

Guidelines for Writing History Papers

Marjorie McIntosh, Eric Love, and Jim Denton of the History Department at the University of Colorado originally created this guide. Distributed with permission from these authors.

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A. Descriptive Writing vs. An Analytic or Critical Approach

1. *Descriptive* writing merely says what happened or what another author has discussed; it provides an account of the topic.
2. An *analytic* (or *critical*) approach asks and answers questions, makes comparisons, and presents and defends a thesis or argument. Rather than just stating the facts, this approach explains and interprets them. Why did events take place, what were their consequences, how did they relate to other developments? Why did the authors you read take differing stands? What is your own interpretation of the issues?
3. Few assignments in history courses will be simply descriptive. Rather than just summarizing what happened or what you read, you will usually be asked to provide your own analysis of the topic or issue about which you are writing and to argue a thesis or conclusion. Be sure that you understand what each assignment requires, in terms of the balance between description, analysis, and argument.
4. You must provide evidence and examples to buttress your analysis and arguments.
5. If you encounter material that does not agree with your position, you cannot just ignore it; instead you need to explain why you think that evidence is less important or persuasive.

B. General Format and Presentation

1. The paper's title, your name, the course number, and the date should appear on a separate first page for long papers and at the top of the first page of text for short papers.
2. Your paper needs an introduction, a middle section, and a conclusion. These sections do not need to be set off with individual headings in a short paper but may be separated in a longer one.
 - a. The *introduction* lays out your topic, states what your particular thesis or argument will be, and tells your reader how the paper will be structured--

- what points you will consider. You may also need to provide some background or context in the introduction.
- b. The *middle section* presents your information and develops your analysis and argument.
 - c. The *conclusion* pulls together the main points, reasserts the thesis, and may relate the topic back to wider historical issues.
3. Number the pages so your instructor can refer to them.
 4. Depending on the nature of the assignment, your paper may need footnotes (at the bottom of the page) or endnotes (at the back of the paper). It will almost certainly need at the end a bibliography of the works you used for the project. See the [Referencing Guidelines](#).
 5. Unless your instructor has given you other instructions, type your papers double-spaced, with margins of standard width (usually 1 inch on the sides and bottom and 1 1/2 inch on the top). Use standard fonts. Professors are fully aware that different fonts may be used to make a paper seem larger or smaller than it really is. Also, exotic fonts may be hard to read and grade.
 6. Indent the start of each paragraph 5 spaces from the left margin.
 7. Proofread your paper carefully for spelling and typing mistakes. A sloppy paper distracts attention from what you are saying and makes the reader wonder if your preparation for the paper and your thinking were careless too. If your word-processor has a spell-checker, use it, but remember that it will not catch typos that happen to be words (e.g., "marital" vs. "martial"). Correct any last-minute changes neatly in ink.
 8. Staple your paper together (not paper clips or folded at one corner).
 9. Keep a copy of your paper, either on disk or photocopied.
 10. If your instructor has given any special instructions about the format of the paper, be sure to follow them.

C. Clarity of Organization and Paragraph Structure

1. The body of your paper should be organized into several main sections, each of which deals with a given sub-topic, issue, or question within your general subject. In each section, you will have one or more paragraphs focusing on individual aspects of that topic.
2. A paragraph consists of a block of material about a particular subject or about a specific point, one of the issues that contributes to the development of the analysis or argument of the paper.
3. Each paragraph should begin with a general topic sentence that indicates what subject the rest of the paragraph will discuss, what issue it will explore, or what point it will make. By reading just the topic sentences of the paper, your reader should be able to get a summary of the subjects you are addressing and the position you are defending.
4. If your paragraph talks about several different subjects, it must either be divided up, so you can develop each point separately and effectively in its own

paragraph, or be opened by a topic sentence that makes it clear that you want to mention briefly a variety of lesser points.

5. The remaining sentences in each paragraph provide more detail or evidence about the main topic. A paragraph should *develop* the subject or point it is making; hence it normally contains at least three sentences in addition to the topic sentence and may have a concluding sentence as well. (Here formal writing differs from journalistic style, which often uses shorter paragraphs.)
6. Transitions:
 - a. Between sections you will need a transition or linking statement, indicating that you are moving on to a new topic.
 - b. Each paragraph within a section should also be clearly related to the one before and the one after, creating an even, logical flow. If the link is not readily apparent, you should include a sentence which describes the transition.

