

**Some Thoughts on the Finer Art of
Writing History Essays**
(2nd UK Edition)

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with additional material by W.H. Rupp

A man may write at any time, if he
will set himself doggedly to it.

Dr. Johnson, 1759¹

Accustom yourself . . . to putting what
you know in order and to expressing
it with clarity.

Le Comte de Vergennes, 1771²

Modern English, especially written
English, is full of bad habits which
spread by imitation and which can be
avoided if one is willing to take the
necessary trouble. If one gets rid of
these habits one can think more
clearly . . .

George Orwell, 1946³

¹James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, G.B. Hill and L.F. Powell (eds) (6 vols. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1934), I 203.

²Orville T. Murphy, 'Charles Gravier de Vergennes: Profile of an Old Regime Diplomat', *Political Science Quarterly* 83 (1968): 409.

³George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in George Orwell, *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), 353.

A history essay is much more than telling a story or a plain recital of ‘the facts’. It must answer a question or a problem with a sustained argument. It explains why things have happened; it seeks to explain what drove events. It identifies continuities in history, balancing these against changes. A history paper interprets history.

These thoughts have been brought together to help you learn how to master this art (and hopefully get a good grade in the process).

On the basics . . .

The fundamental components of an history essay are strong research, logical organization, clear writing, and in-depth analysis. Good papers are built upon a rich blend of information and the consideration of many different points of view. In order to find this blend, a good bibliography for a paper in an undergraduate course will consist of 8-12 sources, including perhaps 2-3 survey texts, 4-5 monographs or biographies, and 2-3 scholarly articles (**Everyone should use at least one article**). Start your research early. Be creative. Try to make interesting connections between sources. Don’t rely too heavily old sources (i.e., published before 1950). Also, don’t rely on just a few sources. Err on the side of diversity. Strategic use of the photocopier can cut down on the risk of painful library fines. The University library also has a scanner available for use. You may want to save money (and trees) by scanning, rather than photocopying, articles and book extracts. If you’re not sure how to go about doing this, ask at the circulation desks near the elevators and the librarians will show you how to scan and save material.

On the internet . . .

If you want to use the internet to do research, **do so with caution**. It has been overrated by computer enthusiasts and the media, few of whom know much about history or proper methods of historical research. Although the net has improved a lot in recent years, it is often inhabited by amateurs, cranks, advertising men, PR agents and government agencies. The web has its uses, particularly for primary source documents. But the best sources for undergraduate papers are still academic books, articles and web sites maintained by legitimate academic authorities. Unlike most amateur web sites, these are written and refereed by professional scholars who have spent years becoming experts in their particular fields. In stark contrast, much of the web is a jungle where quality control is often markedly absent. Web sites are often unstable, or badly maintained, or simply inaccessible. Only scholarly materials possess the longevity upon which real scholarship is based.

A considerable (and growing) percentage of journals are available online. Use the University Library's web portal to search and access a variety of journals across a range of disciplines. Your library card and ATHENS account will be essential for allowing you to utilize these resources.

On the thesis statement and on writing . . .

Make an outline to organize your ideas into an argument which flows logically and coherently. Always keep your thesis statement in mind, modifying it as the process of research and writing develops your argument.

The hardest part of doing an essay is knowing when to put a stop to your research and when to start writing. But as Dr. Johnson sagely observed: 'A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it.'⁴ One method is to write your best section first and then to build up the rest of the paper around it. Try to write at least around two to four pages a day until you are done. In the long run, a steady pace is the most productive. When you're stuck, proofread. Once you have started, you will finish. My guess is that a properly done paper for this course should take about two and a half to three weeks of hard work to research and write. Budget your time accordingly. ***Keep backups of all computer work!!*** Lost data, while unfortunate and upsetting, is ***not*** an acceptable excuse for non-submission of essays. Purchase a USB key chain hard disk (sold on campus at Costcutter for £10-20) or learn how to use your storage allotment on the University network, but make sure you save in at least two locations and back up often.

