

A Pocket Guide to Writing in History

THIRD EDITION

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3e. Revising your research paper

A research paper is a complex project. You need to analyze your sources, synthesize information, organize your thoughts, and present them in a coherent and persuasive manner. As with a short essay, you must construct an argument with a thesis and supporting evidence, but in the case of a research paper, you will need to analyze and synthesize much more material. You will probably have more counterevidence to address as well. It is unrealistic to expect that one or two drafts will be sufficient to do justice to the project. Give yourself time to revise your writing.

4 Following Conventions of Writing in History

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Each academic discipline has its own practices, or conventions, that people writing in the discipline follow when engaged in a scholarly dialogue. These conventions are not hard-and-fast rules, but following them will make it easier for you to participate in an academic conversation in your field. Moreover, many historians are excellent stylists. Your instructor will pay attention to your writing, so your attempts to learn and follow the conventions of the discipline will be noticed — and worth the effort. This section first looks at general conventions of writing history papers and then turns to concerns of word choice and grammar.

4a. Considering the whole paper

4a-1. Your relationship to your subject

When you write a history paper, you are not engaged in creative writing. Rather, you are forming a relationship of sorts with real people and events whose integrity must be respected. It is useful to keep in mind several conventions historians have established for such relationships.

RESPECT YOUR SUBJECT. The people who lived in the past were not necessarily more ignorant or cruel (or, conversely, more innocent or moral) than we are. It is condescending, for example, to suggest that any intelligent or insightful person was “ahead of his or her time” (suggesting, of course, that he or she thought the same way we do).

DO NOT GENERALIZE. Remember that groups are formed of individuals. Do not assume that everyone who lived in

the past believed the same things or behaved the same way. Avoid broad generalizations, such as “the Middle Ages was an age of faith.” At best, such statements are clichés. More often than not, they are also wrong.

AVOID ANACHRONISM. An anachronistic statement is one in which an idea, event, person, or thing is represented in a way that is not consistent with its proper historical time. For example, “Despite the fact that bubonic plague can be controlled with antibiotics, medieval physicians treated their patients with ineffective folk remedies.” This sentence includes two anachronisms. First, although antibiotics are effective against bubonic plague, they had not yet been discovered in the fourteenth century; it is anachronistic to mention them in a discussion of the Middle Ages. Second, it is anachronistic to judge medieval medicine by modern standards. A more effective discussion of the medieval response to the bubonic plague would focus on fourteenth-century knowledge about health and disease, theories of contagion, and sanitation practices.

In short, you should not import the values, beliefs, and practices of the present into the past. Try to understand the people and events of the past in their own contexts.

BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN BIASES. We naturally choose to write about subjects that interest us. Historians should not, however, let their own concerns and biases direct the way they interpret the past. A student of early modern Europe, for example, might be dismayed by the legal, social, and economic limitations placed on women in that period. Reproaching sixteenth-century men for being “selfish and chauvinistic” might forcefully express such a student’s sense of indignation about what appears to modern eyes as unjust, but it is not a useful approach for the historian, who tries to understand the viewpoints of people in the past in the social context of the period under study.

4a-2. The introduction and thesis

The introductory paragraph of your paper is in many ways the most important one and, therefore, the most difficult to write. In your introduction, you must (1) let your readers know what your paper is about, (2) put the topic of your paper into context, and (3) state your thesis — the position

you are going to take on the topic. You must also attract your readers’ attention and interest. The opening paragraph, then, has to frame the rest of the paper, and it has to make readers want to continue reading.

There is no magic formula for writing an effective first paragraph. You should, however, keep these conventions in mind.

DO NOT OPEN WITH A GLOBAL STATEMENT. Unsure of how to start, many students begin their papers with phrases like “Throughout history” or “From the beginning of time” or “People have always wondered about. . . .” You should avoid broad generalizations like these. First, you cannot prove that they are true: How do you know what people have always thought or done? Second, these statements are so broad that they are virtually meaningless; they offer no specific points or details to interest readers. Finally, such statements are so general that they give readers no clue about the subject of your paper. In general, it is much more effective to begin with material that is specific to your topic.

