THE UNIVERSITY of ADELAIDE

History Essay Guidelines

Planning and Writing a Successful History Essay

Establish what you are being asked to argue about.

Because an essay calls for an argument, you need to read the question carefully to determine what you are being asked, and what responses you can make - supporting, rejecting or offering qualified (dis)agreement. It is absolutely essential that you understand the meaning of the essay topic. For example, an essay on popular religion in the Middle Ages would require you to understand what is meant by "popular", what is meant by "religion", and what is meant by "the Middle Ages". If you find that you do not understand some aspects of the topic, confer with your tutor.

Once you understand the topic, you can determine which types of evidence are relevant to it. Returning to the example of popular religion in the Middle Ages, evidence relating to the nobility would not be relevant, nor would the problem of papal supremacy and the causes of the Reformation. This preliminary process enables you to pose questions relating to your topic, so that when you begin to read the result is not an aimless exercise in ploughing through material. On the contrary, the result should be a critical search for the answers to your questions.

Read for the essay in order to collect evidence.

Read any primary sources that may be set in class several times. You should also read what other people have thought about the subject, but this should never be a substitute for your own thoughts. Formulate these, at least in outline, before you read the secondary sources, or you may find yourself simply parroting the opinions of others. Read widely in the secondary literature. This will give you a deep understanding of the topic and help you to better analyse your sources. You are being asked for your point of view, your analysis of the topic.

The bibliographies issued with essay assignments usually list the basic books on particular topics and are designed to provide you with a starting point on the question, but other relevant books and articles will not be included. Footnotes and bibliographies in these basic books and the subject catalogue in the Barr Smith Library will guide you to additional material. The really successful essays usually go beyond the books listed for essay assignments.

Historical material can be divided into five different categories.

1. **Textbooks or reference books.** These seek to provide a general introduction to a historical period with an emphasis on telling the reader what happens rather than why. Examples are Lewis Spitz, *The Renaissance*, and F.K. Crowley, ed., *A New History of Australia*.
2. **Monographs**. These focus on a particular set of problems about a period or a society rather than giving a broad general survey. They put forward a closely argued thesis

and support their arguments with detailed evidence usually drawn from primary sources. The best monographs challenge established opinions on problems. Examples are Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, and L.L. Robson, *The Convict Settler of Australia*.

3. **Interpretive essays.** These take the form of a short book. They are usually written by scholars of considerable experience in a given field, who stand back a little from the close and detailed arguments of the monograph and article to offer a new synthesis of the findings of these works. Interpretive essays usually acknowledge their debt to the research of other scholars, whose works are cited in a bibliography attached to the essay. Examples are Christopher Brooke, *The Structure of Medieval Society* and G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance*. At times the difference between a monograph and an interpretive essay is so fine as to be indistinguishable. For this reason some historians prefer to group them together under a more general title such as "specialist books".
4. **Articles**. These are a little like monographs in the sense that they usually raise narrowly defined problems and seek to answer them by a detailed examination of evidence drawn from a variety of sources, very often unpublished. Like monographs, they are likely to challenge established opinion about particular problems, and they are tightly argued. Articles tend to be short (usually 10 to 40 pages) and appear in journals like *Past and Present*, *Journal of Modem History*, *American Historical Review* and *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. The best of these articles are often collected in such volumes as J. Kaplow, *New Perspectives on the French Revolution*, Trevor Aston, *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660: Essays frorn Past and Present* and Denis Hay, *The Renaissance Debate*. All the above are collectively known as secondary sources.
5. **Primary Sources**. These are the raw material of history. The primary sources from which a historian works may take many forms: they might be personal records like diaries and letters; institutional records like documents of the church or parliamentary debates and papers, the minutes of important committees or the rate books of municipal councils; published records like books, newspapers and pamphlets; oral reminiscences by participants; or material records such as buildings or documents. Published anthologies have made some of this material readily available. Examples are J.H. Stewart, ed., *Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, J.M. Porter, ed., *Luther Selected Political Writings*, C.M.G. Clark, ed., *Select Documents in Australian History* (2 vols.).

Each kind of material demands its own particular approach by the reader, and it is important to establish the kind of book you are reading before you get into it. Check the list of contents and the preface or introduction, for it is through these that the author conveys her intentions. **It is a good idea to start work on an essay with a basic text or reference book,**

and try to locate the question being studied in its wider historical context. From then you can move on to the monographs, interpretive essays, and articles.

