

Writing History Term Papers

By Dr. Jim Kenny, History

10 Qualities of a Good History Paper:

1. An introduction that clearly states the aim, the research question and the thesis (main argument) of the paper

At the outset the author needs to inform the reader what the paper is about and what is the main argument (or thesis). In outlining the paper's aim the author should state clearly the **main research question**. Please note: there is a difference between the topic of the paper and its research question. The First World War is a fine general topic, but it is not a question. What in particular about the First World War do you want to study? If you are interested in the conflict's origins, the question guiding your research might be "What were the main causes of the First World War?" A clearly defined research question allows you to better focus your research efforts and provides a focal point (or *raison d'être*) for the paper. Your **thesis** is your answer to the research question (i.e. "The main causes of the First World War were ...") Therefore, a good introductory paragraph should proceed from announcing the subject matter, to addressing the research question, to the thesis that will guide the arguments and evidence found in the body of the paper.

Hint: when writing a paper, write a rough draft of your introduction that outlines your question and what you think is your main argument. After writing the body of the paper, revisit your introduction to ensure that you have clearly outlined your argument. Sometimes the details of an argument only become clear after you have written the paper!

2. Good research

A successful argument requires good research.

- The author should consult **and use** key books and articles on the chosen topic. Most professors will ask students to use a minimum number of sources. Be sure to meet these requirements **and to demonstrate your familiarity with the sources by citing them throughout the paper**.
- In conducting research, students will sometimes be confronted with historians who disagree on key issues. In these cases, the student will be required to take sides, accepting one argument as the most convincing. A good university-level history paper will take into account not only those arguments which corroborate the paper's main thesis, but also those that contradict it. In doing so, the author should explain why one argument is more convincing than the other. This can be done briefly or at length (if it is a crucial issue) in the main body of the paper or in the footnotes.

****On the research process, see Appendix A "How to Research a History Paper."****

3. Relevant evidence presented in a logical manner to prove or demonstrate the paper's main argument (thesis)

A successful history paper both tells a good story and makes an argument. The narrative in a history paper is important, but that narrative is directed at answering the paper's key question and demonstrating its thesis. Provide evidence to illustrate your key claims. Develop your thesis in a logical and clear manner. Give the reader enough background information to follow your argument. Also, ensure that there are smooth transitions between ideas.

Hint: Don't assume too much background knowledge on the part of your reader. The audience for the paper should be intelligent but uninformed about your subject, not your professor, who may know the field very well. If you write for your professor, it is easy to get careless in assuming he or she knows all of the key background information. Moreover, the background information often provides the context for your paper, and you should demonstrate that you have a good grasp of that context before proceeding to the more specific parts of your argument.

4. Key individuals/events are identified clearly and situated in time

When you introduce an individual, organization, event, or historian be sure to identify them/it clearly. Likewise, if you mention an event or development, be sure to mention when it took place. A sense of time is at the heart of history.

5. Accounts for context and complexity of history

- A successful paper recognizes the broader context in which events/developments take place. For example, a paper on the causes of Canadian confederation that focused only on developments within British North America would be incomplete. The broader international context should also be noted. (e.g. threats to BNA sovereignty from the United States and the British government's desire to divest itself of some of its colonial responsibilities.)
- A history paper should also recognize that events/developments (such as the World Wars) are rarely the product of a single cause. Note all relevant causes or factors shaping an event/development, and prioritize them (i.e. explain which are the most influential).
- Ultimately, historians are interested in change and continuity over time. A good history paper should recognize and account for change and continuity within the context of the paper's topic and question. For example, in writing about American foreign policy during the early Cold War era (1947-55), you should pay attention to those elements that changed and those that stayed the same. You should also explain why those aspects of foreign policy changed and/or stayed the same.

6. A strong conclusion

End on a strong note. Sometimes students "run out of steam" at the end of the paper and the result is a short and unsatisfying concluding paragraph. A strong conclusion reviews briefly the main argument(s) of the paper and, if appropriate, the ramifications of those arguments. Most of all, the conclusion should answer the "So What?" question. Why, for instance, is it important to know which factors were most important in leading to the

First World War? The reader should come away from the conclusion with a clear understanding of the author's thesis.

