

GUIDELINES FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND WRITING

HOW TO APPROACH RESEARCH AND WRITING

A. Fourteen Steps to a good historical research paper.

In *A Short Guide to Writing About History* Richard Marius outlines fourteen steps that every student should follow in writing a historical research paper.

1. Identify your audience. All writing assignments are intended to be read, and the intended audience should always determine what is written. History is no different. An entry on Napoleon in World Book Encyclopedia is written for a general audience, while an article on Napoleon's Waterloo Campaign in the Journal of Military History is written for a scholarly audience. Unless otherwise instructed by your professor, you should always approach research papers in history courses as though you were writing an article for readers who have an interest in a particular subject but who may not be specialists in the field. Define important terms and give enough information to provide a context for your paper, but do not get bogged down in general information.

2. Have a sharply focused and limited topic. You must limit your topic in order to study the sources carefully, to think about them thoroughly, and to write about them meaningfully. **If you try to do too much, you will not do anything.**

3. Present an argument. A common misconception about historical research papers is that they should simply compile the facts. Nothing is further from the truth. **The purpose of writing a historical research paper is to interpret the past.** Do not simply provide what one would find in an encyclopedia entry, whose purpose is, in the words of Sergeant Joe Friday, "to state the facts, and nothing but the facts." Find a problem and try to solve it. Ask a question and seek to answer it. There must be a thesis or theses to develop.

4. Base your paper on primary sources and a thorough reading of secondary sources. Whenever possible trace your research back to the primary sources. Primary sources are the texts nearest to any subject of investigation; secondary sources are always written about primary sources. The most common primary sources are written documents. But primary sources can also include photographs, paintings, sculpture, architecture, oral interviews, statistical tables, and even geography. A thorough reading of secondary sources will provide you a sense of interpretation. **Never rely upon one secondary source! Always incorporate the views of as many secondary sources as possible!**

5. Build your paper step by step on evidence. You must give readers reasons to believe your story. Nobody is interested in your opinion if it is not clear that you know something. **Do not make generalizations, unless they can be immediately supported by quoting, summarizing, or otherwise alluding to a source.** Writing a history paper is similar to presenting a case in a court of law. The reader is your judge and jury and you must present evidence to support your case. Evidence is not always clear; it must be analyzed, evaluated, and pieced together before it can be used.

6. Provide a good title for your paper. A good title not only captures the interest of the reader but also helps the writer stay focused on the main point.

7. Get to the point quickly and stick to it. A good paper sets the scene quickly, reveals a problem to be solved, and sets out in the direction of a solution. **The best writers have something important to say and start saying it quickly.** Within two paragraphs of the beginning, the reader should understand why you have written your paper; otherwise, the reader will lose interest before you get to the point. Stick to the point. **Be sure everything in your paper serves your main purpose, and be sure your readers understand how everything included in the paper relates to the main purpose.**

8. Tell a good story. Capture the readers' imagination by writing descriptively, while at the same time writing analytically. Good historical writing should take the reader along a journey through time that explores important issues and arrives at a climax, where everything comes together.

9. Document your sources. You will not be taken seriously for your own work unless you demonstrate that you are familiar with primary sources and the work of others who have studied the same material. To avoid the cardinal sin of plagiarism, you must document the sources used for facts, ideas, and interpretations presented in your paper, unless they are common knowledge.

10. Write dispassionately. Do not interject your emotions into your prose. Be careful in passing judgments. People in the past must be judged by the standards of their own time, not ours. Allow people's actions or words to speak for themselves. Readers do not need coercive comments and often resent them. If you have presented the details, trust your readers to have the right reactions.

11. Reach independent conclusions. A good paper demonstrates both thorough research and independent analysis. **Never simply tie a series of block quotes together and try to pass it off as a research paper!** Present your own conclusions and interpretations based upon thorough research.

12. Consider counter-evidence. There is always more than one side to every issue. You must take counter-evidence into account. Never research and write toward a preconceived idea. Let your research be your guide. Always consider opposing information and interpretations in writing a paper; the reader will have more confidence in your conclusions if it is clear that you have weighed every side of an issue carefully before reaching a conclusion.

