

# GUIDELINES FOR WRITING HISTORY PAPERS

## **A. GENERAL POLICIES**

1. Handing in a poorly-written paper need not happen as resources abound that can help you achieve the goal of writing a quality paper. The [PC Writing Center](#) can assist you. Use the tutors who are on duty. Ask a professor for help. Run spell-check and proofread carefully.
2. By now you should have mastered the use of the English language, and you should be familiar with the rules of citation. It is, therefore, quite unacceptable that you should turn in a paper that is sloppily written and/or cited. Contained in this document are guidelines that I am expecting you to follow on stylistic and grammatical matters. For matters relating to preparing a research project and citing sources, you are advised to consult the History Department's '[Guidelines for Effective Historical Research](#)'.
3. Student syllabi clearly state the dates on which papers and assignments are due. Papers and assignments will be accepted up to the close of the class period on the day they are due. There is no provision for late papers

## **B. ORGANIZATIONAL CONCERNS**

1. The thesis statement is your answer to your research question. State your thesis clearly early in the paper, preferably within the first paragraph. It should be free of ambiguity yet concise. Everything in the paper should contribute to the process of proving the thesis. In a strong paper, the author proceeds systematically and logically from point to point, seeking to convince the reader of the validity of his/her argument. Good organization enhances credibility.
2. Paragraphs must not be too long or too short. Those that span several pages are obviously too long, but so are paragraphs of reasonable length that cover several topics. Paragraphs should contain material related to only one topic. Do not have paragraphs of less than three sentences; these should be reworked and merged with the surrounding paragraphs or omitted.
3. Proper construction of sentences requires that all sentences be complete, namely it possesses a subject and verb in proper agreement and communicates a complete thought. Vary your sentence structure throughout your paper; otherwise the paper takes on choppy and elementary characteristics.
4. The conclusion is one of the most important parts of your paper. It should flow logically and smoothly from the body of the paper, tying together loose ends but not raising new questions or introducing new material. It needs to demonstrate sound logic and clear analysis. You should be aware of the two types of conclusion.
  - a. After presenting the data that supports the thesis statement, you should spend time considering, reflecting, and analyzing what you have just written. Here is where you ask and answer the 'so what?' question. What are the

implications of your argument? How do they affect the larger historical picture? What are the lessons learned?

- b. The last paragraph of the paper simply closes the paper with a few sentences.
5. Remember, writing is a process, not an event. Working through multiple drafts of a paper is the only way that a paper can improve. Numerous drafts allow the author to see problems, reorganize, tighten, etc. Reading the paper aloud also identifies trouble spots. Start the writing project with plenty of time before the due date as these steps cannot be accomplished the night before.

### **C. GRAMMATICAL AND STYLISTIC CONCERNS**

1. Poor spelling habits are unacceptable for educated people, a group with which college students belong. It is especially galling in the day of computer spell-checkers. Check spelling closely, especially of words often misspelled – its/it's, there/their/they're, a lot/a lot, to/too/two, etc. Even with spell-checkers, proofreading is necessary because some words, such as 'from/form', will not be caught by computer programs.
2. Capitalize all proper nouns and adjectives – French, American, Italy, Henry VIII, Parliament. Terms, such as 'pope', 'king', and 'church' are not capitalized unless used as proper nouns, i.e. – King John, Emperor Napoleon, Pope Innocent III, Anglican Church.
3. Quotations are difficult literary tools to use. Instead of direct quotations, it is better to paraphrase the statement in your own words and then footnote where you found the material.
4. Personal pronouns (i.e. I, we, us, you) are unnecessary and undesirable in formal papers and, therefore, shall not be used in history papers. Put the statement in the third person.
5. Do not use contractions in a formal paper – DON'T!
6. Pronouns must always have antecedents – 'Bob went to the store and bought it.'
7. In a historical paper, verbs are in the past tense. Use active verbs as often as possible to keep the paper lively. Passive voice can be boring. For example, 'Saladin was defeated by Richard Lionheart' is better stated 'Richard Lionheart defeated Saladin.' Watch the helping verb 'would' as it often throws the sentence into a tense that does not work in history papers. For instance, it is incorrect to say 'Richard would go on crusade' when in fact 'Richard went on crusade'.
8. Watch split infinitives – 'to boldly go'.
9. Use punctuation correctly. Commas and periods are essential composition tools and work well when used properly. Get a writing manual and follow its instructions.
10. Spell out numbers below one hundred, except when reporting time/date or money amounts – \$23, 47 B.C., 2:00 p.m., twentieth century, thirty-eight chairs.

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