7. Clear writing style

A good university-level history paper should be free of misspellings and grammatical and punctuation mistakes. The author should write in complete sentences, and the prose should be clear. In addition, students should pay attention to the following writing issues:

- Paragraph structure -- A paragraph contains a sustained argument on a key element of your paper. It is useful to think of paragraphs as mini-essays within your larger essay.[link: Para as essay in miniature] A paragraph usually has a central argument or thesis. Use strong topic sentences at the beginning of your paragraph to introduce this argument or thesis. (A topic sentence therefore performs the same function as the introduction to your essay.) The remainder of the paragraph should develop the main argument (introduced in the topic sentence) and illustrate it with evidence. This can rarely be done in less than four or five sentences, so a good rule of thumb is to avoid constructing paragraphs less than three sentences long. On the other hand, you must avoid paragraphs that go on for pages. You should usually be able to develop your point in one page or less.
- Avoid writing in the first person (i.e. the use of "I" or "my opinion") in formal prose.
- Pay attention to verb tense when writing history papers. When writing about the past, use the past tense.
- Students should also use the active voice rather than the passive voice when writing history papers. The passive voice, which emphasizes the verb over the subject ("A decision was made to launch the attack on Verrieres Ridge....") leads to problems in history papers because readers want to know who was responsible for actions or ideas. When authors fail to make the connection between subjects and their actions, readers are left wondering why? Does the author not know who made the decision? Do they not want to tell us? If so, what other information do they not know or are hiding? In contrast, the active voice makes those connections for readers (i.e. "General Simonds decided to launch the attack on Verrieres Ridge....") Good historians try their best to sort out who was responsible for what, and students should only resort to using the passive voice when the subject of the action is either unknown or unimportant (both of which are rare).
- Proofread, proofread, and proofread!!! A paper littered with misspellings, missing words, typos, etc. creates a bad impression. Indeed, it suggests carelessness and is often penalized harshly by instructors. Invest an extra half hour in proofreading at the end of the writing process. Or better yet, give it to someone else to look at since they will view it with "fresh eyes."

8. Proper use of quotations.

- Quotations should be used sparingly. Do not quote basic information (e.g. “The first Quebec referendum on sovereignty was held in 1980.”) Rather, quotations should be used: a) to illustrate a point (e.g. if you were writing about the 1980 referendum you might quote Rene Levesque or Pierre Trudeau to illustrate their position on a key issue.); b) when the author makes a particularly memorable/ controversial statement; or c) when her/his words sum up a particular argument in an especially pithy manner.
- Quotations need to be properly introduced by clearly pointing out who the words belong to (either historian or historical figure). Also, ensure that you provide enough context for the quotation so that the reader can understand its significance. Situate the quote in time and be sure that the author is clearly identified. (e.g. In a paper on the 1980 referendum you might introduce a quote from Rene Levesque thusly: “The “Oui” side’s referendum strategy was clearly spelled out by Quebec’s Parti Quebecois premier, Rene Levesque, in December 1980:” The quotation could then be inserted.)
- Do not use back-to-back quotes (i.e. don’t stack them up on one another).
- Never begin a paragraph with a quotation. They should be used as evidence and examples to draw out your argument.
- Cite all direct quotations and paraphrases in a footnote which gives not only the author’s name and source of the quote, but also the page number where it can be located.

9. Appropriate citation style/ bibliography.

- Ensure that all appropriate information is cited in footnotes with specific page numbers from the source.
- Proper citation style must be followed (historians use Chicago Style). See below for proper citation style.
- All papers should include a bibliography of sources used in the paper. Again, proper style must be followed.

See Appendices B (“What Do I Cite?”) and C (“Proper Citation Style for Historians”)

10. Appropriate title

A title can be a very effective way of introducing your paper. Spend some time thinking about your title. Choose one that gives the reader an indication not only of the subject matter, but also of your main argument/ thesis.