13. Use standard English and observe the common conventions of writing. A paper may be based upon thorough research of both primary and secondary sources, but it will be worthless if it is poorly written. The reader not only will be unable to understand the point the writer is trying to convey, but will not take him/her seriously. If the reader has to read a sentence more than once, odds are that something is wrong with the sentence.

14. Let your first and last paragraphs mirror each other. Although your beginning and ending should not be mechanical recitations of "what I am going to write about" and "what I have written about," they should reflect some of the same words and ideas. The introduction sets out the problem, the body points toward the solution, and the conclusion ties it all together.

B. The Historian's Mindset.

1. Questioning Your Sources: Our knowledge of the past is limited to the sources available about the past. Just as the journalist asks questions to arrive at an understanding of the present, a historian must ask questions of his/her sources to arrive at an understanding of the past.

2. **Who questions** not only seek to provide biographical information, but also make us think of character. Who was Martin Luther? What kind of person was he? What did people who knew him say about him? Who questions raise the issue of responsibility. Who was most responsible for the First World War? Who questions make us think of those affected by various events. Who was most likely to die during the Black Death? Who was most likely to vote for Jackson in the Election of 1828?

3. **What questions** seek to understand what really happened. Like a detective, you might have to piece together evidence from a variety of sources to find the answer. In some cases it might be difficult to determine because the evidence is either lacking or is contradictory. What really happened during the duel between Hamilton and Burr? What questions also seek to understand what something means. Certain words, such as **liberal** have a far different meaning in a nineteenth-century context than a twentieth-century context.

4. **When questions** help place historical events in their proper time frame. When questions also provide important answers to problems in history when asked in relation to something else. What did Nixon know and When did he know it? When did LBJ make the decision to commit U.S. forces in Vietnam? Before or after Tokin? During the Election of 1964?

5. **Where questions** seek to place events in a geographical context. Where were the best Union forces placed at Gettysburg? Answering a where question can also help answer other questions. Where did crops fail in France during the summer of 1789? Where were the most violent upheavals in the countryside? Answer: the same areas, which tells us that economic distress had more of an impact on the masses than the ideas of the Enlightenment.

6. **Why questions** are what make history fascinating and worth writing about. Knowing what happened is not enough. The historian seeks to discover why it happened and why it had the influence that it did.

a. Always distinguish between the precipitating cause and the background causes of a great event. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand precipitated the First World War; it did not by itself cause the First World War. Precipitating causes make good research topics because they have a natural focus and because "What happened?", "Why it happened?", and "Why did it had the impact that it did?" merge together.

b. Remember that historical causation is complex. Seldom does one thing cause another. Always examine events in their proper context by weighing the relative importance of various causes. Avoid taking a backward view of history; historical events flow forward. Just because one event preceeded another does not mean that they were connected. Do not forget the masses when examining the actions of great leaders? Did the leader shape public opinion, or what he shaped by it?

c. Be cautious in your judgments, especially when dealing with motivations. Why did Constantine legalize Christianity? Be sure to examine every side of the issue.

7. **The Use of Inference.** Sometimes the available sources do not tell us precisely what we need to know. That does not mean that we have to give up. A historian uses inference to fit everything into a plausible whole. The laws of a society often infer far more than they actually state.

8. The Use of Statistics. Statistical information has become a major sources for writing history. The United States Census provides a wealth of information. The use of statistical information is possible whenever we can reduce evidence to numbers. Statistics help put complex matters into terms that are easier to understand. One out of every two Frenchmen who were between the ages of 18 and 32 died during the First World War. During 1916 the British casualty rate was one every forty-five seconds. But the interpretation of statistics requires a high level of skill. Just because the counties of East Tennessee voted to remain in the Union in 1861 does not mean that the inhabitants favored abolishing slavery and extending equal rights to blacks. Statistics also cannot measure the intensity of beliefs. A majority of Americans favored the Vietnam War, but not with the same intensity that a minority opposed it.