D. Acknowledging Your Sources (Referencing) and Academic Honesty

1. You must acknowledge the sources of all your information and any ideas or interpretations you have taken from other works. These references are usually placed into notes, with a bibliography at the end of the paper that lists all works used. See the [Referencing Guidelines](#).
2. *Plagiarism*. This serious academic offense can take many forms, including using another writer's phrase without putting it into quotation marks, not giving the source for a quotation, taking information from other works without acknowledgment, presenting other people's ideas as if they were your own, or submitting a paper that you did not write.
3. You may not use a paper you wrote for one course to fill an assignment in another class.

E. Primary Sources vs. Secondary Works

1. A *primary source* is a record left by a person (or group) who participated in or witnessed the events you are studying or who provided a contemporary expression of the ideas or values of the period under examination. Letters, autobiographies, diaries, government documents, minutes of meetings, newspapers, or books written about your topic at that time are examples; non-written sources include interviews, films, photos, recordings of music, and clothing, buildings, or tools from the period.
2. *Secondary works* are accounts written by people who were not themselves involved in the events or in the original expression of the ideas under study. Written after the events/ideas they describe, they are based upon primary sources and/or other secondary works. Thus, an early 20th-century historian could prepare a secondary study of the American Civil War through her reading of documents from that period, interviews with veterans, examination of weapons, and so on.

F. Use of Direct Quotations

1. When working with *secondary accounts*, limit your use of direct quotations. In general, your paper will flow better if you paraphrase the statement, putting it into your own words. Quote only when you wish to call attention to the author's precise phrasing.
2. When using *primary sources*, you may want to use a few more direct quotations, to illustrate the mood, language, or "flavor" of your sources. But even here, be sparing. A good rule of thumb is to quote only when you plan to analyze or interpret the passage; otherwise, paraphrase.
3. Do not use a direct quotation as the topic sentence of a paragraph.
4. Every direct quotation must be put into quotation marks and given its own individual reference, normally in a note.
5. An *indirect quotation* is when you present a direct quotation of the words of person A that you found in a book written by author B (that is, author B was himself quoting person A). In such cases, you must give both sources in the reference that accompanies the quotation.
6. Quotations of five or more lines need to be indented 5-8 spaces on each side and single spaced. When you use this format, do not use quotation marks (but do still give the reference in a note). Shorter quotations should be typed as part of the regular paragraph.
7. Punctuation with quotation marks. When ending a quotation in the text, a final comma or period always precedes the closing quotation marks, whether or not it is part of the quoted matter. Question marks and exclamation marks precede the quotation marks if they are part of the quoted matter but follow the quotation marks if they are part of the entire sentence of which the quotation is a part. Thus: The newspaper reported that "150,000 young people gathered in Denver." Should we accept its account of "a stupendous congregation"?
8. If you leave out words from a quotation, to shorten it or to make it fit into the grammar of your own sentence, indicate the omission by using periods with a space between each one. For gaps in the middle of a sentence, use three periods; for omissions at the end of the sentence, use four periods. E.g., "History can be fantastic"
9. If you insert a word into a quotation, to increase clarity or adjust it to your own presentation, put the insertion into square brackets. E.g.: She commented that "by January . . . [the trees] looked sickly."

G. Writing in Formal English

While most of us speak in casual or colloquial English, it is important to learn how to write formal English too. Our normal conversational style differs in many respects from formal written English. Your ability to write effectively will be one of the most critical factors in getting a job or being accepted for further training. Hence it is worth working on your formal writing skills while you are in college.

H. Common Problems in Writing Mechanics and Style

1. Misspelled words: Use dictionary (and/or spelling checker) and correct.
2. Typing error(s): Proofread more carefully and correct.
3. Contraction: Do not use contractions (e.g., "wasn't" or "isn't") in formal writing.
4. Commas omitted or in wrong place:
 - a. Set off every parenthetical phrase (one that could be put into parentheses or removed from the sentence) by a pair of commas, one before and one after it.
 - b. Use a comma after each item in a sequence of three or more items, including the next-to-last. (E.g., "The Velociraptor likes apples, oranges, and pears.")
5. Capitalization incorrect:

These capitalization notes apply to papers which have been returned to you for corrections by your professor