Appendix A

How to research a history paper:

i. Locating and Choosing Sources:

Once you have identified a topic in which you are interested, begin looking for sources that will help you narrow in on a question for your paper. Where should you look?

- A good place to start is your course textbook. Often course textbooks will have good bibliographies which list key sources on a broad range of topics. Identify and consult key sources listed here as a starting point.
- Use library search engines, typing in key words or the name of an historian/author who you know has written on the topic (historians will sometimes write more than one book on the same topic).
- Once you have located a useful source, check the author's footnotes and bibliography for other potential sources. Look for particular authors or particular sources (books journal articles) that appear more than once in a particular bibliography or across the bibliographies of different sources. If all the historians in the field have consulted particular works or particular authors in writing their essays, it is a pretty good bet you should too. The most recently published sources will have the most up-to-date bibliographies.
- Libraries sometimes have published bibliographies on key sources in a particular field. Some good Canadian history examples include, O.A. Cooke, *The Canadian Military Experience 1867-1995: A Bibliography*, Third Edition (Ottawa, 1995), M. Brook Taylor and Doug O'ram, eds., *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1994), and Ronald Haycock and Serge Bernier, *Teaching Canadian Military History: Clio and Mars in Canada* (Athabasca, Alberta, 1995).
- Consult scholarly articles published in journals whenever you can. Scholars often publish articles on a particular topic before they publish their book. Articles are shorter and often contain more focused arguments than do books. They therefore make ideal sources for an undergraduate history paper. You can search for scholarly articles using online periodical databases located in most libraries. Choose a database that best suits your interests. For instance, if you are writing a history paper, a good choice would be *America: History and Life*. There are also databases dedicated to foreign policy and military history. Simply type in key words and take note of promising article titles.
- The internet is another place to look for sources but it must be used with caution. There are lots of good internet sources; government agencies, archives, and museums are increasingly making available documents and interpretative essays written by experts. Moreover, some scholarly journals are putting their articles online. However, while the internet's coverage of subjects is extremely wide, most of it is not very deep. In fact, you can probably find much more in depth information in your

textbooks. And of course there is also a lot of junk on the internet. How, then, should a student assess the value of an internet source? The best way to determine the value of a site is to ask the following questions:

- a. Who created the website and why? If the author is not identified or does not appear to have any credentials that would certify him/her as having any particular expertise in the field, one should be wary of using the site as a source. Likewise, one should always question why the website was created. If, for instance, the information is being presented to further a political or ideological cause, one should avoid the source.
 - b. Are sources for the information contained in the website clearly identified? If not, one should be cautious in using the site.
 - c. Is the website updated regularly?
- In choosing sources for your paper pay attention to when the book or article was published. The most recently-published sources are not always better than older sources (on many topics there are often older essential works that should be consulted), but they do have the benefit of the most up-to-date research. Recent publications will take into account both the latest work by other scholars in the field and new primary sources that have become available. A good paper, then, will make use of a wide range of scholarly work on a subject, from “classic pieces” to the most recent “cutting-edge” research.

ii. Popular and Academic Sources

You should also be aware of the distinction between “academic” (or “scholarly”) history and “popular” history. Academic history tends to be written by professional historians (often, but not always, working within a university) who make extensive use of primary documents (i.e. letters, memos, etc., produced during the time period under consideration) in examining a particular topic and crafting their argument. Academic historians are usually very scrupulous in citing the sources on which they base their arguments. They are also concerned with situating their work in a larger context. This happens in two ways. First, academic historians situate their own particular study or story in the larger political, economic and/or social history of the period. So, for instance, an academic historian studying Canada’s role in the Boer War (1899-1902) would discuss and acknowledge the influence of cultural (i.e. attitudes towards imperialism, growing tensions between French and English Canadians in the 1890s, etc.) as well as political and military factors in explaining the Canadian government’s response. Second, academic historians situate their studies in the larger scholarly context. They usually deal explicitly (in the actual text or their footnotes) with the arguments put forth by other historians who have written about their topic, and show how their interpretation is different. Finally, while academic historians are happy when their work is read by the wider public, their first audience tends to be those within the academic or scholarly community (including university students).