C. Modes of Historical Writing.

1. There are four common modes of writing that historians use--description, narration, exposition, and argument. You do not have to limit yourself to one or another; the best papers will use all four. For example, a paper on the Battle of the Somme might use all four. A narrative paragraph paper may tell how British soldiers huddled in their trenches for days as a preliminary barrage pounded the German frontlines and then climbed out and advanced across no-man's land. A descriptive paragraph might give details of no-man's land--the huge crater holes, the barren landscape, the sea of mud. A brief exposition might consider how demoralized British infantry became when they bogged down in mud and could not bring heavy equipment forward. A writer might then argue that the lengthy preliminary barrage served only to give the Germans ample notice that an attack was coming and to make it impossible for troops to advance, therefore leading to the deadliest battle in history--1.2 million casualties. The British army lost almost 60,000 men on the first day alone (almost 20,000 of them dead), or one casualty per yard of front.

2. **Description:** Description presents an account of sensory experience--the way things look, feel, taste, sound, and smell. A good history paper uses vivid descriptions to describe people and places. Never try to describe everything, or you will get bogged down in details. Simply try to captivate the readers's imagination. Never make things up, however. Base descriptions on evidence.

3. Narratives tell stores, and narratives are the bedrock of history because they tell us what happened. As is the case in description, you need to decide what to include and what to exclude. You must also put things in their proper order. Never twist events out of context in order to tell a better story. Recognize that there are contradictions in evidence and indicate either in your text or in the endnotes. A good narrative is not simply a recitation of facts in chronological order. It builds toward a climax. If you cannot find a climatic point, reorganize your story, shift focus. It is sometimes effective to beginning your paper by describing a climatic event, then going back and build a narrative that leads up to it.

Consider the following in writing a narrative:

1. Why am I telling this story?
2. Where do I want to begin?
3. What happened?
4. When did it happen?
5. Who or what causes those things to happen?
6. What were the most important events that happened, the least important?
7. Who were the main characters in the drama?

8. What is the climax of the story?
9. Where do I want to end?
10. What does the story mean?
11. What details help me tell the story more effectively?
12. What details get in the way of the story?

4. Exposition: Expositions explain--ideas, causes of events, the significance of actions, the motives of participants, the working of an organization, the ideology of a party. Exposition usually coexists with other modes. For example, a narrative on the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand should explain why it happened.

5. Argument: Historians use argument to take a position on a controversial subject. Every paper should contain an argument, simply because the paper should have a thesis that the author wants us to believe. Arguments differ from an exposition in that they not only seek to explain the writer's point of view, but also seek to prove that other points of view are wrong. An author of a paper on Germany's role in the Outbreak of the First World War may assert that Russia was more responsible, to be convincing he will need to explain why others who have concluded Germany was responsible were wrong.

Consider the following rules in making an argument in historical writing:

1. Always state your own argument quickly and concisely, as early as possible in your paper. Get to the point in the first paragraph if possible. Be quick to deal with contradictory sources and stress why your evidence is more reliable.
2. When you make an assertion central to your case, provide some examples as evidence. Otherwise, you will not be taken seriously.
3. Always give the fairest possible treatment to other viewpoints. Never distort someone's work. A diatribe against someone will get you into trouble every time.
4. Always admit weaknesses in your argument or at least acknowledge questions that someone might raise about your work. This does not mean that you cannot be assertive; it simply means to be honest and do not be dogmatic.
5. Stay on the subject throughout your essay. Once you stray off the path of your argument, the reader might never get back on it.
6. Avoid common fallacies. "Fallacies are illogical arguments that pose as logical statements. For example, do not set up "straw men" in order to prove a point. Prove it on the basis of evidence. Do not assume that because one thing happened after something else that the first caused the second. Avoid the bandwagon.

RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC

A. Choosing a Topic.

Finding a topic to write on is often an ordeal, but there are some steps that every writer can take that should make the process easier.

