

Writing History Essays

Writing history essays is much different from writing literature. In literature and other fiction, readers are drawn to twists in the narrative, surprise endings, a flowery language. When writing non-fiction, these strategies are counterproductive. You should state your argument (aka the thesis) in the introduction. It should be clear from the beginning what your essay is about, what point you are making, and the entire essay should focus on that point. Similarly, simple and concise writing is usually the clearest and most readable. In other words, avoid flowery language.

While writing history essays is not that different from writing in other non-fiction disciplines, historical essays have their own particularities. First and foremost, historical essays are historically focused. This means that they are focused on a specific time period, and their arguments are focused on a specific time period. In other words, the argument should not be applicable to other periods of time.

Making an Argument

An argument is more than an opinion. An opinion reflects personal preferences and does not expect to be supported with evidence, such as my favorite color is blue, coffee tastes good, or killing is wrong. These statements, when made, expect to stand alone without qualification, support, or contradiction.

An argument is an assertion meant to persuade the reader based on evidence. Most non-fiction texts you read make an argument. Some of these arguments might be philosophical arguments that use abstract logic and reason to support it. One might take the opinion that “killing is bad” and turn it into the argument that “while we should never diminish the taking of a life, not all killing should be treated the same.” One might then bring to bear the different moral principles surrounding the motivations, for instance, in killing a deer for food vs. killing to defend one’s life, vs. accidentally killing a person in a fight vs. intentionally killing a person. Someone else might argue that “killing is always wrong, regardless of what you are killing or the circumstances surrounding it.” That person might trot out their own moral logic that attempts to demonstrate that the divisions between types of killing are social constructions meant to justify our actions. Regardless, the point here is that these two assertions are much different than the simple opinion that “killing is bad,” which stands on its own as a statement of opinion. Indeed, I am currently making an argument about what an argument is (see the first sentence of this paragraph).

Frequently, we overlook arguments as interesting introductory statements—or at least I did when I was an undergraduate—but they are commonly stated explicitly and made plain at the beginning of the text. For

instance, in an article titled “Mongols in the World,” the author makes the argument very clear from the beginning: “Such a view [that the Mongols were barbarians] has diverted attention from the considerable contributions the Mongols made to 13th- and 14th-century civilization. Though the brutality of the Mongols’ military campaigns ought not to be downplayed or ignored, neither should their influence on Eurasian culture be overlooked.”¹ In other words, the author argues that the Mongols had a significant influence on 13th- and 14th-century civilization and Eurasian culture. The author then goes on to organize the rest of the paper around the particular positions that prove the argument: the Mongols supported foreign contact and exchange; they supported trade and East-West contacts; they improved the status of merchants; they instituted a period of sustained peace throughout much of Eurasia (or the Pax Mongolica), etc. The authors of the primary sources are frequently (if not always) making arguments themselves, but they are not always as obvious. When you read, search for these arguments. Ask yourself, what is the point of this chapter, section, letter, or video? The answer is likely the argument. You can do the same for your essays. Ask yourself, what am I trying to say? Your answer should be articulated as an assertion in your thesis statement (argument) somewhere in the introduction (preferably at the end of the introduction). When you are done, ask if the rest of the paper supports what you were trying to say.

Historical Arguments

When writing history essays, arguments need to be historical. Historical arguments are not philosophical arguments. For instance, our hypothetical arguments about whether all types/contexts of killing are ethically equivalent are philosophical. They use logic, reason, and ethics alone to make statements of morality. Historians use evidence from historical documents to support arguments.

Moreover, historians do not argue things were good or bad (which are problematic statements to support with evidence because they are relative to morals). Historians might argue that things could have benefited or been detrimental to society due to their measurable impacts on that society. For instance, while I would agree that Nazi Germany was a bad governmental regime, I do not think that such a statement is a valuable historical argument because it forces us to get into the philosophical discussion of what is good or bad. Hopefully, we could all agree that the Nazis fell into the wrong category. Still, to prove such an argument about the Nazis’ “badness,” we would have to engage in the philosophical discussion of state acts of violence and their various ethical dimensions. This is an entirely non-historical discussion. It is not rooted in the specific context of 1930s-1940s Germany.