In contrast, “popular” historians write for a non-academic audience. They are concerned with creating a readable narrative (a good story) that is unencumbered by references to scholarly debates and larger historical developments. While many popular historians examine primary source material, they usually pay less attention to the academic practice of citing sources in a comprehensive manner. Critics (usually university-based) complain that, in the pursuit of a good story, popular historians sometimes sacrifice attention to detail and the acknowledgement of scholarly/historical context. Critics of academic historians, on the other hand, complain that they sacrifice readability in the pursuit of comprehensiveness.

Having drawn this contrast, however, it is important to note that some historians write successfully for both academic and popular audiences. Indeed, over the last few years, there have been some within the historical profession who have called on academic historians to make their work more accessible to the wider public, while at the same time maintaining scholarly respectability.

iii. Reading Sources Critically

One of the biggest challenges facing students writing history term papers is note-taking. Books and articles on history tend to be very detailed and it is easy for students to get lost in that detail. Learning to **read critically** and **with a purpose** will help you make sense of the detail and glean the information that you need for your paper in the most efficient manner.

Tips for Reading Scholarly Articles

At first glance, scholarly articles can be intimidating to students. Because they are often quite detailed, it is sometimes difficult to understand the point of the articles or to identify what information is important. The easiest way to make sense of scholarly articles is to break them down in a logical manner.

Scholarly articles share a certain structure. Most are organized around a central question (or questions) and an answer (or answers), also known as a *thesis* (or main argument). The introduction will usually identify the question and thesis while the conclusion will usually restate the thesis, although sometimes using different language. Sometimes the introduction and conclusion are clearly marked but, more often, they are not. In the latter case, look at the first and last few paragraphs of the article. The main body of the paper (i.e. everything else other than the introduction and conclusion) is devoted to demonstrating, or proving, the main argument. While the detail may get dense in this part of the paper, bear in mind that it is being used to explain and demonstrate the larger argument.

When approaching an academic reading, then, your first task should be to identify the author’s question(s) and thesis. To do this, read the introduction first and then look at the conclusion. (Ignore reading the main body of the paper until after you have identified the topic of the paper and the main thesis.) After reading the introduction and conclusion, write down on a piece of paper what you think the author’s question is. Then, write down, in a sentence or two, the author’s answer. Sometimes historians will be forthright

with their particular thesis with a statement such as "It is the contention of this paper....." More often, however, the thesis statement will look like an ordinary declarative sentence in the essay. When searching for a thesis of this kind, pay attention to particular transition words and phrases such as "but," or "however," "yet," and so on. These words tend to signal a "disruption" between what is generally known about a particular subject and what is not known, but which the author believes is important to know or understand. In short, this is where they state their contribution to the subject matter or the historical debate.

Having identified the question and thesis, you now know what the article is about. With this information, you can now read the main body of the paper. Remember, the detail here is being used to demonstrate the thesis. So, on your piece of paper, write down the key pieces of evidence the author is using to prove his/her thesis. You should now have, on a page or two of paper, a schematic of the article.

This approach is useful for reading most scholarly articles. However, you will sometimes encounter an author whose article does not fit this structure (some, though thankfully few, will bury their theses deep in the body of their articles.) In such cases you will have to do some tough slogging, but, even so, once you have identified the thesis, the rest of the paper should make sense.

iv. Note taking

Be sure to take good notes as you read the article or book.

- At the top of a piece of paper or recipe card list the bibliographic information for the source.
- Then, clearly identify the author's purpose, question and main arguments.
- Next, briefly outline the evidence used to illustrate those arguments.
- It is also useful to note your impressions of the argument -- was it convincing? Was it biased or shaped by an explicit or implicit ideological or theoretical framework?
- Use a separate note card or piece of paper for each source.