1. Start with something that interests you. If King Solomon were to have written a proverb about choosing a topic, he might have said: "Woe be unto thee if thou chooseth a topic that doth not holdeth thine interest." You must be curious about the people, events, documents, problems, or issues you are writing about in order to ask the questions that will enable you to write a good paper.

2. Ask questions that need to be answered. Why did Johnson get the United States involved in Vietnam? Should Affirmative Action continue? How should Welfare be reformed? Do not be afraid of issues that received a lot of attention. A good history paper might simply examine how various historians have interpreted an issue. How have historians interpreted the War Guilt Question of World War One?

3. Read and Write down your thoughts. Some of your best ideas for a topic will come from reading your textbook, a newspaper, or a magazine. You will see an issue that strikes your interest. Carry a notebook with you at all times to jot down ideas. As you do more reading, ask questions about your preliminary topic and then try to answer them. You may be able to start shaping the argument that you will be making in your paper.

4. Limit your Topic. By far the greatest flaw in most research papers is that students attempt to write on topics that are so broad that their paper lacks focus and originality. Your topic must be defined narrowly if you are to write an interesting, informative paper. You cannot write an interesting and original paper on topics such as "Martin Luther" or "Franklin Delano Roosevelt" or "The Causes of the Civil War" or "The Second World War." The most that you could do would be to write a summary of a person's life or of an event; you would not be able to write a thoughtful paper that tries to make a special point. You must write on something that you can study in depth and write about within the space you have available. Your topic must be defined according to the sources available.

C. Starting Your Research.

1. Start your research in the reference room of your library. Begin by reading several encyclopedia articles related to the topic that you are interested in so that you will have a good foundation for further research. If your knowledge of Maximilien Robespierre is limited, you will not know what to focus on unless you do some preliminary reading. After reading articles in general encyclopedias, such as Encyclopedia Britannica, move on to more specialized encyclopedias, such as A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution.

The Cambridge Ancient History
The Cambridge Mediaeval History
The New Cambridge Modern History
The Dictionary of National Biography (Britain)
The Dictionary of American Biography

Do not overlook such things as:

The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences
The Social Science Encyclopedia
The Encyclopedia of World Art
The New Grove Dictionary of Music

2. Always compile a bibliography while you are doing research by jotting authors and titles down on index cards or in a notebook. Check both the bibliographic references and recommendations for further reading in the bibliographies appended to articles in the encyclopedias you first read.

3. **Always try to go as far back to the original as possible.** As you examine secondary sources, look for references to primary sources.

D. Primary Sources.

1. Look for editions of the written works of the various people who may enter your paper. Primary sources will give your work more authority. The best editions of collected or selected works are generally the latest. The best editions are those of the complete works, such as the complete papers of Woodrow Wilson edited by Arthur Link. Do not overlook autobiographies of associates. If you are doing a paper on Wilson's Role in the Paris Peace Conference, Lloyd George's autobiography published after the war would be a valuable source of how Wilson's partners in peace viewed him. Go through the indexes of collected works to find references to the particular aspect you are examining.

2. Editions of correspondence are an important source because they belong to certain time and place. Letters freeze what a person thinks at a given moment based on the context of that moment. People often say things in their personal correspondence that they would never say in public. Diaries are also good sources, but sometimes you must be careful if it appears that the person was writing for posterity. This is especially the case with memoirs and autobiographies.

3. There are some collections of primary sources that relate to a general topic that have been published. One of the most famous is The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Any student writing a paper on a Civil War battle must use this source.

4. Do not overlook unpublished materials. Many libraries include oral history collections, tapes, and records of individuals. Interviews are also valuable for studies of recent events (last fifty years). To prepare for an interview, learn all you can about the person and write out questions beforehand. Explore each question thoroughly. Ask for clarification or for details.