For example, the following opening sentence comes from a student’s first draft of a paper on William Harvey, the seventeenth-century physician who discovered the circulation of blood:

From ancient times, people have always been interested in the human body and how it works.

Although, strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong with this sentence, it is not a particularly effective opening. For one thing, it is such a general statement that readers will be inclined to ask, “So what?” In addition, it gives readers no indication of what the paper is about. Will the essay examine ancient Greek medical theory? Chinese acupuncture? Sex education in twentieth-century American schools?

In revising the sentence, the student eliminated the general statement altogether and began instead with a description of the intellectual context of Harvey’s work:

For the scholars and physicians of sixteenth-century Europe, observation and experimentation began to replace authoritative texts as the most important source of information about human anatomy and physiology.

From this short sentence, readers learn four things about the subject of the paper: the time frame of the discussion

(the sixteenth century), the place (Europe), the people involved (scholars and physicians), and the topic (the relationship between authority and experience in the study of human physiology). Readers' curiosity is also piqued by the questions implied in the opening statement: Why did experimentation begin to replace authoritative texts? Was this change a subject of controversy? Who was involved? How did this change in method affect the science of biology and the practice of medicine? In other words, this opening sentence makes readers want to continue reading; they want to know the author's thesis.

INCLUDE YOUR THESIS IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH. If your opening sentence has been effective, it will make your readers want to know the main point of your paper, which you will state in the *thesis*. The introduction to a journal article or book may be long, even several paragraphs, and the author's thesis may appear anywhere within it. Until you become skilled in writing about history, however, it is best to keep your introduction short and to state your thesis in the first paragraph.

Your thesis must be more than a description of your topic or a statement of fact; it should inform readers of your interpretation of the materials you have read and the conclusions you have reached. (For additional information on the thesis, see p. 23.) The following is the first draft of a thesis statement from a student paper on Samuel George Morton, a nineteenth-century physician and scientist who wrote several influential treatises on craniometry, the nineteenth-century science of measuring the human skull:

Morton measured the size and shape of human skulls from various racial and ethnic groups, concluding that Caucasians had the largest skulls and were therefore superior to all other races.

This is not really a thesis at all. While it is an accurate description of what Morton did, it does not tell readers anything they couldn't learn from the most cursory reading of one of Morton's books.

Now look at the revised version of the thesis:

Morton and his contemporaries used his skull studies, which he said were objective and quantitative, to justify their belief in the superiority of the Caucasian race; however, a close examination of Morton's work reveals, as Stephen Jay Gould has suggested, that his supposedly

scientific data were created by his own prejudices and racism.

This version of the thesis provides more than a simple description of what Morton did or said. Having studied Morton's works thoroughly and carefully, the writer has now come to a conclusion: Despite appearances to the contrary, Morton's studies were not scientific, and his data-collecting procedures were biased by his prejudices. Moreover, this thesis also tells readers why the writer thinks his topic is historically significant: Morton's views are important because they provided his contemporaries with a seemingly scientific justification for racism. Finally, this thesis statement anticipates the type of argument that will follow: The paper examines Morton's skull studies, discusses the ways in which they appear to be scientific, demonstrates the ways in which they are not scientific, and reveals the hidden biases and assumptions behind them. For all of these reasons, the revised thesis is much more effective than the draft thesis.

PLAN TO REWRITE YOUR OPENING PARAGRAPH. If you are having trouble beginning your paper, write a rough, temporary opening paragraph, and return to it when you finish your first draft of the entire paper. The act of writing your draft will help you clarify your ideas, your topic, and your argument. It may also help solidify your thesis and your opening.

4a-3. The body

In your introduction, you present your subject and state your thesis. In subsequent paragraphs, you provide evidence for your thesis and answer any objections that could be made to it. The following advice will help you to write well-organized paragraphs and make your argument clear and convincing.

