

# WRITING A GOOD HISTORY PAPER



History Department  
Hamilton College

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## **Acknowledgements**

This booklet bears one name, but it is really a communal effort. I'd like to thank the Director of the Writing Center, Sharon Williams, who originally had the idea for a History Department writing guide, prodded me gently to get it done, and helped to edit and format it. My colleagues in the History Department read two drafts and made many valuable suggestions. Chris Takacs, a writing tutor in the class of 2005, helped me to see writing problems with a student's eye. Yvonne Schick of the Print Shop carefully and professionally oversaw the production. Any limitations result solely from my own carelessness or stupidity.

For the third edition we have added some new material and clarified a few passages. Many thanks to Robin Vanderwall for her valuable assistance.

—Alfred Kelly, for the History Department  
August, 2008

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**Welcome to the History Department.** You will find that your history professors care a great deal about your writing. They may cover your papers with red ink. Don't despair. Writing is hard work, but it requires neither native genius nor initiation into occult knowledge. We historians demand the same qualities stressed in any stylebook—good grammar and syntax. You needn't worry that you have to master a specialized "historical style." A successful history paper is clear, precise, concise, organized, analytical, and concrete. It uses the active voice; it has a thesis; it explains the significance of the topic; and it tells the reader who, what, when, where, why, and how. We hope that this booklet will help you to avoid the most common problems of style and substance that students encounter in writing history papers. Please note that this booklet cannot cover everything you need to know about historical writing and research. Get a good general stylebook and keep it by your side as you write. In addition to the College's style guide, *Essentials of Writing*, we recommend Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* and Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*. Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* contains useful advice on historical research and writing.



# Top Ten Reasons for Negative Comments on History Papers

(Drawn from a survey of the History Department)

10. You engage in cheap, anachronistic moralizing. (See page 9.)
9. You are sloppy with the chronology. (See page 4.)
8. You quote excessively or improperly. (See pages 9, 13-14.)
7. You have written a careless “one-draft wonder.” (See page 10.)
6. You are vague or have empty, unsupported generalizations. (See page 4.)
5. You write too much in the passive voice. (See page 11.)
4. You use inappropriate sources. (See page 5-9.)
3. You use evidence uncritically. (See page 3.)
2. You are wordy. (See page 11.)
1. You have no clear thesis and little analysis. (See page 2.)

## Making Sure your History Paper has Substance

***Get off to a good start.*** Avoid pretentious, vapid beginnings. If you are writing a paper on, say, British responses to the rebellion in India in 1857, don't open with a statement like this: "Throughout human history people in all cultures everywhere in the world have engaged in many and long-running conflicts about numerous aspects of government policy and diplomatic issues, which have much interested historians and generated historical theories in many areas." This is pure garbage, bores the reader, and is a sure sign that you have nothing substantive to say. Get to the point. Here's a better start: "The rebellion in 1857 compelled the British to rethink their colonial administration in India." This sentence tells the reader what your paper is actually about and clears the way for you to state your thesis in the rest of the opening paragraph. For example, you might go on to argue that greater British sensitivity to Indian customs was hypocritical.

***State a clear thesis.*** Whether you are writing an exam essay or a senior thesis, you need to have a thesis. Don't just repeat the assignment or start writing down everything that you know about the subject. Ask yourself, "What exactly am I trying to prove?" Your thesis is your take on the subject, your perspective, your explanation—that is, the case that you're going to argue. "Famine struck Ireland in the 1840s" is a true statement, but it is not a thesis. "The English were responsible for famine in Ireland in the 1840s" is a thesis (whether defensible or not is another matter). A good thesis answers an important research question about how or why something happened. ("Who was responsible for the famine in Ireland in the 1840s?") Once you have laid out your thesis, don't forget about it. Develop your thesis logically from paragraph to paragraph. Your reader should always know where your argument has come from, where it is now, and where it is going.

***Be sure to analyze.*** Students are often puzzled when their professors mark them down for summarizing or merely narrating rather than analyzing. What does it mean to analyze? In the narrow sense, to analyze means to break down into parts and to study the interrelationships of those parts. If you analyze water, you break it down into hydrogen and oxygen. In a broader sense, historical analysis explains the origins and significance of events. Historical analysis digs beneath the surface to see

relationships or distinctions that are not immediately obvious. Historical analysis is critical; it evaluates sources, assigns significance to causes, and weighs competing explanations. Don't push the distinction too far, but you might think of summary and analysis this way: *Who, what, when,* and *where* are the stuff of summary; *how, why,* and *to what effect* are the stuff of analysis. Many students think that they have to give a long summary (to show the professor that they know the facts) before they get to their analysis. Try instead to begin your analysis as soon as possible, sometimes without any summary at all. The facts will "shine through" a good analysis. You can't do an analysis unless you know the facts, but you can summarize the facts without being able to do an analysis. Summary is easier and less sophisticated than analysis—that's why summary alone never earns an "A."

***Use evidence critically.*** Like good detectives, historians are critical of their sources and cross-check them for reliability. You wouldn't think much of a detective who relied solely on a suspect's archenemy to check an alibi. Likewise, you wouldn't think much of a historian who relied solely on the French to explain the origins of World War I. Consider the following two statements on the origin of World War I: 1) "For the catastrophe of 1914 the Germans are responsible. Only a professional liar would deny this..." 2) "*It is not true* that Germany is guilty of having caused this war. Neither the people, the government, nor the Kaiser wanted war..." They can't both be right, so you have to do some detective work. As always, the best approach is to ask: Who wrote the source? Why? When? Under what circumstances? For whom? The first statement comes from a book by the French politician Georges Clemenceau, which he wrote in 1929 at the very end of his life. In 1871, Clemenceau had vowed revenge against Germany for its defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War. As premier of France from 1917 to 1920, he represented France at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He was obviously not a disinterested observer. The second statement comes from a manifesto published by ninety-three prominent German intellectuals in the fall of 1914. They were defending Germany against charges of aggression and brutality. They too were obviously not disinterested observers. Now, rarely do you encounter such extreme bias and passionate disagreement, but the principle of criticizing and cross-checking sources always applies. In general, the more sources you can use, and the more varied they are, the more likely you are to make a sound historical judgement, especially when passions and self-interests are engaged. You don't need

to be cynical as a historian (self-interest does not explain everything), but you do need to be critical and skeptical. Competent historians may offer different interpretations of the same evidence or choose to stress different evidence. You will not find a single historical Truth with a capital “T” on any matter of significance. You can, however, learn to discriminate among conflicting interpretations, not all of which are created equal. (See also the section on **Analyzing a Historical Document.**)

***Be precise.*** Vague statements and empty generalizations suggest that you haven’t put in the time to learn the material. Consider these two sentences: “During the French Revolution, the government was overthrown by the people. The Revolution is important because it shows that people need freedom.” What people? Landless peasants? Urban journeymen? Wealthy lawyers? Which government? When? How? Who exactly needed freedom, and what did they mean by freedom? Here is a more precise statement about the French Revolution: “Threatened by rising prices and food shortages in 1793, the Parisian *sans-culottes* pressured the Convention to institute price controls.” This statement is more limited than the grandiose generalizations about the Revolution, but unlike them, it can open the door to a real analysis of the Revolution. Be careful when you use grand abstractions like *people*, *society*, *freedom*, and *government*, especially when you further distance yourself from the concrete by using these words as the apparent antecedents for the pronouns *they* and *it*. Always pay attention to cause and effect. Abstractions do not cause or need anything; particular people or particular groups of people cause or need things. Avoid grandiose trans-historical generalizations that you can’t support. *When in doubt about the appropriate level of precision or detail, err on the side of adding “too much” precision and detail.*

***Watch the chronology.*** Anchor your thesis in a clear chronological framework and don’t jump around confusingly. Take care to avoid both anachronisms and vagueness about dates. If you write, “Napoleon abandoned his Grand Army in Russia and caught the redeye back to Paris,” the problem is obvious. If you write, “Despite the Watergate scandal, Nixon easily won reelection in 1972,” the problem is more subtle, but still serious. (The scandal did not become public until after the election.) If you write, “The revolution in China finally succeeded in the twentieth century,” your professor may suspect that you haven’t studied. Which revolution? When in the twentieth century? Remember that chronology is the backbone of history. What would you think of a biographer who wrote that you graduated from Hamilton in the 1950s?