While note taking, students are often tempted to borrow the author's words. This is dangerous, for students sometimes forget to identify clearly direct quotations in their notes. The result, when writing their paper, is that they can present the author's words as their own; this is plagiarism. This problem also occurs when students paraphrase a sentence by changing only a few words; in these cases the paraphrased sentence remains largely the same as the original. A paraphrase that is "too close" to the original (in both content and form) is also plagiarism. To avoid this very serious problem, use your own words as much as possible when note-taking. When you do use the author's words, be sure to place them in quotation marks and cite the page number.

Appendix B

What do I Cite?¹

Plagiarism must be avoided at all costs. The *RMC Undergraduate Calendar* defines plagiarism as "...the presentation or submission of work as one's own that originates from some other unacknowledged source. In term papers, assignments, and examinations, the verbatim presentation of someone else's work without attribution constitutes an example of plagiarism." (*Royal Military College of Canada Undergraduate Calendar 2003-4*, p.185.)

To avoid plagiarism, it is important to cite the sources of information and ideas used in your paper. The citation of sources is an important part of all academic disciplines as it allows readers to find the source of your information and gives credit to the intellectual work/property of others (i.e. direct quotations or ideas). Here are some examples of the kinds of information that require footnote or endnote citation.

- All citations of specific information not generally known or not likely to be found in a brief encyclopaedia entry (i.e. 167 houses in Quebec's Upper Town were destroyed in one night of Wolfe's siege of Quebec.¹)
- Direct quotations from the text (i.e. Richard Preston argues that construction of an elaborate system of fortresses was "far beyond the bounds of political, and perhaps economic, possibility."²)
- Paraphrases of an author's ideas or general line of argument (i.e. Richard Preston argues that major improvements to Canada's forts would have been too costly, both politically and economically.³) It should be noted here that a valid paraphrase must do more than simply change a few of the author's words or their order.

¹ Robert Leckie, "*A Few Acres of Snow:*" *The Saga of the French and Indian Wars* (New York, James Wiley & Sons, 1999), 354.

² Richard Preston, *The Defence of the Undefended Border: Planning For War in North America, 1867-1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 31.

³ R. Preston, *The Defence of the Undefended Border*, 31.

¹ This section was written by Drs. Jim Kenny and Kevin Brushett of RMC's Department of History.

Appendix C

Citation Style for Historians

1. Book (one author)

Bibliography

Stanley, George F.G. *Canada's Soldiers, 1604-1954: The Military History of an Unmilitary People*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1954.

First Footnote

George F. G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers, 1604-1954: The Military History of an Unmilitary People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954), 35.

Further Footnotes

Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers*, 75.

PLEASE NOTE: Titles of publications (i.e. book titles and journal titles) must be *italicized* or underlined.

1a. Book (Three or more authors)

Bibliography

Francis, R. Douglas, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith. *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation Third Edition*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996.

First Footnote

R. Douglas Francis et al, *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation Third Edition* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 135.

Further Footnotes

Francis et al, *Destinies*, 137.

2. Journal Article

Bibliography

Roy, Patricia. "The Soldiers Canada Didn't Want: Her Chinese and Japanese Citizens." *Canadian Historical Review* Vol. LIX, No. 3 (September 1978): 341-58.

Footnote

Patricia Roy, "The Soldiers Canada Didn't Want: Her Chinese and Japanese Citizens," *Canadian Historical Review* Vol. LIX, No. 3 (September 1978): 345-6.

Further Footnotes

Roy, "The Soldiers Canada Didn't Want," 350-1.

PLEASE NOTE: When citing a journal article, underline/italicize the title of the journal in which the article appears. The article title is placed in quotation marks.

3. Internet Sources²

Sources on the World Wide Web that students and scholars use in their research include a wide range of scholarly projects, reference databases, the texts of books, articles in periodicals, and professional, commercial, and personal sites. In citing sources from the internet, your object should be to duplicate as closely as possible the bibliographic or footnote information and format that you would provide for conventional sources which makes it possible for a reader to locate the information again. In addition to the normal information that you would provide for a conventional source you should provide the following minimum information about the site itself:

- Title of the web site underlined or italicized, but not both.
- For a personal web site with no title, treat the owner of the site as an author and use the description “Home Page” as the title.
- Name of any institution or organization sponsoring or associated with the web site.
- Date when the researcher accessed the source.
- Electronic address, or URL, of the source in angle brackets (<>). (Use of these brackets prevents word processing programmes from automatically converting the URL listing to an underlined hypertext entry.)