BEGIN EACH PARAGRAPH WITH A TOPIC SENTENCE. Each paragraph should have one driving idea, which is usually asserted in the first sentence, or *topic sentence*. If you have made an outline, your topic sentences will be drawn from the list you made of the main points you wish to cover in your paper. (For advice on making an outline, see p. 41.)

MAKE CLEAR CONNECTIONS BETWEEN IDEAS. Each body paragraph provides evidence for your thesis in the form of examples, statistics, and so on. To be convincing, however, your evidence must be clear and well organized. Transitional words and phrases tell your readers how the individual statements in your paragraph are connected. To choose transitions that are appropriate, you will need to consider how your ideas are related to each other. Here are some transitional words or phrases that you might use to indicate particular kinds of relationships:

- **To compare:** *also, similarly, likewise*
- **To contrast:** *on the other hand, although, nevertheless, despite, on the contrary, still, yet, regardless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, whereas, however, in spite of*
- **To add or intensify:** *also, in addition, moreover, furthermore, too, besides, and*
- **To show sequence:** *first* (and any other numerical adjectives), *last, next, finally, subsequently, later, ultimately*
- **To indicate an example:** *for example, for instance, specifically*
- **To indicate cause-and-effect relationships:** *consequently, as a result, because, accordingly, thus, since, therefore, so*

DO NOT WANDER OFF THE SUBJECT. If you include a lot of irrelevant information, you will lose momentum, and your readers will lose the thread of your argument. Be ruthless: Eliminate all extraneous material from the final draft of your paper, however interesting it may be. For instance, if you are writing about the role that Chinese laborers played in the westward expansion of the American railroads, do not spend three paragraphs discussing the construction of the steam locomotive. If your paper concerns the American government's treatment of Japanese citizens during World War II, do not digress into a discussion of naval tactics in the Pacific theater. Similarly, you should avoid repetition and wordy sentences.

WRITING PARAGRAPHS: AN EXAMPLE. Here is a paragraph from the first draft of a paper on Chinese relationships with foreigners during the Ming period:

The Chinese were willing to trade with barbarians. They distrusted foreigners. Jesuit missionaries were able to establish contacts in China. During the seventeenth

century, they acquired the patronage of important officials. They were the emperor's advisers. Chinese women bound their feet, a practice that many Europeans disliked. Relations between China and Europe deteriorated in the eighteenth century. The Jesuits were willing to accommodate themselves to Chinese culture. Chinese culture was of great interest to the scholars of Enlightenment Europe. Matteo Ricci learned about Chinese culture and became fluent in Mandarin. He adopted the robes of a Chinese scholar. He thought that Christianity was compatible with Confucianism. The Jesuit missionaries had scientific knowledge. In the eighteenth century, the papacy forbade Chinese Christians to engage in any form of ancestor worship.

This paragraph is very confusing. In the first place, it has no clear topic sentence; readers have to guess what the writer's main point is. This confusion is compounded by unclear connections between ideas; the paragraph lacks transitional words or phrases that alert readers to the connections that the writer sees between ideas or events. The paragraph is also poorly organized; the writer seems to move at random from topic to topic.

Here is a revised version of the same paragraph:

The Chinese of the Ming dynasty were deeply suspicious of foreigners; nevertheless, Jesuit missionaries were able to achieve positions of honor and trust in the imperial court, ultimately serving the emperor as scholars and advisers. At first glance, this phenomenon seems baffling; upon closer consideration, however, it becomes clear that the Jesuits' success was due to their willingness to accommodate themselves to Chinese culture. For example, one of the most successful of the early Jesuit missionaries, Matteo Ricci, steeped himself in Chinese culture and became fluent in Mandarin. To win the respect of the nobles, he also adopted the robes of a Chinese scholar. Moreover, he emphasized the similarities between Christianity and Chinese traditions. Because of their willingness to adapt to Chinese culture, Jesuit missionaries were accepted by the imperial court until the eighteenth century. Difficulties arose, however, when the papacy forbade Chinese Christians to engage in many traditional customs, including any form of ancestor worship. As a result of the church's increasing unwillingness to allow such practices, relations between China and Europe deteriorated.