When you have completed the preliminary process, you will find that much of the basic reference book was irrelevant to your topic and that the answers given to your questions were superficial. As you move from the basic reference books to the other material, the answers become more complete as well as complicated, and as a consequence your questions will need to be revised. For example, the topic on popular religion in the Middle Ages might have led you to pose the question, "what were the religious beliefs of the peasants?" The basic reference books would provide you with a list of these beliefs, but the other sources would suggest other questions such as 'What is the difference between religion and superstition?" "Were the peasants Christian or pagan?" and "Was their Christianity a thin veneer hiding a pagan soul?" It is through this process of posing and answering questions that the successful essay takes shape.

If your note-taking is guided by this process of posing and answering questions, you are more likely to avoid the tedious business of accumulating vast piles of notes taken practically word for word from the books. Copious, uncritical notes can lead to a serious problem. It is probable that you will copy down practically unchanged the author's own words, without making it clear in your notes that the words are not yours. The danger is that you will then reproduce the author's words as your own in your essay, without quotation marks (inverted commas) or any other form of acknowledgement; this is plagiarism. There are two simple procedures for avoiding this risk: (1) when you are taking notes, try to record the substance of an author's arguments as concisely as possible and in your own words, jotting down at the same time any supporting evidence that you consider important; (2) if you feel it is necessary to copy any passages in the author's own words - because they are particularly well expressed, say, or because you sense the danger of distorting her views if you attempt to summarise them - then be absolutely certain that you put these passages in quotation marks. It is then an easy matter to separate your words from the author's when you write your essay.

Formulate your own position, and muster your evidence.

From your reading, you should now be ready to decide what you will argue and how you will do it.

Essays come in many shapes and sizes, and may legitimately use any of a wide variety of forms to achieve any of a wide variety of effects. For example, some essays chiefly explore or clarify problems, without attempting to solve them. Some make systematic comparisons between different historical processes, forces or ideas. Some may be chiefly expressive, trying to recapture and communicate particular moods or concerns or qualities of past

societies. In using one particular form as an example in the following paragraph, we do not suggest that it is the only or necessarily the best model for your essays.

A common and effective kind of essay is the kind that attempts to prove the validity of a hypothesis. For example, suppose the reading on popular religion in the Middle Ages led you to the conclusion that peasants were more pagan than Christian. This conclusion is your hypothesis, and your essay must present evidence in support of it. In other words, you are trying to convince your tutor that your conclusion is the correct one.

Organisation and Structure

Good organization is essential for the successful achievement of this goal. To put it quite simply, an essay needs a beginning, middle, and an end, or in other words an introduction, body and conclusion. Before writing, prepare an outline. In making notes about what you will say in your essay, keep in mind that:

1. the purpose of the **Introduction** is to state the position you will be taking and to tell the reader how you will address the subject. The introduction places the topic in historical context and points towards the evidence that will be given in the text. All this should be contained in one fully developed paragraph (one sentence does not make a paragraph!).
2. the purpose of the **Body** of the essay is to present the pieces of evidence that support your essay, and to deal with any evidence to the contrary. The body must convince the reader of the validity of your hypothesis by developing an argument, and in order to be effective an argument contains several main points supported by evidence. Each main point of your argument with supporting evidence ideally constitutes one fully developed paragraph. For an essay of 1500 words, four or five such paragraphs are sufficient; longer essays require more points of argument and/or more fully developed evidence. For some topics and some hypotheses the points of argument will be very evident. For these cases, your only problem will be arranging the points in a sequence that will best support your hypothesis. Other topics and other hypotheses will suggest a vast range of points. For these cases, you will have to decide which points are the most pertinent. Sometimes you may have to decide whether your hypothesis is best supported by a topical format, or a format based on sources or chronology.
3. in writing the **Conclusion** of the essay it is usual to summarise the evidence presented and to restate your argument, confident that you have now provided adequate evidence to justify your position. A good conclusion to an essay is more than a mere summary of the argument, although the main points can be reviewed without being repetitive.

For example:

An essay on popular-religion in the Middle Ages could begin by noting the traditional view of the period as an age-of-faith and by claiming that this view is based on the study of the educated elite; it was much different for the mass of illiterate peasants. This is what is meant by placing the hypothesis in its historical context. As for the body, that is, the place where you make your argument, a chronological format would be suitable, but perhaps a format based on sources would be the better of the two. Hence, the first paragraph of the text details the evidence from inquisition records; the second from popular literature such as folk tales and songs, the third from upper class assessments of peasant superstitions, and the fourth analyses demographic evidence such as illegitimacy rates. These four fully developed paragraphs should be analytical and argumentative, designed to convince the reader that the hypothesis is correct. Finally, the conclusion could return to the statements made in the introduction and contrast the "age of faith" with the "age of superstition".