PLEASE NOTE: Web documents generally do not have fixed page numbers or any kind of section numbering. If your source lacks numbering, you have to omit numbers from your references. If your source includes fixed page numbers or section numbering (such as numbering of paragraphs), cite the relevant numbers. For a document printed from the Web, the page numbers of a printout should normally not be cited, because the pagination may vary in different printouts.

Footnote/ Bibliographical Entry

Scholarly Projector Web Site

Willet, Perry. Ed. *Victorian Women Writers Project*. Apr. 1997. Indiana University. 26 Apr. 1997 <<http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/>>.

Professional Site

Portuguese Language Page. University of Chicago. 1 May 1997 <<http://humanties.uchicago.edu/romance/port/>>.

² This section on citing internet sources was adapted from an earlier version of the RMC History Department’s essat writing guide written by LCdr Greg Hannah.

Personal Web Site

Lancashire, Ian. *Home page*. 1 May 1997 <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/-ian/index.html>>.

Book on a website

Nesbit, Edith. *Ballads and lyrics of Socialism*. Victorian Women Writers Project. Ed. Perry Willet. Apr 1997. Indiana University. 26 Apr 1997 <<http://www.indiana.edu/letrs/vwwp/nesbit/ballsoc.html>>.

Article in a Reference Database

Fresco. *Britannica Online*. Vers 97.1.1 Mar. 1997. Encyclopaedia Britannica 29 Mar 1997 <<http://www.eb.com:180>>.

Article in an online Journal

Flannagan, Roy. "Reflections on Milton and Ariosto." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2.3(1996): 16 paras. 22 Feb 1997 <<http://unixg.ubc.ca:7001/0/e-sources/emls/02-3/flanmilt.html>>.

Article in an online Magazine

Landsburg, Steven E. "Who Shall Inherit the Earth?" *Slate* 1 May 1997 <<http://salte.com/Economics/97-05-01/Economics.asp>>.

Miscellaneous Web Site

Noveltex. The World Wide Web Store. 5 Jan 2001 <<http://www.noveltexlinen.com/>>.

Appendix D

Characteristics of Papers at Various Grade Levels

A Paper

A paper of this level displays a mastery of the information and the theoretical context in which it is presented. It contains original thought expressed fluently and written with a style distinguished by its freshness and clarity. The argument is sound, substantive, organized, introduces other points of view and uses proper sources effectively. One is impressed by the author's contribution to the understanding of the topic and where the subject is going.

B Paper

The author demonstrates a substantial knowledge of the information and theoretical concepts associated with the subject. The paper is well-written and presented with no serious flaws, a good use of sources and a clear thesis. The argument is above average in organization and analysis and brings in points to support the thesis. There is an awareness of different points of view. The conclusion is sound but not original. Generally, the paper is competent but not extraordinary.

C Paper

The author demonstrates an acceptable grasp of the material and awareness of the sources and general theory. The organization is logical and the style follows proper form, although there may be some lapses in each aspect. The paper would be best described as descriptive because it lacks any substantial analysis, and demonstrates a modest ability to work with the material critically. One senses the author does not fully understand the issues of the subject because the ideas are shallow, undeveloped, and tend to stray from the subject.

D Paper

The author shows a familiarity with the subject, but not an understanding of it. He or she lacks the writing or communication skill to intelligibly relate what knowledge has been comprehended. The paper is disorganized, lacks structure, and the ideas are undeveloped. There is not evidence of substantial thought.

E/F Paper

The author is without any writing skill. Grammar and spelling errors dominate and disguise the lack of organization. The ideas are unrelated to the subject and reveal a complete misunderstanding of the task.

Source

John Lutz, George Younge, Jeremy Cook and Peter McLeod,
Resource Guide for Teaching and Marking Assistants in History.
Toronto: Canadian Historical Association, 1992.