No thesis statement can be too clearly stated. A sample thesis statement might be: 'The purpose of this essay is to argue that Louis XIV was primarily responsible for the French invasion of Mars.' Likewise, no conclusion can be too strongly stated. One good concluding technique is to restate your argument briefly. A sample concluding sentence in your final paragraph might be: 'Once all relevant factors have been considered, it can be concluded that Louis XIV invaded Mars primarily because he had been raised by Klingons.' Leave ambiguity, subtlety, and irony to novelists. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Balance description and analysis, but when in doubt, emphasize analysis. A good way to attain the right mix is to make sure that all of the terms, events and characters referred to in your paper are concisely defined. Make sure that major and controversial points in your argument are clearly stated and well-supported by evidence and footnotes. If successful, the paper will

⁴Boswell, *Johnson*, I 203.

read smoothly to the expert, yet will be self-contained and comprehensible to literate non-specialists (i.e. your roommate or your parents). A strong paper in this course will demonstrate a sound understanding of the historical context and the process of historical change.

Sometimes there will be a gap in your evidence which no amount of research will solve. When this happens, feel free to speculate, but make it clear that you are speculating. Historical writing requires informed judgment, broad interpretations and plenty of imagination.

On sources and citations . . .

Sources must be provided for all quotes, ideas, and important or unusual information. When in doubt, footnote, working toward an average of 1-2 footnotes per paragraph or 3-4 per page. There is no need to footnote general information. Note the examples and appendix in this handout for proper footnoting style. **Note that when you paraphrase, you must completely rewrite the words you have borrowed and must also provide full documentation.**

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and is completely unacceptable. The department and the University have very clear guidelines regarding the definition of plagiarism and of the consequences for plagiarists. These are outlined in the course handbook, the Undergraduate Handbook, and on the University website.

On the art of writing . . .

One of the most glaring and common problems in undergraduate writing is the misuse of quotations. Students often assume that quotes are the ultimate type of evidence, and that mere citation of them settles arguments once and for all. (Once a student told me that he was ready to start writing, but instead of saying, 'I've finished my research,' he said: 'I've finished collecting my quotes.')

No argument, however, is won by quotes alone. Quotes are useful tools because they provide authenticity, accuracy, authority and color but they have limits. They need to be set in context. They must fit seamlessly into your argument, both conceptually and grammatically. Their provenance must be taken into account. Any biases or shortcomings in them must be discussed (i.e. Was Talleyrand's comment on Napoleon fair or was it motivated by political motives? To what extent was Talleyrand a creditable critic? Did Talleyrand say different things about Napoleon at different times? Why? Does the quote tell us more about Talleyrand than about Napoleon? And so on.) Few undergraduates seem to realize that quotations are not necessar-

ily the best type of evidence for every argument. It is in fact theoretically possible to write a First Class paper without a single quotation. At the very least, remember that **properly documented paraphrasing** can be more effective than awkward quoting. And if you are going to use quotations, remember that extracts from the writings and speeches of historical figures are almost always more interesting and important than those from historians. Finally: don't quote one source to excess; don't use too many quotes; **never** directly follow one quote with another, and *never* start a paragraph with a quotation. A good rule is to follow up every quotation you use with one or two sentences of your own words clearly explaining the relevance of the quote and placing it securely into the context of your paragraph.

Make sure that every part of the essay is directly relevant to your argument. If something doesn't fit, throw it out. The garbage can and the delete button are your best friends. You will need to complete at least several drafts before your essay approaches polished prose. Try to finish a first draft as soon as possible. If you have time, set it aside for a while and go back over it later, strengthening sections where the argument and writing seem weak. Good results cannot be rushed. Last minute efforts will stand out. **Edit ruthlessly.**

Spell correctly. Italicize non-English words and terms. Take pains to get the accents on non-English words right. Search for *le mot juste* to make your meaning as precise as possible. **Be wary of homonyms** – words that sound the same but that have different meanings (i.e. led/lead; guerrilla/gorilla; border/boarder). Avoid use of the present tense in favor of the various past tenses. Make sure that your paragraphs flow naturally and seamlessly from one to another. Avoid sub-titles. Avoid unnecessary verbiage and florid prose – as an eighteenth century college tutor once sagely advised: 'Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage you think is particularly fine, strike it out.'⁵

Proofread.

On conclusions . . .