**Cite sources carefully.** Your professor may allow parenthetical citations in a short paper with one or two sources, but you should use footnotes for any research paper in history. Parenthetical citations are unaesthetic; they scar the text and break the flow of reading. Worse still, they are simply inadequate to capture the richness of historical sources. Historians take justifiable pride in the immense variety of their sources. Parenthetical citations such as (Jones 1994) may be fine for most of the social sciences and humanities, where the source base is usually limited to recent books and articles in English. Historians, however, need the flexibility of the full footnote. Try to imagine this typical footnote (pulled at random from a classic work of German history) squeezed into parentheses in the body of the text: *DZA Potsdam, Rdl, Frieden 5, Erzgebiet von Longwy-Briey, Bd. I, Nr. 19305, gedruckte Denkschrift für OHL und Reichsleitung, Dezember 1917, und in RWA, Frieden Frankreich Nr. 1883.* The abbreviations are already in this footnote; its information cannot be further reduced. For footnotes and bibliography, historians usually use Chicago style. (*The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.) On the Writing Center's website you can find a useful summary of Chicago citation style prepared by a former history major, Elizabeth Rabe '04 (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/Footnotes.html>). RefWorks (on the library's website) will convert your citations to Chicago style. Don't hesitate to ask one of the reference librarians for help if you have trouble getting started on RefWorks.

**Use primary sources.** Use as many primary sources as possible in your paper. A primary source is one produced by a participant in or witness of the events you are writing about. A primary source allows the historian to see the past through the eyes of direct participants. Some common primary sources are letters, diaries, memoirs, speeches, church records, newspaper articles, and government documents of all kinds. The capacious genre "government records" is probably the single richest trove for the historian and includes everything from criminal court records, to tax lists, to census data, to parliamentary debates, to international treaties—indeed, any records generated by governments. If you're writing about culture, primary sources may include works of art or literature, as well as philosophical tracts or scientific treatises—anything that comes under the broad rubric of culture. Not all primary sources are written. Buildings, monuments, clothes, home furnishings, photographs, religious relics, musical recordings, or oral reminiscences can all be primary sources if you use them as historical clues. The interests of historians are so broad that virtually anything can be a primary source. (See also the section on **Analyzing a Historical Document**.)

**Use scholarly secondary sources.** A secondary source is one written by a later historian who had no part in what he or she is writing about. (In the rare cases when the historian was a participant in the events, then the work—or at least part of it—is a primary source.) Historians read secondary sources to learn about how scholars have interpreted the past. Just as you must be critical of primary sources, so too you must be critical of secondary sources. You must be especially careful to distinguish between scholarly and non-scholarly secondary sources. Unlike, say, nuclear physics, history attracts many amateurs. Books and articles about war, great individuals, and everyday material life dominate popular history. Some professional historians disparage popular history and may even discourage their colleagues from trying their hand at it. You need not share their snobbishness; some popular history is excellent. But—and this is a big but—as a rule, you should avoid popular works in your research, because they are usually not scholarly. Popular history seeks to inform and entertain a large general audience. In popular history, dramatic storytelling often prevails over analysis, style over substance, simplicity over complexity, and grand generalization over careful qualification. Popular history is usually based largely or exclusively on secondary sources. Strictly speaking, most popular histories might better be called tertiary, not secondary, sources. Scholarly history, in contrast, seeks to discover new knowledge or to reinterpret existing knowledge. Good scholars wish to write clearly and simply, and they may spin a compelling yarn, but they do not shun depth, analysis, complexity, or qualification. Scholarly history draws on as many primary sources as practical.

Now, your goal as a student is to come as close as possible to the scholarly ideal, so you need to develop a nose for distinguishing the scholarly from the non-scholarly. Here are a few questions you might ask of your secondary sources (bear in mind that the popular/scholarly distinction is not absolute, and that some scholarly work may be poor scholarship): **Who is the author?** Most scholarly works are written by professional historians (usually professors) who have advanced training in the area they are writing about. If the author is a journalist or someone with no special historical training, be careful. **Who publishes the work?** Scholarly books come from university presses and from a handful of commercial presses (for example, Norton, Routledge, Palgrave, Penguin, Rowman & Littlefield, Knopf, and HarperCollins). **If it's an article, where does it appear?** Is it in a journal subscribed to by our library, listed on *JSTOR*, or published by a university press? Is the editorial board staffed by professors? Oddly enough, the word journal in the title is usually a sign that the periodical is scholarly. **What do the notes**

**and bibliography look like?** If they are thin or nonexistent, be careful. If they are all secondary sources, be careful. If the work is about a non-English-speaking area, and all the sources are in English, then it's almost by definition not scholarly. **Can you find reviews of the book in the data base *Academic Search Premier*?** If the book was published within the last few decades, and it's not in there, that's a bad sign. With a little practice, you can develop confidence in your judgment—and you're on your way to being a historian. If you are unsure whether a work qualifies as scholarly, ask your professor. (See also the section on **Writing a Book Review**.)

***Avoid abusing your sources.*** Many potentially valuable sources are easy to abuse. Be especially alert for these five abuses:

***Web abuse.*** The Web is a wonderful and improving resource for indexes and catalogs. But as a source for primary and secondary material for the historian, the Web is of limited value. Anyone with the right software can post something on the Web without having to get past trained editors, peer reviewers, or librarians. As a result, there is a great deal of garbage on the Web. If you use a primary source from the Web, make sure that a respected intellectual institution stands behind the site. Be especially wary of secondary articles on the Web, unless they appear in electronic versions of established print journals (e.g., *The Journal of Asian Studies* in JSTOR). Many articles on the Web are little more than third-rate encyclopedia entries. When in doubt, check with your professor. With a few rare exceptions, you will not find scholarly monographs in history (even recent ones) on the Web. You may have heard of Google's plans to digitize the entire collections of some of the world's major libraries and to make those collections available on the Web. Don't hold your breath. Your days at Hamilton will be long over by the time the project is finished. Besides, your training as a historian should give you a healthy skepticism of the giddy claims of technophiles. Most of the time and effort of doing history goes into reading, note-taking, pondering, and writing. Finding a chapter of a book on the Web (as opposed to getting the physical book through interlibrary loan) might be a convenience, but it doesn't change the basics for the historian. Moreover, there is a subtle, but serious, drawback with digitized old books: They break the historian's sensual link to the past. And of course, virtually none of the literally trillions of pages of archival material is available on the Web. For the foreseeable future, the library and the archive will remain the natural habitats of the historian.

**Thesaurus abuse.** How tempting it is to ask your computer’s thesaurus to suggest a more erudite-sounding word for the common one that popped into your mind! Resist the temptation. Consider this example (admittedly, a bit heavy-handed, but it drives the point home): You’re writing about the EPA’s programs to clean up impure water supplies. *Impure* seems too simple and boring a word, so you bring up your thesaurus, which offers you everything from *incontinent* to *meretricious*. “How about *meretricious* water?” you think to yourself. “That will impress the professor.” The problem is that you don’t know exactly what *meretricious* means, so you don’t realize that *meretricious* is absurdly inappropriate in this context and makes you look foolish and immature. Use only those words that come to you naturally. Don’t try to write beyond your vocabulary. Don’t try to impress with big words. Use a thesaurus *only* for those annoying tip-of-the-tongue problems (you know the word and will recognize it instantly when you see it, but at the moment you just can’t think of it).