E. Secondary Sources.

1. The bibliographies in the articles you read in reference works will give you a start toward both the primary sources for your study and the secondary sources. The secondary sources will broaden your understanding and help you see the problems and opportunities in the sources as other writers have seen them. The card catalog in the library will list books by titles, author, and subject. Since most researchers tend to specialize, the odds are that if you find a reference to a book on Wilson by Arthur S. Link, he has written several. Once you find a book on the shelves, browse along the stacks in that section. The footnotes or endnotes of books will lead you to other books and to articles.

2. Scholarly journals are sources that students too often overlook, simply because articles are harder to find than books. It takes more digging, but the deeper you go the more gold nuggets you will find. The Reference Library will have Bibliographic Guides on Special Subjects that will lead you to articles. Books will cite articles in footnotes and bibliographies. Specialized journals generally publish an annual index that lists the articles for the previous year. There are also several CD-ROM

and Computer data bases that provide references to journals. The Internet will also provide you with information.

PROCESSING AND ORGANIZING YOUR RESEARCH

A. Reading Critically.

1. Read enough background material in order to understand what questions need to be asked and to recognize the answers. This is not to say that you start with a pre-conceived notion of the questions or that you are looking for specific answers.
2. Take the time to read thoroughly and make sure that you understand the vocabulary being used.
3. As you read, ask questions not only about content, but also about the author's conclusions. What evidence does the author rely upon? Primary or secondary sources? Does the author consider counter-evidence? Are the author's conclusions presented in an objective fashion?
4. Keep an open mind and look for counter-evidence.
5. Take notes as you read, using headings and subheadings that easily be incorporated into an outline.

B. Note-Taking Systems.

1. **Index Cards:** 4 X 6 or 5 X 8 is preferred. Advantages: Index cards are easy to manipulate and make organizing and reorganizing easier. Disadvantages: Index Cards can become cumbersome, intimidating, and easily misplaced.
2. **Notebooks:** Advantages: Notebooks are easy to carry from place to place and make it easier to include commentary with your information. Disadvantages: Your notes are not as easy to manipulate.
3. **Computerized Notes:** Advantages: There are four advantages to using a computer to take notes: first, they will be legible; second, the search function of your word processing program will help you locate key words quickly; third, you can move notes into the text when writing; and fourth, you can place the bibliographic information into a header, thus insuring that you do not lose your source. Disadvantages: You don't always have a computer with you and even if you do you can see only one note at a time unless you print them off. **ALWAYS HAVE AT LEAST ONE, IF NOT TWO BACKUPS!**

Based upon my personal experience, I prefer taking notes on the computer, then printing them on index cards.

C. How to Take Notes.

1. Bibliographic Notes. Always make a full citation of each source.
2. Direct Quotation: Ask three questions before writing down a direct quote on a note card: (a) Will the quote bring life to my paper?; (b) Will paraphrasing obscure the force of meaning?; (c) Will the

source be unavailable later? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, write down the direct quote.

3. Paraphrase. Try to paraphrase in the manner that you might present the information in your paper. This will save time later when you are writing your paper.

4. Summarize. You might simply summarize an entire chapter or an author's thesis.

5. Commentary: commenting on your reading makes you an active reader instead of a passive reader. **Be sure to distinguish between your thoughts and the ideas of the author.**

D. Getting Ready to Write.

You have started your research by using a preliminary outline. Sort through your notes and revise your outline as needed. Based on your research, determine your thesis, how you will defend it, and what is the most logical way of presenting it.

WRITING YOUR PAPER

A. Make an Outline.

1. Writing a good paper is like traveling to somewhere for the first time because you have to know where you are going before you can get there. Just as you need a map to take a trip, you need an outline to write a good paper. An outline will help you keep focused and prevent you from taking diversionary journeys, which may be interesting but will lose your reader.

2. Having defined your topic after doing some preliminary research, you need to draft a preliminary outline before you start taking notes. **Do not, however, set out to reach a preconceived conclusion! Always let your research be your guide.** If the evidence suggests something else, shift your outline accordingly.

3. Once you have finished taking notes, sift through them and prepare a final outline. Then use the outline to organize your note cards. You will then be ready to start writing.