- a. The word marked with a single underline on your paper should start with a lower-case letter, not a capital.
 - b. The word marked with a double-underline should be spelled with a capital letter.
6. Possessives:
 - a. Insert an apostrophe when a noun is used as a possessive. (E.g., "the dog's ear," or "the girls' running shoes.")
 - b. Do not use an apostrophe for "its" as a possessive. (E.g., "The dog shook its head.") "It's" with an apostrophe is a contraction of "it is" and hence should not be used in formal writing.
7. Prepositions:
 - a. Check the phrase marked for an incorrect preposition.
 - b. Reword to avoid a preposition at the end of the sentence. (Wrong: "That is an idea I have never thought about." Better: "That is an idea I have never considered," or "I have never thought about that idea.")
8. Dangling participle: Reword to eliminate an opening or closing phrase with no subject or the wrong one. When a sentence starts with a participle, the (understood) subject of the participle must be the same as the first word (subject) of the main clause that follows. (Wrong: "Flying through the trees, John watched the lovely bird." [This means that John was flying.] Correct usage: "Checking through her notes, Laquita decided to focus on the problem of deforestation.")
9. Adverbs vs. adjectives: Use an adverb, not an adjective, to modify a verb. (Wrong: "Mary plays squash good." Right: "She plays it well.")
10. Pronoun: Use "who/whom" when referring to people, "that/which" for others.
11. Hyphen with century: Insert a hyphen when you use a century term to modify a noun. (E.g., "important to seventeenth-century science.") If the century term stands alone, do not use a hyphen. (E.g., "in the fifth century.")

12. Wrong word or nonexistent word: Check a dictionary to be sure this word exists and what its meaning is.
13. Verb tense:
 - a. Use the past tense, not the present, for historical descriptions.
 - b. Stay in the same tense throughout a given discussion.
14. Disagreement between singular and plural forms in verbs or pronouns
 - a. Subject and verb. (E.g., "He and his dog walk," not "He and his dog walks.")
 - b. Noun and pronoun. (Wrong: "The country went to war when an enemy attacked them." Right: ". . . when an enemy attacked it.")
15. Parallel wording: When using the constructions "both . . . and" or "not only . . . also," use the same grammatical form after each of those terms. That is, the word or phrase immediately following *both* terms must be a subject, a verb, or a prepositional phrase. (Wrong: "Naboru likes both dancing and a quiet evening at home." Right: "Naboru likes both dancing and having a quiet evening at home.")
16. Run-on sentence: Do not join two separate sentences by a comma. To solve this problem, either: (1) add a conjunction (e.g., "and," "but," "or"); (2) substitute a semi-colon for the comma; or (3) divide it into two sentences using a period in the middle.
17. Incomplete sentence: Reword this phrase so that it becomes a full sentence, with a subject and a main verb.
18. Unclear meaning:
 - a. Undefined term. Make clear to your reader what exact definition you intend when using this term, which can be used in a variety of different ways.
 - b. Unclear reference. Re-write to indicate to whom or what this word refers. Be especially careful with "this" and "that."
 - c. Confusing wording. Re-write so as to communicate a clear point to your reader, so that no one can misunderstand you.
 - d. Idea cannot be followed because it is undeveloped. Explain and discuss this point more fully.
19. Wordiness. Eliminate unnecessary language; see how briefly you can express this point.
20. Awkward phrasing. Re-write to convert this lumpy, uncomfortable wording into a smoother statement.
21. Repetitious wording. Vary your wording to add interest, rather than using the same terms or phrases several times within a few paragraphs, as you have done here.
22. Passive voice. Re-write to avoid passive wordings, which are often imprecise, wordy, and/or wimpy; further, they seldom say who committed the action. (E.g., "Many orders were issued.") Use the active voice to achieve a more direct and forceful statement. (E.g., "The Queen Mother of Benin issued many orders.")
23. Indirect opening phrase. Re-word for a more vigorous effect, eliminating round-about or vague opening phrases like "there is/are/was/were" or "it seems that".

24. Repetition of ideas/information. Do not state the same point twice. Discuss each idea or topic fully in one part of your paper, then move on; delete unnecessary repetition.
25. Overly broad generalization. Stick to the evidence you have before you, that you can defend effectively.
26. Gender-specific (or sexist) language. In contemporary American usage, we no longer follow the traditional but biased practice of using masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to everyone. Instead, we try to use "gender-neutral" language, finding wordings that are inclusive or introduce both male and female terms. (Biased: "Every student is responsible for his own schedule." Recast: "Every student is responsible for his or her own schedule," or, better, "Students are responsible for their own schedules.")

For more explanation about writing mechanics and grammar, see Diana Hackett's *A Pocket Style Manual*; for help with your style, consult William Strunk and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*.