**Quotation book abuse.** This is similar to thesaurus abuse. Let’s say you are writing a paper on Alexander Hamilton’s banking policies, and you want to get off to a snappy start that will make you seem effortlessly learned. How about a quotation on money? You click on the index of *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, and before you know it, you’ve begun your paper with, “As Samuel Butler wrote in *Hudibras*, ‘For what is worth in anything/ But so much money as ’t will bring?’” Face it, you’re faking it. You don’t know who Samuel Butler is, and you’ve certainly never heard of *Hudibras*, let alone read it. Your professor is not fooled. You sound like an insecure after-dinner speaker. Forget *Bartlett’s*, unless you’re confirming the wording of a quotation that came to you spontaneously and relates to your paper.

**Encyclopedia abuse.** General encyclopedias like *Britannica* are useful for checking facts (“Wait a sec, am I right about which countries sent troops to crush the Boxer Rebellion in China? Better check.”). But if you are footnoting encyclopedias in your papers, you are not doing college-level research.

**Dictionary abuse.** The dictionary is your friend. Keep it by your side as you write, but do not abuse it by starting papers with a definition. You may be most tempted to start this way when you are writing on a complex, controversial, or elusive subject. (“According to *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, liberalism is defined as...”). Actually, the dictionary

does you little good in such cases and makes you sound like a conscientious but dull high-school student. Save in the rare case that competing dictionary definitions are the subject at hand, keep dictionary quotations out of your paper.

***Quote sparingly.*** Avoid quoting a **secondary** source and then simply rewording or summarizing the quotation, either above or below the quotation. It is rarely necessary to quote secondary sources at length, unless your essay focuses on a critical analysis of the author's argument (see **Writing a Book Review**). Your professor wants to see your ability to analyze and to understand the secondary sources. Do not quote unless the quotation clarifies or enriches your analysis. When in doubt, do not quote; instead, integrate the author's argument into your own (though be sure to acknowledge ideas from your sources, even when you are paraphrasing). If you use a lot of quotations from secondary sources, you are probably writing a poor paper. An analysis of a **primary** source, such as a political tract or philosophical essay, might require lengthy quotations, often in block format. In such cases, you might need to briefly repeat key points or passages as a means to introduce the author's ideas, but your analysis and interpretation of the text's meaning should remain the most important aim. (See also the sections *Use primary sources* and *Use scholarly secondary sources*.)

***Know your audience.*** Unless instructed otherwise, you should assume that your audience consists of educated, intelligent, nonspecialists. In fact, your professor will usually be your only reader, but if you write directly to your professor, you may become cryptic or sloppy (oh well, she'll know what I'm talking about). Explaining your ideas to someone who doesn't know what you mean forces you to be clear and complete. Now, finding the right amount of detail can, admittedly, be tricky (how much do I put in about the Edict of Nantes, the Embargo Act, or President Wilson's background?). When in doubt, err on the side of putting in extra details. You'll get some leeway here if you avoid the extremes (my reader's an ignoramus/my reader knows everything).

***Avoid cheap, anachronistic moralizing.*** Many of the people and institutions of the past appear unenlightened, ignorant, misguided, or bigoted by today's values. Resist the temptation to condemn or to get self-righteous. ("Martin Luther was blind to the sexism and class prejudice of sixteenth-century German society.") Like you, people in the past

were creatures of their time; like you, they deserve to be judged by the standards of their time. If you judge the past by today's standards (an error historians call "presentism"), you will never understand why people thought or acted as they did. Yes, Hitler *was* a bad guy, but he was bad not only by today's standards, but also by the commonly accepted standards of his own time. Someday you're going to look pretty foolish and ignorant yourself. ("Early twenty-first century Hamilton students failed to see the shocking inderdosherism [that's right, you don't recognize the concept because it doesn't yet exist] implicit in their career plans.")

***Have a strong conclusion.*** Obviously, you should not just stop abruptly as though you have run out of time or ideas. Your conclusion should conclude something. If you merely restate briefly what you have said in your paper, you give the impression that you are unsure of the significance of what you have written. A weak conclusion leaves the reader unsatisfied and bewildered, wondering why your paper was worth reading. A strong conclusion adds something to what you said in your introduction. A strong conclusion explains the importance and significance of what you have written. A strong conclusion leaves your reader caring about what you have said and pondering the larger implications of your thesis. Don't leave your reader asking, "So what?"

***Revise and proofread.*** Your professor can spot a "one-draft wonder," so don't try to do your paper at the last moment. Leave plenty of time for revising and proofreading. Show your draft to a writing tutor or other good writer. Reading the draft aloud may also help. Of course, everyone makes mistakes, and a few may slip through no matter how meticulous you are. But beware of lots of mistakes. The failure to proofread carefully suggests that you devoted little time and effort to the assignment. Tip: Proofread your text both on the screen and on a printed copy. Your eyes see the two differently. Don't rely on your spell checker to catch all of your misspellings. (If ewe ken reed this ewe kin sea that a computer wood nut all ways help ewe spill or rite reel good.)

## Common Marginal Remarks on Style, Clarity, Grammar, and Syntax

**Note:** The Writing Center suggests standard abbreviations for noting some of these problems. You should familiarize yourself with those abbreviations, but your professor may not use them.

### Remarks on Style and Clarity

**Wordy/verbose/repetitive.** Try your hand at fixing this sentence: “Due to the fact that these aspects of the issue of personal survival have been raised by recently transpired problematic conflicts, it is at the present time paramount that the ultimate psychological end of suicide be contemplated by this individual.” If you get it down to “To be or not to be, that is the question,” you’ve done well. You may not match Shakespeare, but you can learn to cut the fat out of your prose. The chances are that the five pages you’ve written for your history paper do not really contain five pages’ worth of ideas.

**Misuse of the passive voice.** Write in the active voice. The passive voice encourages vagueness and dullness; it enfeebles verbs; and it conceals agency, which is the very stuff of history. You know all of this almost instinctively. What would you think of a lover who sighed in your ear, “My darling, you are loved by me!”? At its worst, the passive voice—like its kin, bureaucratic language and jargon—is a medium for the dishonesty and evasion of responsibility that pervade contemporary American culture. (“Mistakes were made; I was given false information.” Now notice the difference: “I screwed up; Smith and Jones lied to me; I neglected to check the facts.”) On history papers the passive voice usually signals a less toxic version of the same unwillingness to take charge, to commit yourself, and to say forthrightly what is really going on, and who is doing what to whom. Suppose you write, “In 1935 Ethiopia was invaded.” This sentence is a disaster. Who invaded? Your professor will assume that you don’t know. Adding “by Italy” to the end of the sentence helps a bit, but the sentence is still flat and misleading. Italy was an aggressive actor, and your passive construction conceals that salient fact by putting the actor in the syntactically weakest position—at the end of the sentence as the object of a preposition. Notice how you add vigor and clarity to the sentence when you recast it in the

active voice: “In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia.” *In a few cases*, you may violate the no-passive-voice rule. The passive voice may be preferable if the agent is either obvious (“Kennedy was elected in 1960”), irrelevant (“Theodore Roosevelt became president when McKinley was assassinated”), or unknown (“King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings”). Note that in all three of these sample sentences the passive voice focuses the reader on the receiver of the action rather than on the doer (on Kennedy, not on American voters; on McKinley, not on his assassin; on King Harold, not on the unknown Norman archer). Historians usually wish to focus on the doer, so you should stay with the active voice—unless you can make a compelling case for an exception.

***Abuse of the verb to be.*** The verb *to be* is the most common and most important verb in English, but too many verbs *to be* suck the life out of your prose and lead to wordiness. Enliven your prose with as many action verbs as possible. (“In *Brown v. Board of Education* it was the opinion of the Supreme Court that the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.”) Rewrite as “In *Brown v. Board of Education* the Supreme Court ruled that the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ violated the Fourteenth Amendment.”

