

# Writing History Essays

The purpose of this handout is to provide some hints and general suggestions for writing history essays at Queen's University. Many of the points apply to the preparation of any term paper or research report.

Essays form an integral part of your history courses, and your success or failure will depend to a considerable extent on your ability to express your ideas clearly and accurately. In preparing essays, remember that grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure are essential to the effective expression of your ideas. Chronic forms of bad grammar often result in incoherent prose. In order to avoid meaninglessness, both clear thinking and careful organization are essential, which means that attention must be paid to questions of form as well as content. For further information, two useful guides to writing essays are *A Writer's Handbook*, from Student Academic Success Services, and *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White.

## Choice of Topics and Sources

You should initially define the topic of the essay, survey the field in general outline histories and texts, and discuss it with your professor or tutor. The first thing you read should be a survey of the area, period, or subject, preferably a recent publication with an up-to-date bibliography that can serve as a guide to further reading. Turn next to more specialized books, taking the course reading lists and bibliographies as starting points. Several hours spent browsing through library shelves of areas indicated in your first sources often lead to valuable discoveries.

No essay should be attempted on the basis of textbooks. Historical writing is subjective, and researchers should take into consideration several different points of view, whether or not they suit their thesis. Also, it is unlikely that one book will contain all the factual information needed. The most important depository is [Stauffer Library](#) and its various branches, which contain most of the books (many in multiple copies) that might be needed for an undergraduate essay and many more specialized works and journals. Articles in periodicals, which may contain new approaches to and concise sources of information, are too often overlooked by students. Other libraries of value are the [Kingston Public Library](#), and the [RMC Library](#). Students should also familiarize themselves with the [Queen's Archives and the Documents Library](#).

## Reading and Note-Taking

Research does not mean hunting for books, or just reading them. It means reading them with definite questions in mind. Before you begin to read, make sure that you understand your question or topic, and have some idea of what you need to know in order to deal with it. This understanding is best achieved by working out a preliminary outline, indicating the main points you hope to deal with and the rough order in which they are likely to appear in your essay. Essays should not be written from open books, but from notes made while reading sources. It is advisable to save time by using the table of contents and index of any book you are consulting in order to locate relevant material. Careful notation of research sources is imperative, including the author, title and page number of the source.

When you have found material related to your topic, make notes by paraphrasing or summarizing in your own words the ideas which you think will be useful. You should make and revise outlines while doing the research for the paper, emphasizing your developing perception of the major issues. Research notes are your main tools; they should be filed under topic headings, reviewed and rearranged frequently, in order to fill in gaps in information or analysis. This process enables you to determine what is of value as you do the research for the paper; to return to an orderly collection of material if you have to leave it for any reason; and to organize your thoughts when you finally sit down to write the paper. Keep in mind the limitations and strengths of the sources you use. If you are using primary sources (original sources such as newspapers, diaries, letters) in your research, be aware of their essential nature and bias. Similarly, you should pay attention to the methodology and theoretical assumptions of secondary works (articles or books by scholars).

Only if there is an unusually striking formulation of an idea should you copy the exact words, making sure to enclose the borrowed phrases in quotation marks. As you take your notes, be sure to keep track of the book and page number, so that you will be able to make proper acknowledgement of your sources.

**All not commonly known or controversial information or opinions must be acknowledged whether you are quoting directly or paraphrasing.**

Because **plagiarism** is a very serious offense, it is of crucial importance that you be aware of what constitutes plagiarism, as well as the penalties for plagiarism. Ignorance is no excuse. Plagiarism is a glaring form of intellectual theft and occurs whenever the language, ideas, or thoughts of an author are appropriated without acknowledgement by another author. It is also plagiarism to submit the same essay for credit in two different courses, or to submit an essay or take-home examination based on unauthorized group work. By following scrupulously the guidelines for documentation listed below in the section Documentation and Notes you will avoid the risk of plagiarism. For additional information on plagiarism, see [the SASS academic integrity module](#).

The penalty for plagiarism in the History Department is normally a mark of zero on the plagiarized assignment and, in some cases, the Chair may impose the penalty of failure in the course concerned or recommend that the Board of Studies impose a still heavier penalty.