On the other hand, a historical thesis would argue that the policies of Nazi Germany in the pursuit of an exclusive nationalistic state were detrimental to the German people. Nazi policies caused significant trauma for the minority communities—especially the Jewish community—that the regime sought to purge from the German nation. These policies were also detrimental to the rest of German society. They produced a significant brain drain from society. To prove this argument, one could discuss the lived experience of the minorities, and especially Jewish, communities (and those who tried to support them) targeted by the Nazis for forced emigration, compulsory labor, and, finally, extermination. Then one could cite the significant numbers of the German intelligentsia that fled Germany during the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime, as well as the purging of the same class from positions of influence when the Nazis attained power. Such an

¹“Mongols in World History,” 1.

argument avoids philosophical discussions of morality while also demonstrating the essence intended by the original statement that Nazi Germany was wrong.

Good Arguments Predict the Essay.

After someone reads the argument, s/he should understand what the rest of the paper is about. For instance, let us return to the argument about the Mongols: “Such a view [that the Mongols were barbarians] has diverted attention from the considerable contributions the Mongols made to 13th- and 14th-century civilization. Though the brutality of the Mongols’ military campaigns ought not to be downplayed or ignored, neither should their influence on Eurasian culture be overlooked.”² This argument is okay, but I would suggest that it is not particularly informative. It positions the argument within the context of what others have said [or the popular misconception] about the Mongols, which helps the reader understand the significance of the author’s argument. As readers, however, we do not know what the paper is about. The rest of the paper is about how Mongol conquests and rule (though brutal) ushered in an unprecedented period of foreign cultural, intellectual, and economic exchange. Articulating those points explicitly would better predict the rest of the paper in the argument. The reader would understand not only that the Mongols influenced Eurasian civilization but how they did so.

Good Questions Make Good Arguments.

Responding to a question is a helpful hint in making sound, informative arguments. For instance, for the Mongols’ argument, one might simply ask, “Why were the Mongols important?” I do not think the response, “because the Mongols influenced Eurasian culture,” would be adequate. I do not think the person asking the question would find that response particularly illuminating. If you said, instead, that “Mongol conquests and rule (though brutal) ushered in an unprecedented period of foreign cultural, intellectual, and economic exchange.” The response might be, “Oh really? Tell me more.”

The essay does not have to state every single issue that the essay will discuss, and it should not restate the question in the answer. For instance, I am never a fan of the three-part argument. Something had an impact during some period by doing things one, two, and three. This is an argument, but try to consider what those three things create when combining them. The above argument does that. It does not state each way the Mongols connected Eurasia (supporting foreign contact/exchange, supporting merchants, and supporting diplomatic contacts with the West). It combines those ideas into the idea of connecting Eurasia culturally, intellectually, and economically.

So, when you make an argument, imagine it responding to a question. Then, support your argument with evidence from the readings and videos provided in the unit’s content folder. Finally, organize that support (evidence) in a logical manner that helps prove your argument.

Here are some links to other resources for theses:

- [Thesis Advice from UCLA](#)

²“Mongols in World History,” 1.

- [Thesis Advice from U. of Iowa](#)

Organizing Essays

Organization is crucial to any essay. It will determine if your essay reads as a coherent argument or a meandering mess. Think of writing an essay as building an essay. The introduction provides the blueprint for the essay: it introduces the topic and establishes the argument the essay will prove. The body paragraphs should be built in an organized fashion. Think about the order of events when organizing the body paragraphs. Finally, the conclusion should re-emphasize what you have already stated and demonstrate the significance of it without introducing new issues. Constructing an outline is always helpful in this process.

When writing history essays, consider the order of events when organizing paragraphs. Many times, undergraduate essays have strong paragraphs, but they read out of order. There are many ways to organize an essay, but the easiest way is chronological. Things that happened earlier should be discussed earlier in the essay. History is particularly attuned to this approach because change over time is a central concern of the discipline. Chronological organization also helps support arguments that are historically specific as they should be. For instance, there were

Topic Sentences

Finally, use strong topic sentences. Topic sentences are like mini theses for each paragraph. They declare to the reader what the main point of the paragraph is. Topic sentences also tie paragraphs together and help drive the narrative forward. It is usually a good idea to include these strong topic sentences in the outline of the essay. The essay has strong topic sentences if it reads clearly and orderly when reading the topic sentences alone.