***Explain/what’s your point?/unclear/huh?*** You may (or may not) know what you’re talking about, but if you see these marginal comments, you have confused your reader. You may have introduced a *non sequitur*; gotten off the subject; drifted into abstraction; assumed something that you have not told the reader; failed to explain how the material relates to your argument; garbled your syntax; or simply failed to proof-read carefully. If possible, have a good writer read your paper and point out the muddled parts. Reading your paper aloud may help too.

***Paragraph goes nowhere/has no point or unity.*** Paragraphs are the building blocks of your paper. If your paragraphs are weak, your paper cannot be strong. Try underlining the topic sentence of every paragraph. If your topic sentences are vague, strength and precision—the hallmarks of good writing—are unlikely to follow. Consider this topic sentence (from a paper on Ivan the Terrible): “From 1538 to 1547, there are many different arguments about the nature of what happened.” Disaster looms. The reader has no way of knowing when the arguing takes place, who’s arguing, or even what the arguing is about. And how does the “nature of what happened” differ from plain “what happened”?



Perhaps the writer means the following: “The childhood of Ivan the Terrible has provoked controversy among scholars of Russian history.” That’s hardly deathless prose, but it does orient the reader and make the writer accountable for what follows in the paragraph. Once you have a good topic sentence, make sure that everything in the paragraph supports that sentence, and that cumulatively the support is persuasive. Make sure that each sentence follows logically from the previous one, adding detail in a coherent order. Move, delete, or add material as appropriate. To avoid confusing the reader, limit each paragraph to one central idea. (If you have a series of supporting points starting with *first*, you must follow with a *second*, *third*, etc.) A paragraph that runs more than a printed page is probably too long. Err on the side of shorter paragraphs.

***Inappropriate use of first person.*** Most historians write in the third person, which focuses the reader on the subject. If you write in the first person singular, you shift the focus to yourself. You give the impression that you want to break in and say, “Enough about the Haitian revolution [or whatever], now let’s talk about me!” Also avoid the first person plural (“We believe...”). It suggests committees, editorial boards, or royalty. None of those should have had a hand in writing your paper. And don’t refer to yourself lamely as “this writer.” Who else could possibly be writing the paper?

***Tense inconsistency.*** Stay consistently in the past tense when you are writing about what took place in the past. (“Truman’s defeat of Dewey in 1948 caught the pollsters by surprise.”) Note that the context may require a shift into the past perfect. (“The pollsters had not realized [past perfect] that voter opinion had been [past perfect] changing rapidly in the days before the election.”) Unfortunately, the tense problem can get a bit more complicated. Most historians shift into the present tense when describing or commenting on a book, document, or evidence that still exists and is in front of them (or in their mind) as they write. (“de Beauvoir published [past tense] *The Second Sex* in 1949. In the book she contends [present tense] that woman....”) If you’re confused, think of it this way: History is about the past, so historians write in the past tense, unless they are discussing effects of the past that still exist and thus are in the present. When in doubt, use the past tense and stay consistent.

***Ill-fitted quotation.*** This is a common problem, though not noted in stylebooks. When you quote someone, make sure that the quotation fits

grammatically into your sentence. Note carefully the mismatch between the start of the following sentence and the quotation that follows: “In order to understand the Vikings, writes Marc Bloch, it is necessary, ‘To conceive of the Viking expeditions as religious warfare inspired by the ardour of an implacable pagan fanaticism—an explanation that has sometimes been at least suggested—conflicts too much with what we know of minds disposed to respect magic of every kind.’” At first, the transition into the quotation from Bloch seems fine. The infinitive (to conceive) fits. But then the reader comes to the verb (conflicts) in Bloch’s sentence, and things no longer make sense. The writer is saying, in effect, “it is necessary conflicts.” The wordy lead-in and the complex syntax of the quotation have tripped the writer and confused the reader. If you wish to use the whole sentence, rewrite as “Marc Bloch writes in *Feudal Society*, ‘To conceive of...’” Better yet, use your own words or only part of the quotation in your sentence. Remember that good writers quote infrequently, but when they do need to quote, they use carefully phrased lead-ins that fit the grammatical construction of the quotation.

**Free-floating quotation.** Do not suddenly drop quotations into your prose. (“The spirit of the Progressive era is best understood if one remembers that the United States is ‘the only country in the world that began with perfection and aspired to progress.’”) You have probably chosen the quotation because it is finely wrought and says exactly what you want to say. Fine, but first you inconvenience the reader, who must go to the footnote to learn that the quotation comes from *The Age of Reform* by historian Richard Hofstadter. And then you puzzle the reader. Did Hofstadter write the line about perfection and progress, or is he quoting someone from the Progressive era? If, as you claim, you are going to help the reader to judge the “spirit of the Progressive era,” you need to clarify. Rewrite as “As historian Richard Hofstadter writes in the *Age of Reform*, the United States is ‘the only country in the world...’” Now the reader knows immediately that the line is Hofstadter’s.

**Who’s speaking here?/your view?** Always be clear about whether you’re giving your opinion or that of the author or historical actor you are discussing. Let’s say that your essay is about Martin Luther’s social views. You write, “The German peasants who revolted in 1525 were brutes and deserved to be crushed mercilessly.” That’s what Luther thought, but do you agree? You may know, but your reader is not a mind reader. When in doubt, err on the side of being overly clear.

**Jargon/pretentious theory.** Historians value plain English. Academic jargon and pretentious theory will make your prose turgid, ridiculous, and downright irritating. Your professor will suspect that you are trying to conceal that you have little to say. Of course, historians can't get along without some theory; even those who profess to have no theory actually do—it's called naïve realism. And sometimes you need a technical term, be it ontological argument or ecological fallacy. When you use theory or technical terms, make sure that they are intelligible and do real intellectual lifting. Please, no sentences like this: "By means of a neo-Althusserian, post-feminist hermeneutics, this essay will de/construct the logo/phallo/centrism imbricated in the marginalizing post-colonial gendered gaze, thereby proliferating the subjectivities that will re/present the de/stabilization of the essentializing habitus of post-Fordist capitalism."

**Informal language/slang.** You don't need to be stuffy, but stay with formal English prose of the kind that will still be comprehensible to future generations. Columbus did *not* "push the envelope in the Atlantic." Henry VIII was *not* "looking for his inner child when he broke with the Church." Prime Minister Cavour of Piedmont was *not* "trying to play in the major leagues diplomaticwise." Wilson did *not* "almost veg out" at the end of his second term. President Hindenburg did *not* appoint Hitler in a "senior moment." Prime Minister Chamberlain did *not* tell the Czechs to "chill out" after the Munich Conference, and Gandhi was *not* an "awesome dude."

**Cliches.** Try to keep your prose fresh. Avoid clichés. When you proofread, watch out for sentences like these: "Voltaire always *gave 110 percent* and *thought outside the box*. His *bottom line* was that as people *went forward into the future*, they would, *at the end of the day*, *step up to the plate* and realize that the Jesuits were conniving perverts." Ugh. Rewrite as "Voltaire tried to persuade people that the Jesuits were conniving perverts."

**Intensifier abuse/exaggeration.** Avoid inflating your prose with unsustainable claims of size, importance, uniqueness, certainty, or intensity. Such claims mark you as an inexperienced writer trying to impress the reader. Your statement is probably not *certain*; your subject probably not *unique*, the *biggest*, the *best*, or the *most important*. Also, the adverb *very* will rarely strengthen your sentence. Strike it. ("President Truman was *very* determined to stop the spread of communism in Greece.")

Rewrite as “President Truman resolved to stop the spread of communism in Greece.”

**Mixed image.** Once you have chosen an image, you must stay with language compatible with that image. In the following example, note that the chain, the boiling, and the igniting are all incompatible with the image of the cold, rolling, enlarging snowball: “A snowballing chain of events boiled over, igniting the powder keg of war in 1914.” Well-chosen images can enliven your prose, but if you catch yourself mixing images a lot, you’re probably trying to write beyond your ability. Pull back. Be more literal.

