

Tips for Writing History Papers

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1. **Basic Characteristics.** A good history paper should have several basic characteristics:

- it should have a sustained argument;
- it should be thorough, considering all of the most important examples and covering all the most relevant topics;
- it should flow well, with proper transitions to move you from topic to topic or from one stage of argument to another; and
- it should be well-written, with no serious grammar or stylistic problems.

2. **A Good Introduction.** Above all, you should write a good introduction. Your introduction should:

- introduce the problem or question that you are dealing with;
- provide any necessary background to make the problem understandable;
- if you have time, provide information that will make the problem or question interesting to the general reader;
- finally, end with a thesis, which is usually a one-sentence summary of your take on the problem or question, which will then be the basis for your argument. You should try to make the thesis as concrete and detailed as possible, which will often mean briefly mentioning some of the basis themes or evidence that you will cover in your paper.

The length of your introduction will vary depending on the length of your paper. For a 5-7 page paper, shoot for a long paragraph, and no more than two shorter paragraphs. This would usually mean one-half to two-thirds of a page. For a 10-15 page paper, your introduction should be probably about a page, perhaps a little longer. Remember, at the book length, a manuscript usually has a whole chapter as an introduction.

3. **Thoroughness.** Writing papers for history classes is often different from writing them for literature classes. We are interested generally in making historical arguments based on events, trends, characteristics, or other pieces of relevant historical information. Above all, though, historians believe in thoroughness. This means that all relevant information should be covered, even if you have to do so only briefly. This is very different, I know, from many English courses, where you are often asked to focus on one thing and do it well, even if it means ignoring other relevant areas.

3. **Define Basic Terms or Key Concepts.** Write as if your sole audience wasn't the professor, but was an audience of college-educated people. This means you should explain enough to make clear to your reader all the key concepts and events that are necessary to understand your paper. This is done just in case your reader does not know much about your topic; they may also need reminding in case they have not considered the topic for many years. At the very least, it serves to establish some common ground between you and the reader that you can build on in making your argument. You can, however, use an educated vocabulary and a complex writing style that you would hope that college-educated people would be able to handle.

4. **Check for Basic Grammar or Spelling Errors.** Although the spelling- and grammar-checkers now commonly available on most computers can be helpful, don't depend on them to fix all of your mistakes. They normally can't tell when you are simply using the incorrect, though correctly spelled, word. (The classic example: "I don't *now* why I make so many mistakes.") Also, these checkers generally have a hard time dealing with extremely complex sentences. Finally, they won't help you make your writing more precise or concise. Every college student should have a grammar book and dictionary readily available. For the former, I normally recommend Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, but there are other very good ones.

5. **Using Past Tense.** Unlike in many English papers, it is alright (and usually preferable) to use the past tense (as well as the present and past perfect tenses). Literature scholars use the present tense regularly to make their writing more vivid and intense; historians, alas, deal with the past, and so we can't get around the past tenses. The main exception is when we are discussing what *other historians* think; in this case, we too often use the present tense.

Note: Remember, the past has a past too. When talking about events before the past event you are currently discussing, the proper tense is the past perfect (for example, "had gone" "had already changed", etc.)

6. Common Basic Mistakes.

a. History books are *not* novels. You can refer to them as books or works, but not as novels.

b. In history papers, we frequently use several hyphenated adjectives:

- centuries

Example: *Nineteenth-century society was divided into several classes.*

However, used as a noun, this would not be hyphenated: *In the nineteenth century, society was divided into several classes.*

- social classes

Example: *working-class norms, middle-class lifestyle, etc.*

Again, though, used as a noun, these would not be hyphenated: *The working class in England was faced with a very rough life.*

c. You normally don't need a comma between two nouns if the second *specifies* the first. Just think of the phrase "My uncle Joe is very nice." Joe specifies uncles, and no comma is necessary. This is not the same thing as an appositive, which *renames* the previous noun, in which you do need commas: *The boy next door, Joe, needs a haircut.* The difference is that in the first case we are dealing with essential meaning, in the second case the meaning of the sentence does not radically change if you took out the appositive.

Example: *The sixteenth-century humanist Loy Le Roy wrote many influential works.*

However, you could write: One sixteenth-century humanist, Loy Le Roy, described some of the advances of the age.

Another example: *Machiavelli's political tract The Prince has not lost its power since it was written in the sixteenth century.*

Here, by writing the alternative, the meaning changes entirely: *Machiavelli's political tract, The Prince, has not lost its power since it was written in the sixteenth century.* This implies that The Prince is the only political tract that he wrote, which is just wrong.

d. Remember, "its" (along with "yours", "ours") is possessive, while "it's" is a contraction for "it is."

e. "Lead" is an element with the atomic number 82; "led" is the past tense of "to lead."

f. Also, "bourgeois" can be used as an adjective (for example, bourgeois culture, bourgeois life, bourgeois norms) or as a noun when referring to a single individual; normally, though, we are referring to the whole class of people, in which case we use the term "bourgeoisie" to refer to the class.