

Writing Tips

This paper is designed as a guide for writing a good history paper. While this is a history course and I am primarily concerned with history papers, these tips can be applied to writing for a variety of disciplines. One of the main goals of this class is to help develop your analytical writing skills. The tools I provide here are important, but they can be overshadowed if you forget some of the basics such as proper spelling, good grammar, clear sentences, and active voice.

If you have had trouble with writing papers in the past then I would suggest that you seek help before the paper is due. I am available for office hours to discuss any questions or problems you may have, just make sure that you come in BEFORE the paper is due. Whether you seek assistance or not, please review this sheet both before and after you write the paper.

1. Avoid Global Openings

Do not begin your papers with statements like: "Throughout all of history, people have struggled with the question of racism," instead try for something that draws the reader into the specific subject on which you are focusing. For example, "after the civil war, the governments of the Southern States passed laws restricting rights and opportunities of African Americans. In response, different African American leaders struggled to develop strategies to respond to these laws."

2. Provide a Thesis Statement

In your introduction you will need a thesis statement. In one to three sentences, a thesis statement presents the main idea, or the focus, of your paper. It must also contain an argument that requires evidence and development.

I will take your thesis statement very seriously. I expect your paper to demonstrate what your thesis statement claims. I will be confused if your paper covers LESS or MORE than your thesis statement claims.

3. Use Topic Sentences and Have Coherent Paragraphs

Each paragraph of your paper should begin with a clear sentence indicating the scope of the paragraph and its role in developing your argument. For example, consider a paragraph that begins "President Diem's rule was doomed by his inflexible pride and the unbridled ambitions of his family members." This paragraph would give an example of Diem's pride, would explain the effect of his family's ambitions on his presidency and would conclude by noting his murder by former aides disgruntled by his decisions and ruling styles.

In contrast, a less clear paragraph on same topic might begin with "President Diem's presidency was doomed." A truly confusing paragraph would simply start talking about President Diem without any indication of purpose.

Remember that each paragraph develops your overall argument. As you write, check whether the information in each paragraph is relevant to your argument (and your thesis statement). If it is not, you may want to change your thesis or you may have gone off your topic.

4. Write in the Past Tense

You should use the past tense in your papers. You are writing about events that happened in the past. Do not write, "the Beatles attract considerable attention from girls because they are talented and sexy." If you were alive in 1964, you could have written this sentence, but it is not appropriate for 2012

What about quotations you might wonder? Many people choose to introduce quotations in the present tense. For example: "During the early 1930s, Robert Goldberg **asserts**, 'the [Communist] Party positioned itself as the vehicle for men and women whose discontent was immediate and situational...'" This usage is acceptable but not required. You can write the sentence in the past tense: "during the early 1930s, David Goldberg **asserted**, 'the [Communist] Party positioned itself as the vehicle for men and women whose discontent was immediate and situational...'"

5. Use Short, Well-Chosen Quotations in Your Paper

The most effective papers will use short quotations from the assigned readings, especially from primary sources (documents produced in the past during the period you are discussing). These quotations must be indicated with quotation marks ("like this"). In general, you should never quote more than a single sentence. If you do quote extensively, the quotation used should be its own paragraph, indented on both the right and left sides. Short, well-chosen quotations will help support your argument and add vitality to your papers

In addition, you should introduce every quote or incorporate it smoothly into the sentence. For example, *Robert and Helen Lyndon argue that most teenage girls in Middletown were "planning to work after graduation... only 3 per cent said definitely that they did not expect to work."* Or, for example: *Some Southerners argued that the recently freed slaves were a threat to "our Anglo-Saxon race and Anglo-Saxon government."*

6. Provide Citations for Your Papers in Footnotes or Endnotes

You are required to cite the sources for the information, paraphrases, and quotations in your papers. For this class, you **MUST USE footnotes or endnotes or parenthetical citations** in your papers. These citations document the source of any paraphrase or

summary of any information that you did not know before writing the paper, and of any direct quotations.

Remember that the numerical reference to footnote or endnote should always appear at the **end** of the sentence. If you have more than one citation in the same sentence, combine them into one citation. The numerical references should run in consecutive order from 1 to 7 (or, however many citations you need). You may have footnotes at the bottom of the page or put all the citations at the end in endnotes. If you do not have word processing software that easily accommodates footnotes, you will want to do endnotes. As for the numbers in the text, you should subscript them if possible. In the worst case, you can hand number them.

7. Conclude Your Paper with the Significance of Your Argument

The conclusion of your paper should emphasize the significance of the argument of the paper. You do not want to introduce a brand-new topic. You do not want to repeat your introduction. You may want to connect your argument to contemporary debates, or you may want to emphasize how your argument can help people to think about the past differently.

Remember it is quite common to figure out what a paper is arguing when you write the first draft of the conclusion. This insight is great. Yet, you want to use that insight to revise your introduction! You then may need to write a different conclusion. Always compare your introduction and your conclusion. Your introduction should suggest the material in your conclusion but the two should not repeat each other.

Remember DRAFTS MAKE GOOD PAPERS

WRITE; TAKE A BREAK; WRITE

FINAL CHECKLIST

You will need to write a first draft of the paper. When done, review the following points:

1. Do you have an introduction that explains the scope of the paper, its structure and its argument?
2. Does each paragraph refer to a coherent issue and is it supported with evidence?
3. Are the paragraphs in an order that allows your argument to develop?
4. Does your conclusion indicate how your paper connects to important issues in American history?
5. Have you cited the sources of all information, ideas, paraphrases, and quotes?
6. Do you have a title?

When you can answer yes to all of the above questions, you are *almost* ready to print out the final version of the paper. Before hitting the print command, be sure to check the following:

1. Are the spelling, punctuation, and grammar in the paper correct?
2. Is the paper typed?
3. Are the pages numbered?
4. Is there a title that indicates your name, the title of the paper, and the date?
Please put your name only on the title page.

Now print out the paper and staple it in the upper left-hand corner. Do not email it to me unless you have made prior arrangements. Do not put it in a folder or binder. Remember the paper is due at the **beginning** of class.