**Clumsy transition.** If your reader feels a jolt or gets disoriented at the beginning of a new paragraph, your paper probably lacks unity. In a good paper, each paragraph is woven seamlessly into the next. If you find yourself beginning your paragraphs with phrases such as “Another aspect of this problem...,” then you are probably “stacking note cards” rather than developing a thesis.

**Unnecessary relative clause.** If you don’t need to restrict the meaning of your sentence’s subject, then don’t. (“Napoleon was a man who tried to conquer Europe.”) Here the relative clause adds nothing. Rewrite as “Napoleon tried to conquer Europe.” Unnecessary relative clauses are a classic form of wordiness.

**Distancing or demeaning quotation marks.** If you believe that a frequently used word or phrase distorts historical reality, don’t put it in dismissive, sneering quotation marks to make your point (“the communist ‘threat’ to the ‘free’ world during the Cold War”). Many readers find this practice arrogant, obnoxious, and precious, and they may dismiss your arguments out of hand. If you believe that the communist threat was bogus or exaggerated, or that the free world was not really free, then simply explain what you mean.

## Remarks on Grammar and Syntax

**Awkward.** Ideally, your professor will help you to improve your writing by specifying exactly what is wrong with a particular passage, but sometimes you may find a simple *awk* in the margin. This all-purpose

negative comment usually suggests that the sentence is clumsy because you have misused words or compounded several errors. Consider this sentence from a book review: “However, many falsehoods lie in Goldhagen’s claims and these will be explored.” What is your long-suffering professor to do with this sentence? The *however* contributes nothing; the phrase *falsehoods lie* is an unintended pun that distracts the reader; the comma is missing between the independent clauses; the *these* has no clear antecedent (*falsehoods? claims?*); the second clause is in the passive voice and contributes nothing anyway; the whole sentence is wordy and screams hasty, last-minute composition. In weary frustration, your professor scrawls *awk* in the margin and moves on. Buried under the twelve-word sentence lies a three-word idea: “Goldhagen often errs.” When you see *awk*, check for the common errors in this list. If you don’t understand what’s wrong, ask.

***Unclear antecedent.*** All pronouns must refer clearly to antecedents and must agree with them in number. The reader usually assumes that the antecedent is the immediately preceding noun. Do not confuse the reader by having several possible antecedents. Consider these two sentences: “Pope Gregory VII forced Emperor Henry IV to wait three days in the snow at Canossa before granting him an audience. It was a symbolic act.” To what does the *it* refer? Forcing the Emperor to wait? The waiting itself? The granting of the audience? The audience itself? The whole previous sentence? You are most likely to get into antecedent trouble when you begin a paragraph with *this* or *it*, referring vaguely back to the general import of the previous paragraph. When in doubt, take this test: Circle the pronoun and the antecedent and connect the two with a line. Then ask yourself if your reader could instantly make the same diagram without your help. If the line is long, or if the circle around the antecedent is large, encompassing huge gobs of text, then your reader probably will be confused. Rewrite. Repetition is better than ambiguity and confusion.

***Faulty parallelism.*** You confuse your reader if you change the grammatical construction from one element to the next in a series. Consider this sentence: “King Frederick the Great sought to expand Prussia, to rationalize agriculture, and that the state support education.” The reader expects another infinitive, but instead trips over the *that*. Rewrite the last clause as “and to promote state-supported education.” Sentences using *neither/nor* frequently present parallelism problems. Note the two

parts of this sentence: “After 1870 the cavalry charge was *neither* an effective tactic, *nor* did armies use it frequently.” The sentence jars because the *neither* is followed by a noun, the *nor* by a verb. Keep the parts parallel. Rewrite as “After 1870 the cavalry charge was *neither* effective *nor* frequently used.” Sentences with *not only/but also* are another pitfall for many students. (“Mussolini attacked *not only* liberalism, *but* he *also* advocated militarism.”) Here the reader is set up to expect a noun in the second clause, but stumbles over a verb. Make the parts parallel by putting the verb *attacked* after the *not only*.

***Misplaced modifier/dangling element.*** Do not confuse the reader with a phrase or clause that refers illogically or absurdly to other words in the sentence. (“Summarized on the back cover of the American paperback edition, the publishers claim that...”) The publishers are not summarized on the back cover. (“Upon finishing the book, many questions remain.”) Who finished the book? Questions can’t read. Avoid following an introductory participial clause with the expletives *it* or *there*. Expletives are by definition filler words; they can’t be agents. (“Having examined the origins of the Meiji Restoration in Japan, it is apparent that...”) Apparent to whom? The expletive *it* didn’t do the examining. (“After going on the Long March, there was greater support for the Communists in China.”) Who went on the Long March? *There* didn’t go on the Long March. Always pay attention to who’s doing what in your sentences.

***Run-on sentence.*** Run-on sentences string together improperly joined independent clauses. Consider these three sentences: “Galileo recanted his teaching that the earth moved privately he maintained his convictions.” “Galileo recanted his teaching that the earth moved, privately he maintained his convictions.” “Galileo recanted his teaching that the earth moved, however, privately he maintained his convictions.” The first fuses two independent clauses with neither a comma nor a coordinating conjunction; the second uses a comma but omits the coordinating conjunction; and the third also omits the coordinating conjunction (*however* is not a coordinating conjunction). To solve the problem, separate the two clauses with a comma and the coordinating conjunction *but*. You could also divide the clauses with a semicolon or make separate sentences. Remember that there are only seven coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*).

**Sentence fragment.** Write in sentences. A sentence has to have a subject and a predicate. If you string together a lot of words, you may lose control of the syntax and end up with a sentence fragment. Note that the following is not a sentence: “While in Western Europe railroad building proceeded rapidly in the nineteenth century, and in Russia there was less progress.” Here you have a long compound introductory clause followed by no subject and no verb, and thus you have a fragment. You may have noticed exceptions to the no-fragments rule. Skilful writers do sometimes intentionally use a fragment to achieve a certain effect. Leave the rule-breaking to the experts.

### ***Confusion of restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.***

Consider these two versions of the same sentence: “World War I, which raged from 1914-1918, killed millions of Europeans.” “World War I that raged from 1914-1918 killed millions of Europeans.” The first sentence has a nonrestrictive relative clause; the dates are included almost as parenthetical information. But something seems amiss with the second sentence. It has a restrictive relative clause that limits the subject (World War I) to the World War I fought between 1914 and 1918, thus implying that there were other wars called World War I, and that we need to distinguish among them. Both sentences are grammatically correct, but the writer of the second sentence appears foolish. Note carefully the distinction between *that* (for use in restrictive clauses, with no comma) and *which* (for use in nonrestrictive clauses, with a comma).

***Confusion about who’s doing what.*** Remember--history is about what people do, so you need to be vigilant about agency. Proof-read your sentences carefully, asking yourself, “Have I said exactly who is doing or thinking what, or have I inadvertently attributed an action or belief to the wrong person or group?” Unfortunately, there are many ways to go wrong here, but faulty punctuation is among the most common. Here’s a sentence about Frantz Fanon, the great critic of European imperialism. Focus on the punctuation and its effect on agency: “Instead of a hierarchy based on class, Fanon suggests the imperialists establish a hierarchy based on race.” As punctuated, the sentence says something absurd: that Fanon is advising the imperialists about the proper kind of hierarchy to establish in the colonies. Surely, the writer meant to say that, in his analysis of imperialism, Fanon distinguishes between two kinds of hierarchy. A comma after *suggests* fixes the immediate problem. Now look at the revised sentence. It still needs work. Better diction

and syntax would sharpen it. Fanon does not suggest (with connotations of both hinting and advocating); he states outright. What's more, the comparison of the two kinds of hierarchy gets blurred by too many intervening words. The key point of the sentence is, in effect, "instead of A, we have B." Clarity demands that B follow A as closely as possible, and that the two elements be grammatically parallel. But between the elements A and B, the writer inserts Fanon (a proper noun), suggests (a verb), imperialists (a noun), and establish (a verb). Try the sentence this way: "Fanon says that the imperialists establish a hierarchy based on race rather than class." Now the agency is clear: We know what Fanon does, and we know what the imperialists do. Notice that errors and infelicities have a way of clustering. If you find one problem in a sentence, look for others.