This paragraph has been improved in several ways. First, a topic sentence, which is underlined, has been added to

the beginning. Readers no longer need to guess that this paragraph will address the apparent contrast between sixteenth-century Chinese suspicion of foreigners and the imperial court's acceptance of Jesuit missionaries.

Second, the author has clarified the connections between ideas by including transitional words and phrases. These transitions, which are italicized, illustrate several different kinds of relationships, including contrast, cause and effect, sequence, and so on, and allow readers to follow the writer's argument.

Third, the paragraph has been reorganized so that the relationships between events are clearer. For example, the revised paragraph states explicitly that relations between China and European missionaries deteriorated in the eighteenth century because the church became less accommodating to Chinese customs, a relationship obscured in the original paragraph by poor organization.

Finally, the writer has removed references to the practice of foot binding and to European interest in China during the Enlightenment. Both are interesting but irrelevant in a paragraph that deals with Chinese attitudes toward Europeans.

ANTICIPATE AND RESPOND TO COUNTEREVIDENCE AND COUNTERARGUMENTS. Historical issues are seldom clear-cut, and historians often disagree with each other. Effective papers acknowledge disagreement and differing viewpoints. If you discover information that does not support your thesis, do not suppress it. It is important to acknowledge *all* of your data. You should try to explain to your readers why your interpretation is valid, despite the existence of counterevidence, but do not imply that your interpretation is stronger than it is by eliminating data or falsifying your information.

A student writing about the French Revolution, for instance, might argue that the average Parisian worker became a revolutionary not as a result of reading the political arguments of the Enlightenment thinkers but rather from desperate economic need. But the student cannot ignore the fact that many Parisian workers had read such works and that Enlightenment thinkers were often quoted in the popular press. Rather, a successful paper would acknowledge these facts and attempt to show that economic need was a more important or more immediate catalyst for political action.

Remember, too, that it is important to treat opposing viewpoints with respect. It is perfectly legitimate to

disagree with the interpretations of other historians. In disagreeing, however, you should never resort to name-calling or oversimplifying or otherwise distorting opposing points of view. It is important to understand opposing arguments and respond to them fairly.

4a-4. The conclusion

Your paper should not come to an abrupt halt, and yet you do not need to conclude by summarizing everything that you have said in the body of the text. It is usually best to end your paper with a paragraph that states the most important conclusions you have reached about your subject and the reasons you think those conclusions are significant. You should avoid introducing new ideas or information in the conclusion. If an idea or fact is important to your argument, you should introduce and discuss it earlier; if it is not, leave it out altogether.

4b. Considering word choice and grammar

It is essential that your writing follow the rules of formal English grammar. Historians are just as concerned as English professors with grammatical issues such as comma placement, subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, misplaced modifiers, run-on sentences, and unclear antecedents. If you are using a computer, a grammar-check program will help you avoid some of these mistakes, but it is no substitute for learning the rules.

It is beyond the scope of this manual to cover the basic rules of grammar. Any good style guide or writing manual will offer plenty of advice for writing clear grammatical sentences. (See Appendix A for a list of guides.) The following major points are useful to keep in mind when you write in history.

4b-1. Word choice

The words that you choose to express yourself with are a reflection of your own style. Nevertheless, here are a few guidelines.

AVOID CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE, SLANG, AND JARGON. Because history papers are usually formal, you should use formal language rather than conversational

language and slang. For example, although it is perfectly acceptable in conversational English to say that someone "was a major player" in an event, this expression is too informal for a history paper. In addition, slang often sounds anachronistic: Historians do not usually describe an aggressive individual as being "in your face"; people are "killed," not "bumped off." Words with double meanings should be used only in their conventional sense: Use *cool* and *hot* to refer to temperature and *radical* to describe something extreme or on the political left. *Awesome* should generally be reserved for awe-inspiring things like Gothic cathedrals. You should also avoid jargon, or specialized language, which can often obscure your meaning.