How to Say it in formal writing

Try to be direct, clear and interesting. Simple words and constructions and short sentences are often best, but variety does prevent boredom. It is important to integrate quotations into the fabric of your argument.

Use appropriate conjunctions and punctuation. You should always quote accurately, but for the purpose of integrating quotations you may make minor changes (you may change a pronoun, for example) as long as you enclose all such changes in square brackets.

Formal writing is always polite. It is not acceptable to use masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to men and women. For example, “man is a literate being.” To avoid sexist language, the plural is often the best solution grammatically. For example, “people are literate beings.”

Avoid writing the way you speak. For example: “I reckon this is a very interesting question because everyone knows that this fantastic novel has a lot to do with his own life, but I don’t think it’s that easy to read.” Written language differs from spoken language in terms of:

- **Vocabulary**: avoid the use of slang, abbreviations, or heavily attitudinal words;
- **Logic**: do not hang all statements off your own opinion (“I think that”);
- **Sentence structure**: sentences should not be long chains of clauses linked by “because” or “and”; use full stops liberally;
- **Transitions**: make use of the written language tools offered by words such as “First, second,” “on the other hand," “in conclusion,” which help the reader (and writer) to follow the logical organisation of the material;
- **Substance**: avoid sharing truisms or inanities with your reader. For example, “literature is really important.”

Many students have difficulty with the following:

- **Sentence construction**. Make sure that the subject of the clause or sentence is clear, and that each sentence has a finite verb. If these terms mean nothing to you, now is your chance to find out - your tutor is there to be asked.
- **Paragraphing**. Each paragraph should begin with a relatively short "topic sentence" which summarises or introduces the theme of the paragraph. Well-designed paragraphs of four to five sentences help the reader to follow your argument.
- **Punctuation**. Use punctuation to mark off elements of meaning and designate their respective values. Be scrupulous with apostrophes.
- **Cliches**. Avoid cliches and colloquialisms - such words and phrases have been devalued.

Presentation and other tricky bits

Acronyms, Numbers and Dates

- The names of government agencies, associations, unions and other organisations are often abbreviated. Commonly, acronyms are in full capitals with no periods. For example: UN, OPEC, and YMCA.
- Spell out all numbers from one to one hundred and any of the whole numbers followed by hundred, thousand, hundred thousand, and so on. For example: The population of the district was less than four million; there were 365 people in the graduating class.
- The same style should be used for all dates throughout the text. For example: On 28 June 1970 the convocation *Pacem in Maribus* was held.
- Particular centuries should be spelled out. For example: seventeenth-century literature; the eighteenth century. Decades are expressed as one word without an apostrophe. For example: 1890s, 1930s.

Spelling and Possessive Case

Always use a spell-checker to correct spelling and grammar but do not rely on it exclusively.

Use Australian/UK forms in preference to American (-ize not -ise forms; -our not -or forms).

In general, form the possessive of single words by adding an apostrophe and *s*: For example, Jones's book; Marx's ideology. Note there are some exceptions to this rule, including long words ending in *s* and some proper names ending in *s*. For example: for righteousness' sake; Jesus' ministry; the Bradleys' house.

Confusingly, the possessive of the pronoun "it" is simply "its" - with no apostrophe. "It's" is the contracted form of "it is."

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Quotations

Essays must be your own work, that is, they must be written in your own words, presenting your own analysis and arguments. When you use a quotation, use it to reinforce your essay - not to save you from writing it. A "scissors and paste" collection of long quotations connected in a cursory fashion is not acceptable. Only use quotes if they are directly relevant and fit appropriately into your line of argument. All direct quotations must be accurately reproduced, that is, follow the original exactly.