***Confusion about the objects of prepositions.*** Here's another one of those common problems that does not receive the attention it merits. Discipline your prepositional phrases; make sure you know where they end. Notice the mess in this sentence: "Hitler accused Jewish people of engaging in incest and stating that Vienna was the 'personification of incest.'" The reader thinks that both *engaging* and *stating* are objects of the preposition *of*. Yet the writer intends only the first to be the object of the preposition. Hitler is accusing the Jews of *engaging*, but not of *stating*; he is the one doing the *stating*. Rewrite as "Hitler accused the Jews of incest; he stated that Vienna was the 'personification of incest.'" Note that the wordiness of the original encouraged the syntactical mess. Simplify. It can't be said too many times: Always pay attention to who's doing what in your sentences.

***Misuse of the comparative.*** There are two common problems here. The first might be called the "floating comparative." You use the comparative, but you don't say what you are comparing. ("Lincoln was more upset by the dissolution of the union.") More upset than by what? More upset than who? The other problem, which is more common and takes many forms, is the unintended (and sometimes comical) comparison of unlike elements. Consider these attempts to compare President Clinton to President George H. W. Bush. Often the trouble starts with a possessive: "President Clinton's sexual appetite was more voracious than President Bush." You mean to compare appetites, but you've forgotten about your possessive, so you absurdly compare an appetite to a man. Rewrite as "more voracious than President Bush's." A variation of this



problem is the unintended comparison resulting from the omission of a verb: “President Clinton liked women more than President Bush.” Rewrite as “more than did President Bush.” A misplaced modifier may also cause comparison trouble: “Unlike the Bush administration, sexual scandal nearly destroyed the Clinton administration.” Rewrite as “Unlike the Bush administration, the Clinton administration was nearly destroyed by sexual scandal.” Here the passive voice is better than the misplaced modifier, but you could rewrite as “The Bush administration had been free of sexual scandal, which nearly destroyed the Clinton administration.”

***Misuse of apostrophe.*** Get control of your apostrophes. Use the apostrophe to form singular or plural possessives (Washington’s soldiers; the colonies’ soldiers) or to form contractions (don’t; it’s). Do not use the apostrophe to form plurals. (“The communists [not communists’] defeated the nationalists [not nationalists’] in China.”)

***Comma after although.*** This is a new error, probably a carryover from the common conversational habit of pausing dramatically after *although*. (“*Although*, coffee consumption rose in eighteenth-century Europe, tea remained far more popular.”) Delete the comma after *although*. Remember that *although* is not a synonym for the word *however*, so you cannot solve the problem in the sentence by putting a period after *Europe*. A clause beginning with *although* cannot stand alone as a sentence.

***Comma between subject and verb.*** This is a strange new error. (“Hitler and Stalin, agreed to a pact in August 1939.”) Delete the comma after Stalin.

**Finally, two hints:** If your word-processing program underlines something and suggests changes, be careful. When it comes to grammar and syntax, your computer is a moron. Not only does it fail to recognize some gross errors, it also falsely identifies some correct passages as errors. Do not cede control of your writing decisions to your computer. Make the suggested changes only if you are positive that they are correct.

If you are having trouble with your writing, try simplifying. Write short sentences and read them aloud to test for clarity. Start with the subject and follow it quickly with an active verb. Limit the number of relative clauses, participial phrases, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. You will win no prizes for eloquence, but at least you will be clear. Add complexity only when you have learned to handle it.

## Word and Phrase Usage Problems

***An historical/an historian.*** The consonant “H” is not silent in *historical* and *historian*, so the proper form of the indefinite article is “A.”

***Feel.*** Avoid the common solecism of using *feel* as a synonym for think, believe, say, state, assert, contend, argue, conclude, or write. (“Marx *felt* that the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat.” “Emmeline Pankhurst *felt* that British women should be able to vote.”) The use of *feel* in these sentences demeans the agents by suggesting undisciplined sentiment rather than carefully formulated conviction. Concentrate on what your historical actors said and did; leave their feelings to speculative chapters of their biographies. As for your own feelings, keep them out of your papers. (“I *feel* that Lincoln should have freed the slaves earlier.”) Your professor will be delighted that the material engages both your head and your heart, but your feelings cannot be graded. If you believe that Lincoln should have acted earlier, then explain, giving cogent historical reasons.

***The fact that.*** This is a clumsy, unnecessary construction. (“*The fact that* Nixon resigned in disgrace damaged the Republican Party.”) Rewrite as “Nixon resigned in disgrace, damaging the Republican Party.” Never use the hideous phrase *due to the fact that*.

***In terms of.*** This phrase is filler. Get rid of it. (“Bismarck was a success *in terms of* uniting Germany.) Rewrite as “Bismarck successfully united Germany.”

***Only.*** Attend carefully to the placement of this limiting word. Note, for example, these three sentences: “The government *only* interred Japanese Americans during World War II.” “The government interred *only* Japanese Americans during World War II.” “The government interred Japanese Americans *only* during World War II.” The first limits the action to interring (as opposed to, say, killing); the second limits the group interred (i.e., not Italian Americans); the third limits the time of interring (i.e., not during other wars).

***Thus and therefore.*** More than likely, you have not earned these words and are implying that you have said more than you actually have. Use them sparingly, only when you are concluding a substantial argument with a significant conclusion.

**Misuse of *instead*.** *Instead* is an adverb, not a conjunction. Consider this sentence: “Charles Beard argued that the framers of the constitution were not idealists, *instead* they promoted their economic interests.” Revise as “The framers of the constitution, Charles Beard argued, did not uphold ideals; *instead*, they promoted their economic interests.” Now the *instead* appears properly as an adverb. (Note also that the two clauses are now parallel—both contain transitive verbs.)

***Essentially and basically*.** These are usually either filler words (the written equivalent of “uh” or “um”) or weasel words that merely call attention to your vagueness, lack of conviction, or lazy unwillingness to qualify precisely. (“*Essentially*, Churchill believed that Nazi Germany presented a grave danger to Britain.”) Delete *essentially* and *basically* unless you are writing about essences or bases.

***Both share or both agree*.** These are redundant. If two people share or agree, they are both involved by definition. (“Stalin and Mao *both agreed* that capitalism belonged in the dustbin of history.”) Delete *both*.

***Unique*.** This word means one of a kind. It is an absolute. Something cannot be very unique, more unique, or somewhat unique.

***Incredible*.** In casual conversation *incredible* often means extraordinary, astonishing, or impressive (“Yesterday’s storm was *incredible*.”). To avoid confusion in historical prose, you should stick with the original meaning of *incredible*: not believable. If you write that “William Jennings Bryan gave *incredible* speeches,” you’re saying that you don’t believe his speeches, or that his audiences didn’t believe them at the time—in other words, that he appeared to be lying or mistaken. You probably mean that he gave great speeches. If you write that “It’s *incredible* that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor,” you’re calling into question the very existence of a historical event. You probably mean that the Japanese attack was unwise or reckless. English is rich with adjectives. Finding the best one forces you to think about what you really mean.

***Issue*.** As a synonym for subject matter, bone of contention, reservation, or almost anything else vaguely associated with what you are discussing, the word *issue* has lost its meaning through overuse. (“There

were many *issues* involved with Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, and some historians have *issues* with his decision.") Stop talking about *issues* and get to the point.

***Literally.*** Beware of the word *literally*. It's commonly misused, and you almost never need it in historical prose. *Literally* means actually, factually, exactly, directly, without metaphor. The careful writer would never say, "Roosevelt *literally* swamped Landon in the election of 1936." One imagines Roosevelt (in his wheelchair no less!) dumping the hapless Landon off a pier in the Everglades on election night. The swamping was figurative, strictly a figure of speech. The adverb *literally* may also cause you trouble by falsely generalizing the coverage of your verb. "London was *literally* destroyed by the blitz." This suggests that the whole city was destroyed, when, in fact, only parts were destroyed. Rewrite as "The blitz destroyed parts of London." Now you've qualified properly (and gotten rid of the passive).

