

Steps for Writing a History Paper

Writing a history paper is a process. Successful papers are not completed in a single moment of genius or inspiration, but are developed over a series of steps. When you first read a paper prompt, you might feel overwhelmed or intimidated. If you think of writing as a process and break it down into smaller steps, you will find that paper-writing is manageable, less daunting, and even enjoyable. Writing a history paper is your opportunity to do the real work of historians, to roll up your sleeves and dig deep into the past.

What is a history paper?

History papers are driven by arguments. In a history class, even if you are not writing a paper based on outside research, you are still writing a paper that requires some form of argument. For example, suppose your professor has asked you to write a paper discussing the differences between colonial New England and colonial Virginia. It might seem like this paper is straightforward and does not require an argument, that it is simply a matter of finding the “right answer.” However, even here you need to construct a paper guided by a larger argument. You might argue that the main differences between colonial New England and Virginia were grounded in contrasting visions of colonization. Or you might argue that the differences resulted from accidents of geography or from extant alliances between regional Indian groups. Or you might make an argument that draws on all of these factors. Regardless, when you make these types of assertions, you are making an argument that requires historical evidence. Any history paper you write will be driven by an argument demanding evidence from sources.

History writing assignments can vary widely—and you should always follow your professor’s specific instructions—but the following steps are designed to help no matter what kind of history paper you are writing. Remember that the staff of the History Writing Center is here to assist you at any stage of the writing process.

1. Make sure you know what the paper prompt is asking.

Sometimes professors distribute prompts with several sub-questions surrounding the main question they want you to write about. The sub-questions are designed to help you think about the topic. They offer ideas you might consider, but they are not, usually, the key question or questions you need to answer in your paper. Make sure you distinguish the key questions from the sub-questions. Otherwise, your paper may sound like a laundry list of short-answer essays rather than a cohesive argument.

A helpful way to hone in on the key question is to look for action verbs, such as “analyze” or “investigate” or “formulate.” Find such words in the paper prompt and circle them. Then, carefully consider what you are being asked to do. Write out the key question at the top of your draft and of the

certainly change as you move through the writing process. For more information, visit our section about thesis statements. Once you have a thesis, you may find that you need to do more research targeted to your specific argument. Revisit some of the tips from Step 3.

5. Identify your key sources (both primary and secondary) and annotate them.

Now that you have a working thesis, look back over your sources and identify which ones are most critical to you—the ones you will be grappling with most directly in order to make your argument. Then, annotate them. Annotating sources means writing a paragraph that summarizes the main idea of the source as well as shows how you will use the source in your paper. Think about what the source does for you. Does it provide evidence in support of your argument? Does it offer a counterpoint that you can then refute, based on your research? Does it provide critical historical background that you need in order to make a point? For more information about annotating sources, visit our section on annotated bibliographies.

While it might seem like this step creates more work for you by having you do more writing, it in fact serves two critical purposes: it helps you refine your working thesis by distilling exactly what your sources are saying, and it helps smooth your writing process. Having dissected your sources and articulated your ideas about them, you can more easily draw upon them when constructing your paper. Even if you do not have to do outside research and are limited to working with the readings you have done in class, annotating sources is still very useful. Write down exactly how a particular section in the textbook or in a primary source reader will contribute to your paper.

6. Draft an outline of your paper.

An outline is helpful in giving you a sense of the overall structure of your paper and how best to organize your ideas. You need to decide how to arrange your argument in a way that will make the most sense to your reader. Perhaps you decide that your argument is most clear when presented chronologically, or perhaps you find that it works best with a thematic approach. There is no one right way to organize a history paper; it depends entirely on the prompt, on your sources, and on what you think would be most clear to someone reading it.

An effective outline includes the following components: the research question from the prompt

If you have trouble getting started or are feeling overwhelmed, try free writing. Free writing is a low-stakes writing exercise to help you get past the blank page. Set a timer for five or ten minutes and write down everything you know about your paper: your argument, your sources, counterarguments, everything. Do not edit or judge what you

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