B. Techniques for getting started.

1. Perhaps the biggest misconception about good authors is that they can sit down and begin writing and the words will flow smoothly and clearly onto paper or into the computer without any need for future revision. Unfortunately, the vast majority of writers struggle to get started, face mental deadlock, and have to go through several drafts to reach the final product. Don't get discouraged if you have problems in writing, you are in good company.

2. Writing is an art, not a science. There is no formula or magic ritual that produce the "A" paper overnight. What works for one person, may not work for another, but here are some techniques you might try.

a. As you read and take notes, try to paraphrase and write commentary notes while you are thinking on the evidence. This will automatically give you something to start with.

b. Some people find writing easier if they simply sit down and start writing the first thing that comes to mind, then go back and revise it. If this is the case, be sure to over-write the first time. Taking this approach is sometimes useful because you will quickly discover if there are major gaps in your thesis. You might find that you need to do more research.

c. Others, including myself, find it easier to write one paragraph at a time, slowly but carefully building your paper, polishing and revising as you go along. This approach is made much easier if you can train yourself to compose on the computer, instead of with paper and pen.

d. Sometimes it is easier to write the body of your paper first, then go back and write your introduction. You might want to do this if you are having problems getting started. If you have your outline and note cards organized, building the body will be easier. Once you have the body finished, you might then have an easier time in writing the introduction. This will also help you make sure that your introduction and conclusion mirror each other.

e. Discipline yourself. Force yourself to sit down at least two hours at a time, preferably every night. If you can average one page per day, you can write a paper in a month's time.

C. Documentation.

1. As you write, document your sources right then. Otherwise, you might forget and unintentionally commit plagiarism. Word processing programs, such as Word Perfect, allow you to do your endnotes (or footnotes) as you go along. Be sure to use this function, instead of typing your endnotes separately later because if you have to add something in the body, the program will automatically readjust your endnote numbers for you.

2. Rules for documentation:

- a. Quote directly.
- b. paraphrase or summarize.
- c. acknowledge important ideas.
- d. no to common knowledge, common expressions, or allusions.

D. Style of Writing.

1. Write in coherent paragraphs.

2. Support your argument by specific references to evidence.

3. The introduction and conclusion should mirror each other. But try to avoid artificial summaries of "what I am going to cover" and "what I have covered."

4. Begin most sentences with the subject, or have it as close to the beginning as possible.

5. Keep subjects as close to their verbs as possible.

6. Use an occasional rhetorical question, but do not over do it.

7. Use an occasional metaphor or a simile to make a vivid statement, but do not over do it and do not use clichés or slangish expressions.

8. Use active voice wherever possible and avoid passive voice.

9. Keep sentences short enough to be clear, but do not be choppy. **Always say something in less words if possible. Avoid awkward phrasing.** If you have to read a sentence more than once, something is wrong with it.

10. Do not overuse adjectives and adverbs.

11. Avoid long strings of prepositional phrases in your sentences.

12. Write in the correct tense: past to describe the past, present in referring to something in the present.

E. Revising and Editing.

1. Always leave yourself enough time (preferably a week) to revise and edit before you turn in a paper. You will find problems easier if you read your paper later. Too often we read things into a sentence that is not there. Seek an outside reader. What becomes obvious to us after gathering a mountain of evidence and writing for days, might be as clear as mud to the reader.

2. As you read your draft, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does my paper present a compelling argument and is it supported by evidence? If you cannot answer yes, you are in trouble.

2. Have I provided enough context (background) or too much?

3. Have I considered counter-evidence?

4. Does my paper move smoothly from one section to another? Are there smooth transitions between paragraphs? Is there anything that gets in the way of the main point?

5. What is the tone of my paper?

6. Does the introduction capture the readers attention?

7. Does the conclusion wrap everything up and hammer home the thesis?

8. Do I stay in active voice?

9. Are my sentences clear? Can they be understood the first time they are read?

10. Have I overused certain words, phrases, clichés, etc.