***Involve.*** When you're tempted to use this word, resist. Like *issue*, *involve* tells the reader too little. ("Erasmus was *involved* in the Renaissance.") This statement could mean virtually anything. Delete it and discuss specifically what Erasmus said or did.

***Aspect.*** This is a fine old word with many precise meanings, but as an overused synonym for feature, side, or part, it is usually a sign of insipid prose ("Another *aspect* of the issues in this area is the fact that..."). Just get directly to the point.

***Impact.*** Most good writers frown on the use of this word as a verb. ("Eisenhower's military background *impacted* his foreign policy.") Affected, influenced, or shaped would be better here. *Impacted* suggests painfully blocked wisdom teeth or feces. *Had an impact* is better than *impacted*, but is still awkward because *impact* implies a collision.

***Factor.*** Here is another beloved but vapid word. ("Many *factors* led to the Reformation.") Such a sentence usually opens a vague, boring, weaseling paragraph. If you believe (quite reasonably) that the Reformation had many causes, then start evaluating them.

***Meaningful.*** Overuse has drained the meaning from *meaningful*. ("Peter the Great took *meaningful* steps to westernize Russia.") Just get to the point.

**Interesting.** The adjective *interesting* is vague, overused, and does not earn its keep. (“Burckhardt had an *interesting* perspective on the Renaissance.”) This sentence is filler. Delete it and explain and analyze his perspective.

**The events that transpired.** Your professor will gag on this one. Events take place or happen by definition, so the relative clause is redundant. Furthermore, most good writers do not accept *transpire* as a synonym for happen. Again, follow the old rule of thumb: Get right to the point, say what happened, and explain its significance. You don’t need any filler about *events* and *transpiring*.

**The reason is because.** This phrase is awkward and redundant. Replace it with *the reason is*, or better still, simply delete it and get right to your reason.

**For all intensive purposes.** The phrase is *for all intents and purposes*, and few good writers use it in formal prose anyway.

**Take for granite.** This is an illiteracy. The phrase is “take for granted.”

**Should of/could of.** You mean should *have* or could *have*.

**Center around.** Good writers frown on this phrase because it’s illogical and jarring. Use *center on* or *center in*. Attention to a small detail like this indicates that you’re thinking carefully about what you’re saying, so when the big problems confront you, you’ll be disciplined and ready.

**Begs the question.** Recently, many people have started to use this phrase to mean raises, invites, or brings up the question. (“Stalin’s purges *beg the question* of whether he was paranoid.”) Actually, *begging the question* is the common logical fallacy of assuming your conclusion as part of your argument. (“In the late nineteenth century, many Americans moved to the cities because of urbanization.”) Note that the use of abstractions (e.g., urbanization) encourages *begging the question*. Understanding this fallacy is central to your education. The formal Latin term, *petitio principii*, is too fancy to catch on, so you need to preserve the simple English phrase. If something raises a question, just say so.

**Historic/historical confusion.** Everything in the past or relating to the past is *historical*. Resist the media-driven hype that elevates the ordinary to the *historic*. (“A three-alarm fire last night destroyed the *historic* site of the first Portuguese-owned dry cleaners in Cleveland.”) Reserve the word *historic* for the genuinely important events, persons, or objects of the past. The Norman invasion of England in 1066 was indeed *historic*. *Historically*, historians have gathered annually for a *historical* convention; so far, none of the conventions has been *historic*.

**Affect/effect confusion.** The chances are that the verb you want is *affect*, which means to have an influence on (“The Iranian hostage crisis *affected* [not *effected*] the presidential election of 1980”). *Effect* as a verb means to bring about or cause to exist (*effect* change). *Effect* as a noun means result or consequence (“The *effect* of the Iranian hostage crisis on the election...”).

**While/whereas confusion.** If you’re stressing contrast, the word you want is *whereas*. *While* stresses simultaneity. “Hobbes had a dismal view of human nature, *whereas* [not *while*] Rousseau believed that man had a natural sense of pity.”

**It’s/its confusion.** This is *the* classic bonehead error. Note that the spell checker won’t help you. And remember—*its’* is not a word at all.

**Reign/rein confusion.** A queen reigns during her reign. You rein in a horse with reins.

**Their/there/they’re confusion.** You do know the difference. Pay attention.

**Everyday/every day confusion.** As an adjective, *everyday* (one word) means routine. If you wish to say that something happened on every successive day, then you need two words, the adjective *every* and the noun *day*. Note the difference in these two sentences: “Kant was famous for going on the same constitutional at the same time *every day*. For Kant, exercise and thinking were *everyday* activities.”

**Refer/allude confusion.** To *allude* means to refer to indirectly or to hint at. The word you probably want in historical prose is *refer*,

which means to mention or call direct attention to. “In the first sentence of the ‘Gettysburg Address’ Lincoln *refers* [not *alludes*] to the fathers of the nation [he mentions them directly]; he *alludes* to the ‘Declaration of Independence’ [the document of four score and seven years earlier that comes to the reader’s mind, but that Lincoln doesn’t directly mention].”

**Novel/book confusion.** *Novel* is not a synonym for *book*. A *novel* is a long work of fiction in prose. A historical monograph is not a *novel*—unless the historian is making everything up.

**Than/then confusion.** This is an appalling new error. If you are making a comparison, you use the conjunction *than*. (“President Kennedy’s health was worse *than* [not *then*] the public realized.”)

**Lead/led confusion.** The past tense of the verb to *lead* is *led* (not *lead*). “Sherman *led* [not *lead*] a march to the sea.”

**Lose/loose confusion.** The opposite of win is *lose*, not *loose*. “Supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment suspected that they would *lose* [not *loose*] the battle to amend the constitution.”

**However/but confusion.** *However* may not substitute for the coordinating conjunction *but*. (“Mussolini began his career as a socialist, *but* [not *however*] he later abandoned socialism for fascism.”) The word *however* has many proper uses; *however*, [note the semicolon and comma] graceful writers use it sparingly.

**Cite/site/sight confusion.** You *cited* a source for your paper; ancient Britons *sited* Stonehenge on a plain; Columbus’s lookout *sighted* land.

**Conscience/conscious confusion.** When you wake up in the morning you are *conscious*, though your *conscience* may bother you if you’ve neglected to write your history paper.

**Tenet/tenant confusion.** Your religion, ideology, or worldview all have *tenets*—propositions you hold or believe in. *Tenants* rent from landlords.

**All are not/not all are confusion.** If you write, “*All* the colonists *did not* want to break with Britain in 1776,” the chances are you really mean, “*Not all* the colonists wanted to break with Britain in 1776.” The first sentence is a clumsy way of saying that no colonists wanted to break with Britain (and is clearly false). The second sentence says that some colonists did not want to break with Britain (and is clearly true, though you should go on to be more precise).

**Nineteenth-century/nineteenth century confusion.** Historians talk a lot about centuries, so you need to know when to hyphenate them. Follow the standard rule: If you combine two words to form a compound adjective, use a hyphen, unless the first word ends in *ly*. (“*Nineteenth-century* [hyphenated] steamships cut the travel time across the Atlantic.”) Leave out the hyphen if you’re just using the ordinal number to modify the noun *century*. (“In the *nineteenth century* [no hyphen] steamships cut the travel time across the Atlantic.”) By the way, while you have centuries in mind, don’t forget that the nineteenth century is the 1800s, not the 1900s. The same rule for hyphenating applies to *middle-class* and *middle class*—a group that historians like to talk about.