## Writing the Essay

A detailed outline is of critical importance as you write the essay. It's a skeleton which provides the essay with its structure. When you write the essay, you are simply clothing this skeleton with flesh, developing themes and introducing relevant facts to illustrate the points you wish to make. Try to leave sufficient time for at least one draft. The first draft, which is for the development of your argument, can be written quickly, and then refined in each succeeding draft.

The last one provides an opportunity to polish style. You should make sure that the introduction is clear, indicating the historical context and the problem under discussion; that the narrative and argument are presented logically and concisely in the body of the essay; and that the conclusion summarizes and unifies the arguments presented. As a general rule, it is better to aspire to terseness and economy. Students more often obscure their meaning by using too many words rather than too few.

# Stylistic Suggestions

## Introduction and conclusion

Two very important elements of a successful historical essay are the introduction and conclusion. Do not fall into the fallacy that “facts speak for themselves.” It is for you to make them speak through your interpretation and emphasis. An introduction, by highlighting the major themes of the essay, should set forth in clear and forceful language the hypothesis of the essay. The introduction should situate the essay topic historically (by explaining the significance of the topic and its effects), historiographically (by relating the topic to important debates over interpretation) or a combination of the two. It is often helpful to write a draft introduction, in general terms, and then, following the first draft of the paper, to revise the introduction, tighten it, and make certain that the focus is clear. A good introduction will also help you to write the conclusion. Often a conclusion can restate, in different language, the major points foreshadowed in the introduction, as well as the important issues that remain unresolved.

## Style

Good historical prose is distinguished by its clarity and vigour. An over-frequent use of passive verbs, for example, can lead to weak sentences and leave questions of agency unclear. One of the cures for weak or muddled prose is to develop a lean writing style which relies chiefly upon nouns and active verbs, rather than the piling up of adjectives and adverbs, to capture and express ideas. Be careful to define your terms. Cavalier use of terms like “the people” and “the elite” often leads to sweeping generalizations. Be precise about your terms and attempt to capture fully the nuances of the topic which you are describing. Be careful to **stay on topic**. Each sentence and paragraph should be relevant to your thesis. Avoid narrative and descriptive material which does not contribute to the development of your argument.

## Presentation and Proofreading

The final draft of the essay should be typed double-spaced on one side of the paper only, using 8½ x 11 paper and margins of about one inch. The final draft should be carefully proofread for typing errors, missing punctuation or words, computer errors, or any other defects which might detract from the legibility or prose of the essay.

## Documentation and notes

Most ideas presented in an undergraduate essay will be derived from other sources, so it is necessary that these be acknowledged. Every essay must be provided with:

1. footnotes or endnotes acknowledging the sources of quotations, facts, and borrowed ideas; and
2. a bibliography in which you list and describe the sources you have used, in alphabetical order.

## Notes

In general, notes should be used to make clear to the reader on what authorities you are basing your statements. In particular, footnotes or endnotes should:

1. indicate the exact source of every quotation used

2. acknowledge indebtedness to others for opinion and ideas
3. give authority for a fact which the reader might question
4. call attention to other interpretations, additional authorities or more extended treatment of a topic which, although relevant, would interrupt the flow of the main text. Such substantive notes should be used with restraint.

Notes, which may appear at the bottom of the page as footnotes or collected together at the end of the essay as endnotes, should be numbered cumulatively throughout the essay. They are indicated by Arabic numerals placed at the end of the sentence and slightly above the line. The first citation of a work must include the initials and name of the author, title of the book or article, place of publication, publisher and date of publication and the page number from which the material was cited. For subsequent references to the same work, it is sufficient to give the author, a shortened title (if you are using more than one work by the same author), and page number or, in appropriate circumstances, to use *ibid*. Be sure to indicate the edition used if it differs from the first, and include information on the date of original publication.

## **Bibliography**

The bibliography appears at the end of your essay. Correct form of entry is the same in essence as in the first footnote citation. Items are to appear alphabetically by author.

You will need to consult a standard authority for further technical details about correct note and bibliographic citation. Your aim should be clarity and consistency, making it easy for the reader of your essay to check back to the materials you have used for further information.