Consider a hypothetical essay on the impact of the Roman Empire on the Mediterranean. In the below example, the topic sentences drive the story forward and make the argument clear on their own. The body of the paragraphs will prove the topic sentence.

- Thesis: Roman conquests transformed the Mediterranean world into a single political and cultural entity.
- Roman expansion across the Mediterranean began with the Punic Wars.
- After the conquests, Rome expanded its cultural hegemony across the territory by incorporating the conquered territories into the Roman system, giving the inhabitants a stake in the system.
- As Rome tied the empire together politically, it created the opportunity for seamless trade and movement across the Mediterranean.
- Christianity spread across the connected Mediterranean rapidly, and as the Roman Empire adopted the religion, it established an institutional framework for the new religion.
- Conclusion: As Rome connected the Mediterranean world, people, goods, and ideas rapidly moved about the empire, creating new opportunities to accumulate wealth and integrate cultural movements.

Short Essays

Short history essays are shorter than 2000 words, which is roughly 6 pages. They should be organized by paragraphs. This sounds obvious, but what I mean is that the major points needed to prove the argument should each receive one paragraph. The introduction and conclusion should only be one paragraph. History essays shorter than 2000 words do not need a historiography section, but they should have at least a sentence in the introduction indicating the significance of the argument. The thesis (or argument) should be the last sentence of the introduction. Strong topic sentences are always essential but are even more critical in short essays. Short essays need as many paragraphs as it takes to prove the arguments. Do not become married to the five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay is good for helping you think about organizing a paper, but think of the number of paragraphs as fluid. It is very likely an essay will need more than three body paragraphs. Once again, take time to organize and order your points before writing. In the above hypothetical example, each bullet point would be the topic sentence for its own paragraph.

Long Essays and Historiography

Long history essays should take a slightly different organization while following the same pattern. The introduction should be multiple paragraphs. Each major point will need multiple paragraphs. Think about the outline as an organization of different sections of the essay rather than different paragraphs.

Introductions

The introduction is the biggest difference between long and short essays because it should include a historiography section. Depending on the length, the introduction could be two to five paragraphs. Historiography is simply what other historians have said on this topic. Depending on the length of the essay, historiography should be between one and two paragraphs. But historiography is tricky to write because its point is to situate your research within what others have said. Still, it is crucial when writing a more extended history essay. The point is to indicate why what you are doing is significant. Historiography should not be a list of what historians have said before you. Instead, it should isolate the problem or gap in the historiography to indicate why your argument solves or fills it (which is an elaboration of an argument). Think about organizing the introduction as introducing the question, answering the question (the thesis), and explaining its significance (historiography).

Organized by Section

The second significant difference with longer essays is that sections rather than individual paragraphs should organize your outline. It is OK to include the organization of individual paragraphs in your outline, but they should be subordinate to the sections that make up the essay. For instance, the above hypothetical outline could still work for a longer history essay, but each bullet point would reference that section. For instance, the expansion of Rome across the Mediterranean during the Punic Wars would include multiple paragraphs

discussing what started the Punic Wars, the wars themselves, and then the expansion toward Greece it inspired. Where this would all be discussed in one paragraph for a shorter essay, it is three in a longer one.

Finally, the conclusion will once again be longer. In the added length, the essay should attempt to draw out the broader implications of the argument. Don't just restate what you already wrote. Focus on why it is significant. How does it change what we already know? This can be tricky to do without introducing new information. But doing so is the difference between a powerful and mediocre conclusion.

Writing Guidance

I have two main pieces of advice on writing that occur at all levels of writing, and it is not specific to writing history essays. Avoiding them makes your writing stronger and easier to read.