**Bourgeois/bourgeoisie confusion.** *Bourgeois* is usually an adjective, meaning characteristic of the middle class and its values or habits. Occasionally, *bourgeois* is a noun, meaning a single member of the middle class. *Bourgeoisie* is a noun, meaning the middle class collectively. (“Marx believed that the *bourgeoisie* oppressed the proletariat; he argued that *bourgeois* values like freedom and individualism were hypocritical.”)



## Analyzing a Historical Document

Your professor may ask you to analyze a primary document. Here are some questions you might ask of your document. You will note a common theme—read critically with sensitivity to the context. This list is not a suggested outline for a paper; the wording of the assignment and the nature of the document itself should determine your organization and which of the questions are most relevant. Of course, you can ask these same questions of any document you encounter in your research.

- What exactly is the document (e.g., diary, king's decree, opera score, bureaucratic memorandum, parliamentary minutes, newspaper article, peace treaty)?
- Are you dealing with the original or with a copy? If it is a copy, how remote is it from the original (e.g., photocopy of the original, reformatted version in a book, translation)? How might deviations from the original affect your interpretation?
- What is the date of the document?
- Is there any reason to believe that the document is not genuine or not exactly what it appears to be?
- Who is the author, and what stake does the author have in the matters discussed? If the document is unsigned, what can you infer about the author or authors?
- What sort of biases or blind spots might the author have? For example, is an educated bureaucrat writing with third-hand knowledge of rural hunger riots?
- Where, why, and under what circumstances did the author write the document?
- How might the circumstances (e.g., fear of censorship, the desire to curry favor or evade blame) have influenced the content, style, or tone of the document?
- Has the document been published? If so, did the author intend it to be published?
- If the document was not published, how has it been preserved? In a public archive? In a private collection? Can you learn anything from the way it has been preserved? For example, has it been treated as important or as a minor scrap of paper?
- Does the document have a boilerplate format or style, suggesting that it is a routine sample of a standardized genre, or does it appear out of the ordinary, even unique?

- Who is the intended audience for the document?
- What exactly does the document say? Does it imply something different?
- If the document represents more than one viewpoint, have you carefully distinguished between the author's viewpoint and those viewpoints the author presents only to criticize or refute?
- In what ways are you, the historian, reading the document differently than its intended audience would have read it (assuming that future historians were not the intended audience)?
- What does the document leave out that you might have expected it to discuss?
- What does the document assume that the reader already knows about the subject (e.g., personal conflicts among the Bolsheviks in 1910, the details of tax farming in eighteenth-century Normandy, secret negotiations to end the Vietnam war)?
- What additional information might help you better interpret the document?
- Do you know (or are you able to infer) the effects or influences, if any, of the document?
- What does the document tell you about the period you are studying?
- If your document is part of an edited collection, why do you suppose the editor chose it? How might the editing have changed the way you perceive the document? For example, have parts been omitted? Has it been translated? (If so, when, by whom, and in what style?) Has the editor placed the document in a suggestive context among other documents, or in some other way led you to a particular interpretation?

## Writing a Book Review

Your professor may ask you to write a book review, probably of a scholarly historical monograph. Here are some questions you might ask of the book. Remember that a good review is critical, but critical does not necessarily mean negative. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, nor is it a suggested outline. Of course, you can ask these same questions of any secondary historical work, even if you're not writing a review.

- Who is the author, and what are his or her qualifications? Has the author written other books on the subject?
- When was the book written, and how does it fit into the scholarly debate on the subject? For example, is Smith writing to refute that idiot Jones; to qualify the work of the competent but unimaginative Johnson; or to add humbly to the evidence presented by the redoubtable Brown's classic study? Be sure not to confuse the author's argument with those arguments he or she presents only to criticize later.
- What is the book's basic argument? (Getting this right is the foundation of your review.)
- What is the author's method? For example, does the author rely strictly on narrative and anecdotes, or is the book analytical in some way?
- What kinds of evidence does the author use? For example, what is the balance of primary and secondary sources? Has the author done archival work? Is the source base substantial, or does it look thin? Is the author up-to-date in the scholarly literature?
- How skillfully and imaginatively has the author used the evidence?
- Does the author actually use all of the material in the bibliography, or is some of it there for display?
- What sorts of explicit or implicit ideological or methodological assumptions does the author bring to the study? For example, does he or she profess bland objectivity? A Whig view of history? Marxism?
- How persuasive is the author's argument?
- Is the argument new, or is it old wine in new bottles?
- Is the argument important, with wide-ranging implications, or is it narrow and trivial?
- Is the book well organized and skillfully written?
- What is your overall critical assessment of the book?
- What is the general significance, if any, of the book? (Make sure that you are judging the book that the author actually wrote, not complaining that the author should have written a different book.)

## Writing a Term Paper or Senior Thesis

Here are some tips for those long, intimidating term papers or senior theses:

- **Start early.** If you don't, none of these tips will matter. Big trouble is looming if you don't have a specific topic by the end of the first week. You should be delving into the sources during the second week.
- Keep in mind all of the dos and don'ts in this booklet.
- Work closely with your professor to assure that your topic is neither too broad nor too narrow.
- Set up a schedule with your professor and check his or her policy about reading rough drafts or parts of rough drafts. Then keep your professor informed about what you're doing. You don't want any unpleasant surprises. You certainly don't want to hear, "I haven't seen you for weeks, and it sounds like you're way off base. How can you possibly get this done with only two weeks left in the semester?"
- Make an appointment with Kristin Strohmeyer, the history reference librarian in Burke Library. She will help you to find and use the appropriate catalogs and indexes.
- Use your imagination in compiling a bibliography. Think of all of the possible key words and subjects that may lead you to material. If you find something really good, check the subjects under which it is cataloged. Comb the notes and bibliographies of books and articles you've already found.
- Much of what you need will not be in our library, so get to know the friendly folks in the Interlibrary Loan department.
- **Start early.** This can't be said too often.
- Use as many primary sources as you can.
- Jot down your ideas as they come to you. You may not remember them later.
- Take careful notes on your reading. Label your notes completely and precisely. Distinguish meticulously and systematically between what you are directly quoting and what you are summarizing in your own words. Unintended plagiarism is still plagiarism. Stay clean as a hound's tooth. Write down not just the page of the quotation or idea, but also the whole run of pages where the matter is discussed. Reread all of your notes periodically to make sure that you still understand them and are compiling what you will need to write your paper. Err on the side of writing down more than you think you will need. Copious, precise notes won't come back to haunt you; skimpy, vague notes will. Just accept that there is something anal about good note-taking.

- If you take notes directly into your computer, they will be easy to index and pull up, but there are a couple of downsides. You will not be able to see all of them simultaneously, as you can note cards laid out on a big table. What you gain in ease of access may come at the price of losing the big picture. Also, if your notes are in your computer, you may be tempted to save time and thought by pasting many of them directly into your paper. Note cards encourage you to rethink and to rework your ideas into a unified whole.
- Don't start to write until you have a good outline.
- Make sure that your paper has a thesis. (See the entry *State a clear thesis*.)
- Check and recheck your facts.
- Footnote properly. (See the entry *Cite sources carefully*.)
- Save plenty of time to proofread.
- *Start early*.

## Top Ten Signs that you may be Writing a Weak History Paper

10. You're overjoyed to find that you can fill the required pages by widening all margins.
9. You haven't mentioned any facts or cited any sources for several paragraphs.
8. You find yourself using the phrase "throughout history mankind has..."
7. You just pasted in another 100 words of quotations.
6. You haven't a clue about the content of your next paragraph.
5. You're constantly clicking on *The Britannica*, *Webster's*, and *Bartlett's*.
4. Your writing tutor sneaks another look at her watch as she reminds you for the third time to clarify your thesis.
3. Your main historical actors are this, it, they, the people, and society, and they are all involved with factors, aspects, impacts, and issues.
2. You just realize that you don't understand the assignment, but it's 3:00 A.M, the paper is due at 9:00, and you don't dare call your professor.
1. You're relieved that the paper counts for only 20 percent of the course grade.

## Final Advice

You guessed it — **start early.**