MAKE YOUR LANGUAGE AS CLEAR AND SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE. In an effort to sound sophisticated, students sometimes use a thesaurus to find a "more impressive" word. The danger of this approach is that the new word might not mean quite what you intended. In general, you should use the simplest word that makes your meaning clear. Do not use a four-syllable word when a single syllable will do. Do not use five words (such as *due to the influence of*) where you can use one (*because*).

AVOID BIASED LANGUAGE. Always take care to avoid words that are gender-biased or that have negative connotations for particular racial, ethnic, or religious groups. You should never use expressions that are clearly derogatory. In addition, you should be aware that many words that were once acceptable are now deemed inappropriate. For example, the use of masculine words or pronouns to refer to both men and women, once a common practice, is now considered sexist by many. Use *humankind* or *people* rather than *mankind*, and do not use a masculine pronoun to refer to people of both genders.

In an attempt to avoid sexist language, students sometimes find themselves making a grammatical error instead. For example, in trying to eliminate the masculine pronoun *his* in the sentence "Each individual reader should form *his* own opinion," a student may write, "Each individual reader should form *their* own opinion." The problem with this new version is that the pronoun *their* is plural, while the antecedent, the word *individual*, is singular. The first version of the sentence is undesirable because it sounds sexist, and the second is unacceptable

because it is ungrammatical. A grammatically correct revision is "Individual readers should form their own opinions." In this sentence, the antecedent (*readers*) and the pronoun (*their*) are both plural.

It is also important to realize that you cannot always rely on the books you are reading to alert you to biased language. For example, the author of a fairly recent study of the origins of racism consistently refers to Asian people as "Orientals," a term that was not generally thought derogatory at the time of the book's publication. Since then, however, the word *Oriental* has come to be seen as having a Western bias and should therefore not be used. Another example is the term *Negro*, which once was a respectful term used to refer to people of African descent. Today, the preferred term is *black* or *African American*.

NOTE: You cannot correct the language of your sources. If you are quoting directly, you must use the exact wording of your source, including any racist or sexist language. If you are paraphrasing or summarizing a paragraph containing biased language, you might want to use nonbiased language when it doesn't distort the sense of the source. Otherwise, put biased terms in quotation marks to indicate to your readers that the words are your source's and not yours.

4b-2. Tense

The events that historians write about took place in the past; therefore, historians conventionally use the past tense. Students are sometimes tempted to use the historical present tense for dramatic effect or to make the scene they are describing come alive, as in this example from a student paper:

The battle rages all around him, but the squire is brave and acquits himself well. He defends his lord fearlessly and kills two of the enemy. As the fighting ends, he kneels before his lord on the battlefield, the bodies of the dead and dying all around him. His lord draws his sword and taps it against the squire's shoulders. The squire has proven his worth, and this is his reward; he is now a knight.

This use of the present may be an effective device if you are writing fiction, but it is awkward in a history paper. First, readers might become confused about whether the events under discussion happened in the past or in the

present, especially if the paper includes modern assessments of the issue. Second, use of the present makes it easy for the writer to fall prey to anachronism (see p. 44). Perhaps more important, writing in the present sounds artificial; in normal conversation, we talk about events that happened in the past in the past tense. The same approach is also best for writing.

The present tense is used, however, when discussing the contents of documents, artifacts, or works of art because these still exist in the present. Note, for example, the appropriate use of past and present tenses in the following description:

Columbus sailed across an "ocean sea" far greater than he initially imagined. The admiral's *Journal* tells us what Columbus thought he would find: a shorter expanse of water, peppered with hundreds of hospitable islands.