1. Avoid weak language.
2. Avoid the passive voice.

Common causes of weak language are turning verbs into nouns and overusing “be” verbs. For example, do not write that doing of things was important. Instead, people did important things. With the second sentence, we now know who did things. A helpful trick is to align the actors in the sentence with the subject of the sentence. Similarly, align the actions the character in the sentence performs with the verb of the sentence.

The passive voice is when a sentence places the object of the verb in the subject of the sentence, adds a “be” helping verb, and either eliminates the subject of the verb or places it in a prepositional phrase. In other words, “mistakes were made” or “the chicken was prepared poorly by the cook.” These sentences either elide the person or thing performing the action or remove it from the subject. Instead, write that “Joe made mistakes” (in history, we want to know who did what) or that “the cook prepared the chicken poorly.” Everyone makes these mistakes, but following these two pieces of advice will significantly improve your writing.

Citing Sources in History Essays

There are two ways to cite a source: 1) footnotes, and 2) parenthetical citations. Most of you are likely least familiar with footnotes, but they are simple. You simply write your sentence. Then insert the footnote.³ In Microsoft Word, the “Insert Footnote” feature is under the “References” tab in the top ribbon (see image below). I have provided the basic formats for a footnote citation in the footnote below.

Footnotes are my preferred method of citation, but if you choose to use parenthetical citations, it is okay. The crucial point—and I cannot emphasize this enough—is that you **MUST** cite sources not only when you quote from a document but also when you simply borrow an idea or information from a document. For instance, if you write in your paper that the Industrial Revolution changed women's labor by reducing the amount

³Joe Frank, “Title of the chapter in quotations,” in *Title of the Book in Italics* (place of publication: publisher, date of publication), page number. It would look like this: Joe Frank, “Important Stories from History,” in *An Important History Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 234-235. For an article, it follows a similar premise: Joe Frank, “Article Title,” *Journal Title* [volume number], no. [issue number] (date): page number. Note the absence of “in” between the article title and journal title. It should look like this: Joe Frank, “Important Article,” *Important History Journal* 15, no. 2 (1992): 123-124.

of spinning that women were asked to do because you read it in one of the readings. You need to cite that information even though you did not quote it. That idea is not yours; it was an argument made by the author you read. If you do not cite it, you are passing it off as yours, which is plagiarism. Some information does not need a citation, such as information that is generally common knowledge. Christopher Columbus sailing the Atlantic Ocean in 1492 would fall under this category. Nevertheless, if you are unsure whether you need to cite something, the answer is likely that you should. When in doubt, cite. If all the information in a paragraph comes from one source, you can put the citation at the end of the paragraph, but quotations should always have citations of their own to avoid ambiguity.

Parenthetical Citations

For parenthetical citations, you will need to provide a works cited page at the end of the essay. The parenthetical citation should have the last name of the author and the page number it can be found. It works by using the first word related to the works-cited entry, which is almost always the author's last name, so the reader can quickly find the source from which the information was derived. For instance, it would look like this (Frank, 123). Note that the punctuation follows the closed parenthesis. The works cited citation looks almost the same as a footnote citation, but note that the last name comes first in the works cited, and periods, not commas, separate the main pieces of the metadata.

Footnote Citations

Footnotes follow a simple pattern, typically following the Chicago Style: Author Name, Title, (city: publisher, date), ##. Below, I have provided examples of the three main types of footnotes—books, articles, and book chapters. For more information, The [Chicago Manual of Style has a website with a quick guide here](#).

Book Chapters

Joe Frank, "Title of the chapter in quotations," in *Title of the Book in Italics* (place of publication: publisher, date of publication), page number.

It would look like this: Joe Frank, "Important Stories from History," in *An Important History Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 234-235.

Articles

Articles follow a similar premise:

Joe Frank, "Article Title," *Journal Title* [volume number], no. [issue number] (date): page number. Note the absence of "in" between the article title and journal title.

It should look like this:

Joe Frank, "Important Article," *Important History Journal* 15, no. 2 (1992): 123-124.

Books

Books are the simplest:

Joe Frank, *Title of the Book in Italics* (place of publication: publisher, date), page number.

It would look like this:

Joe Frank, *An Important History Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 234-235.