

Writing is an art and there are no rigid formulas or rules when it comes to style. Your personal writing style will develop with practice. There are, however, rules of grammar and punctuation that must be observed in order to make your meaning clear.

It is better not to use too many direct quotations. Use your own words wherever possible, and save quotations for special emphasis or when the author expresses an idea in a particularly effective way which you yourself cannot match.

Avoid using colloquial expressions, clichés or jargon in essays. Do not use contractions (don't, gov't) or abbreviations (Main St.). Do not use the first person if at all possible in a formal essay. Instead of saying "I think that..." simply state your point of view.

Keep all the verbs in the same tense. Do not switch back and forth between past and present tense unless you are writing to achieve a specific effect in a work of fiction or casual journalism. History essays are usually written in the past tense.

Remember that good writing is essential to win and keep your reader's attention. Write clearly and directly. No one is impressed by jargon, by improperly used multi-syllabic words, or by complicated sentence structure. Make your sentences as straightforward as possible, but try to vary their length and structure to keep the reader interested. The active voice (e.g., "The king declared war") is more effective than the passive voice (e.g., "War was declared by the king").

## Avoiding plagiarism

Do not paste together an essay simply by linking a series of excerpts from one or more books. Believe it or not, it is actually more difficult to write an essay this way than it is to write a proper one.

Do not copy phrases, sentences or entire passages from your sources unless you are deliberately using a direct quotation. The University has severe penalties for plagiarism and the Department of History has issued the following policy:

All written work for... every History course must be untainted by plagiarism. The University Senate defines plagiarism as *"to use and pass off as one's own idea or product the work of another without expressly giving credit to another."* (Calendar, p. 50) The Department of History interprets this statement as covering the following practices:

- Copying from another person's work without indicating this through appropriate use of quotation marks and citations in footnotes.
- Lengthy and close paraphrasing of another person's work (i.e., extensive copying interspersed with a few "different" phrases or sentences).
- Submitting written work produced by someone else as if it were one's own work

(e.g. another student's term paper, a paper purchased from a commercial term paper "factory," material downloaded via the Internet, etc.).

In an academic environment plagiarism is a serious offence, and it is not a matter that can be dealt with by an informal arrangement between the student and the instructor. In all cases where plagiarism is suspected, instructors are now *required* to notify their departmental Chair, and the Chair is in turn *required* to report the matter to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. The Associate Dean makes a formal investigation and then decides on an appropriate sanction. Penalties can range from a mark of zero for the plagiarized work, to a final grade of F for the course, to suspension from all studies, to expulsion from the University. (Students should also be aware that the Senate classifies as an instructional offence the submission of "*substantially the same piece of work to two or more courses without the prior written permission of the instructors... involved.*")

### **Some technical points**

Essays must be printed out or submitted online as per the instructor's instructions. Use double-spacing, with adequate margins on all four sides of the text. Be sure to number the pages.

Quotations that are longer than four lines should be single-spaced and indented to set them off from the rest of the text. Do not use quotation marks in these cases.

Notes may be placed on separate pages at the end of the essay (endnotes), or at the bottom ("foot") of the appropriate page (footnotes). Ask your instructor for his or her preference.

The bibliography must appear on a separate page or pages.

The cover page must show your name, student number, date submitted, the instructor's (or tutor's) name, and the title of the paper. Ask your instructor if you should use the exact title that was assigned to you or whether you yourself should devise a title. If you give your essay your own title, it should be clear and descriptive so that the reader knows immediately what the essay is about.

### **Footnotes/endnotes**

Footnotes or endnotes are generally used to identify direct quotations from your sources, ideas and interpretations that are not your own, little-known facts, and information likely to be controversial. You should not footnote a well-known fact such as "The French Revolution began in 1789," but you should footnote a more obscure fact such as "In 1789 French army officers had to swear an oath not to order their troops against civilians."

You will probably find that most paragraphs (except for the introduction and conclusion) have at least one footnote. Footnotes are also useful in that they enable your reader to go to the sources you have used. You may also use a footnote or endnote if you want to comment on a point in the text without interrupting the flow of your argument. It is important that your notes are complete and accurate.

If you are unsure whether or not to use a footnote in a particular case, consult your instructor. If

you think that failing to provide a footnote might open you to a charge of plagiarism it is better to provide one.

Unless your instructor directs otherwise, do not use the Social Science form of references that gives the author, date of the publication, and page number in parentheses, such as: (Wilson, 1994: 35).

The number indicating a note is always placed at the end of the phrase or sentence to which it refers, and it should be slightly elevated above the line of text.

Titles of books and journals must be underlined. Titles of articles in journals or essays contained in books are enclosed in quotation marks. An example of a note referring to a passage in a book is:

<sup>3</sup>G.L. Nute, Caesars of the Wilderness (New York, 1943), pp. 70-72.

An example of a note referring to a passage in an article is:

<sup>6</sup>Robert Lynd, "Objections to Laughter," Atlantic Monthly, 145 (March, 1930), p. 334.

There are some shortcuts. If you have two consecutive references to the same source, use ibid., which is the abbreviation of the Latin word "ibidem," meaning "in the same place." For example:

<sup>3</sup>G.L. Nute, Caesars of the Wilderness (New York, 1943), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

If a reference is repeated after one or more references have intervened, you may either abbreviate the second reference or use op. cit., the abbreviation for the Latin words "opere citato," meaning "in the work already cited." For example,

<sup>7</sup>Nute, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>Nute, op. cit., p. 30.

If you have used two or more sources by the same author make sure your reader can distinguish between them by including a word or two from the title. For example, if you used William Doyle's Origins of the French Revolution and his Oxford History of the French Revolution, you might differentiate them in the notes by citing one as Doyle, Origins, p. 98, and the other as Doyle, Oxford History, p.112.

## **The bibliography**

The bibliography is a list of the books and articles you actually consulted while preparing your essay, whether or not you quoted from them. Do not include encyclopedias and dictionaries unless they specifically addressed the essay question. In an essay on the French Revolution you should not include the Encyclopedia Britannica, but you might include the Dictionary of the French Revolution. Do not include books you have not read or that you found not relevant or useful. Your instructor will quickly recognize a "padded" bibliography.

The bibliography should appear on a separate page at the end of the essay. You should list the

entries alphabetically by the author's surname and it is common to give the surname first. Note that bibliographical entries contain more information than references in footnotes or endnotes, and that the punctuation is different. There are several accepted forms of punctuation, including these:

- Jackson, L.B. and A. Strake. "New Light on the Ancestry of Sydney Lanier", Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, XLII (1935), 153-170.
- Ormsby, W.G. The Emergence of the Federal Concept in Canada, 1839-45. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.

### **Further help in writing essays**

There are many guides and handbooks on essay-writing, style, and grammar. Among the most useful are:

- Mark Hillstern, et al., The History Student Writer's Manual. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Margot Northey, Making Sense. A Student's Guide to Writing and Style. 3rd. edn., Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Kate Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations. 6th edn., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- William Strunk and E. B. White, The Elements of Style. 3rd. edn., New York: Macmillan, 1979.

Students who want assistance with essay-writing can also contact the Writing Tutorial Service. It offers help with all stages of essay-writing and provides one-to-one tutoring, free of charge, to any student registered at Carleton. See <http://carleton.ca/sasc/writing-tutorial-service/> for more information.

### **Use of Internet**

The Internet contains a vast amount of information — some valuable; some unreliable. Please be sure to check with your instructor before using the Internet as a research source.