The events of the past are referred to in the past tense (*sailed, imagined, thought*), and the contents of the *Journal* are referred to in the present (*tells*).

4b-3. Voice

In general, historians prefer the active rather than the passive voice. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence is also the actor:

Duke William of Normandy conquered England in 1066.

By the seventh century, the Chinese had invented gunpowder, which they used to make fireworks.

Emperor Gia Long, with French military and naval support, united Vietnam in 1802.

In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not the actor but is acted on:

England was conquered in 1066.

The process for making gunpowder was known in the seventh century.

Vietnam was united in 1802.

Several difficulties arise when you use the passive voice. Persistent use of the passive voice can make writing sound dull. More important, however, the passive voice can often obscure meaning and create unnecessary confusion. And

as you can see from these examples, readers cannot always tell who the actor is. We are not told, for example, who conquered England or who invented gunpowder.

Use of the passive voice also allows writers to avoid the complexities of some historical issues. In the second example, for instance, moving from the passive to the active voice forces the writer to be more specific: The Chinese invented gunpowder, but they used it for making fireworks and not for firing weapons. Similarly, in the third example, use of the active voice makes the writer think about *who* united Vietnam in 1802, which leads to a consideration of the relationship between Emperor Gia Long and the French military in bringing about that unity.

In addition, using the passive voice in the expressions "it can be argued that" or "it has been argued that" is equivocal. The first expression suggests that the writer is unwilling to take responsibility for his or her arguments. If your evidence leads you to a certain conclusion, state it clearly. Using passive expressions like "it can be argued that" suggests that you are not really sure that your evidence is convincing. Similarly, the expression "it has been argued that" confuses readers: Who has made this argument? How many people and in what context? Readers must have this information to evaluate your argument. Moreover, use of this expression can result in plagiarism. If someone or several persons have argued a particular point, you should identify them in your text itself and in a citation.

This is not to say, however, that you should never use the passive voice. Here, for example, is a description of the Holocaust (verbs in the passive voice have been italicized):

Hitler engaged in the systematic and ruthless murder of the Jewish people. In 1933, Jews *were forbidden* to hold public office; by 1935, they *were deprived* of citizenship. In all, over six million Jews *were killed* as part of Hitler's "final solution."

In this passage, the writer wants to draw readers' attention to the recipients of the action — the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. The persons acted on are more important than the actor. The passive voice, which focuses attention on the victims, is therefore appropriate here.

The passive voice, then, can be effective, but it should be used only occasionally and for a specific reason.

4b-4. Use of the pronouns I, me, and you

Until recently, most professional historians used the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *you* sparingly, if at all. This convention has been changing, however, and these pronouns are beginning to appear more regularly in history books and journal articles. Although many instructors still prefer that students avoid personal pronouns whenever possible, an increasing number of professors find their use not only acceptable but actually preferable to more labored constructions like "this evidence leads one to conclude that." Since the conventions governing the use of personal pronouns are in flux, it is best to consult your instructor about his or her preferences.

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Quoting and Documenting Sources

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Any history paper you write reflects your careful reading and analysis of primary and secondary sources. This section offers general guidance in incorporating source material into your writing through paraphrase and quotation. It also explains the conventions historians use to cite and document sources and will help you avoid the serious offense of plagiarism.

5a. Using quotations

Quotations are an important part of writing in history. Quotations from primary sources provide evidence and support for your thesis. Quotations from secondary sources tell your readers that you are well informed about the current state of research on the issue that you are examining. However, some students go to extremes, producing papers that are little more than a series of quotations loosely strung together. No matter how interesting and accurate the quotations, such a paper is no substitute for your own analysis and discussion of sources. In general, you should minimize your use of quotations, and you should choose the quotations you do use with great care.

The following guidelines will help you to decide when to quote and how to use quotations effectively.

DO NOT QUOTE IF YOU CAN PARAPHRASE. Summarizing or paraphrasing in your own words is usually preferable