- If quotations are short (about three lines or less) they can be incorporated into your text, enclosed in double quotation marks. For example: The President of the Miners Federation stated: "The rejection of our claim for annual leave shows the employers' bias in the arbitration process." He then called for mass pithead meetings.
- For a quotation within a quotation, single quotation marks are used. Periods and commas should be placed inside quotation marks; semicolons and colons go outside. For example: "I'm not convinced," said the miner, "that he really meant 'nothing.'"
- Quotations longer than three lines should be indented and single-spaced (the rest of the text being double-spaced). Indented quotations do not need quotation marks.
- Do not use ellipsis points (three dots) before or after a quotation. If an omission occurs within a quotation you should indicate that something has been omitted by three ellipsis points.
- If you are quoting someone else's quotation, your footnote reference must indicate both the original and the secondary source of your quotation. Do not cite as your source an original document unless you have read that document. For example: [1.]Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur" (The death of an author), *Manteia*, vol. 5 (1968); trans. Stephen Heath in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147; quoted in Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 372-73, n.9.
- (In fact - why not look up the original and create your own citation? It really is much easier.)

Why Use Footnotes?

In general, footnotes serve four main purposes:

- To cite the authority for specific facts, opinions, paraphrases or exact quotations;
- To make cross-references;
- To make incidental comments or amplify a point in the text (though it is bad style to do this too often);
- To make acknowledgements.

Footnotes are necessary to acknowledge all quotations and key ideas from your sources that are not common knowledge. For example, "The Bastille was stormed on 14 July 1789" is common knowledge and does not need to be referenced. On the other hand, "Some

historians argue that the storming of the Bastille had little impact on the overall outcome of the revolution" refers to scholarly opinion and should be supported with relevant citations.

Insert the footnote number at the end of the sentence to which it refers and number consecutively from the beginning to the end of the essay. Footnotes can contain references to more than one source. These are separated by a semi-colon. For ease of marking and reading, put footnotes at the bottom of each page, not at the end of the essay. For every thousand words you write you should generally supply somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five footnotes.

Essays submitted in History should follow the referencing conventions known as the University of Chicago style as outlined in Marius, Richard and Melvin E. Page. *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. 8th edn. New York: Pearson, 2012. Copies of this guide are available in the Bookshop and students undertaking a history major are advised to purchase their own copies. Honours and postgraduate students should also consult the full version of the style as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Copies are available in the reference section of the library and on the web.

Other Points About Footnotes

- Failure to acknowledge another author's words or ideas is dishonest and is one of the cardinal sins in essay writing in History. It is called **plagiarism**, and may attract serious penalties.
- You will often find that the notes in the works you read can lead to valuable additional sources for your own research. Therefore, you, in turn, should lead the reader to your sources. This strengthens the authority of your work.
- In order to be able to construct footnotes, it is essential to keep a note of the name of the author, the book or article and the number of the page where the key point or quotation is to be found. Keep this information in the margin or in the text of your notes so that you can easily write your footnotes along with the text of your essay.
- Do not quote from encyclopedias or from your lecture or tutorial notes. Also, avoid non-scholarly web-sites. They are not acceptable sources of reference.

Why does an Essay need a Bibliography?

In conjunction with footnotes, a bibliography allows your reader or marker to identify and verify the information provided in your essay. The bibliography lists the sources used in writing the essay; it should not be a list of everything in the library which is relevant to the topic.

General Instructions

- Place the bibliography on a separate sheet at the end of the essay.

Include all books and articles consulted and which appear in your footnotes whether actual quotations are taken from them or not; never list an item that you have not actually read or noted within your paper.

Divide the Bibliography into Primary Sources and Secondary Sources. A primary source is a document or other artifact that is contemporary with the historical events described in your essay. Secondary sources are sources that are not eyewitness or contemporary records but were written and published by historians and other scholars who were not present at the time of the events they describe.

Within these categories, a strict alphabetical arrangement according to the surnames of the authors should be used. When there are two or more authors' names, only the first is inverted in the bibliography.

Note that the form of reference for a bibliography entry differs from that used in a footnote.

Further reading

The Chicago Manual of Style. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers Of Research Papers*, 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999.

Lester, James D. *The Essential Guide To Writing Research Papers*. New York: Longman, 1999.

Marius, Richard and Melvin E. Page. *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. 8th edn. Boston: Longman, 2012.

Mauch, James E. *Guide to the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: A Handbook For Students and Faculty*, 4th ed. New York : M. Dekker, 1998.

Peters, Pam. *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Peters, Pam. *The Macquarie Student Writers Guide*. Milton, Qld.: Jacaranda, 1989.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations,* 6th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Li, Xia and Nancy B. Crane. *Electronic Styles: A Handbook for Citing Electronic Information*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 1996.