Take great pains to write a good conclusion. Weak conclusions are common failings of many papers. One way to remedy this fault is to write it as you go along. Then, time permitting, take a couple days off for reflection before writing the final version. A good conclusion will sum up all the main arguments of the paper, binding smaller points together with larger interpretive observations on the topic as a whole as well as on the larger international

⁵Ibid., II 237.

system. If the paper has found several explanations to a problem, a conclusion could evaluate which is the strongest one. Remember, like a speeding race car, a good paper can't stop on a dime. If the main body of the paper is about 9-11 pages long, the conclusion should be at least a page long, and should consist of about two or four paragraphs.

And finally . . .

Von Clausewitz aptly noted: 'all thinking is indeed art'.⁶ Bear this in mind but remember that essay writing is an art which is never fully mastered. Do the best job you can, but don't sacrifice your efforts before an unattainable ideal of perfection. With each paper that you finish, the next one will become easier. Work hard, and don't stop until you are done. Academic writing may seem to be full of arbitrary and arcane rules, but when mastered, it can be a very powerful and elegant means of expression.

Don't stay at home and suffer in silence!! If you need help, feel free to contact me. You can reach me at w.h.rupp@warwick.ac.uk or during my office hours (as detailed on the course handout). Appointments to discuss papers may be arranged. The Learning Grid and the skills components listed on the course website can also be of invaluable assistance.

⁶Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Anatol Rapoport (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1978), 201.

Documentation Appendix:

Two important and connected aspects of academic writing are the citations and bibliography. Citations, several examples of which appear in preceding pages, are how you tell readers where the information you are using comes from. This means that you provide your readers with specific information on the source you are discussing so that other people can go back and check the information. A bibliography is a final list of all the books, journal articles, web pages, etc. that you have used in your entire paper.

Resist the temptation to leave your citations and bibliography until the end. It takes far more time to go back and put in footnotes after you've finished writing than it does to add them as you write. By leaving your citations until the end (when you may be running out of time!) you also increase the risk of not (or incorrectly) citing something which could lead to accusations of plagiarism.

Generally, footnotes and endnotes are interchangeable. You must decide, however, which you want to use and once you have chosen to use either footnotes or endnotes it is **essential** that you stick to your decision. **Do not** mix footnotes and endnotes.

Different disciplines and subjects have different ways of citing material. Make sure you know which way your professor and/or seminar leader expect you to format your footnotes/endnotes and bibliography. The following examples show how a typical history essay should be cited. When in doubt, check the department's excellent online resource: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/res_rec/research/resources/referencing/ or come talk to me.

A sample sequence of footnotes or endnotes:

1. Mack P. Holt, 'Putting Religion Back Into the Wars of Religion', *French Historical Studies* 18, 2 (Fall 1993), 537.
2. Ibid., 524, 528, 549-51.
3. Derek McKay and H.M. Scott, *The Rise of the Great Powers, 1648-1815* (London: Longman, 1983), 12-15.
4. William S. Maltby, 'The Origins of a Global Strategy: England from 1558 to 1713' in *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States and War*, Williamson Murry et al. eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 157-8.
5. Holt, 'Wars of Religion', 538.

6. Ibid.

7. Matlby, 'Global Strategy', 160. McKay and Scott, *Great Powers*, 129.

Sample Bibliography:

Frey, Linda and Marsha Frey, eds. *The Treaties of the War of Spanish Succession: An Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Westport, USA: Greenwood, 1995.

Holt, Mack P. 'Putting Religion Back Into the Wars of Religion'. *French Historical Studies* 18, 2 (Fall 1993): 524-51.

Maltby, William S. 'The Origins of a Global Strategy: England from 1558 to 1713' in *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States and War*. Williamson Murray et al. eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 151-78.

McKay, Derek and H.M. Scott. *The Rise of the Great Powers, 1648-1815*. London: Longman, 1983.

Comments:

- Note that the authors' names in the bibliography are inverted and in alphabetic order. Titles are either underlined or italicized.
- Pay careful attention to the use of commas and periods above. Also, note the different variations for entries on books, articles from journals, and articles from edited collections.
- In the case of multiple authors, cite them in the order given on the book's cover. If there are too many authors or editors to conveniently cite (i.e. more than two), it's acceptable to sum up the extra ones with the catch phrase: et al.
- When citing publishing information, the correct sequence is: place of publication, then publisher, then date; for example: Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986.
- Parentheses are not employed for citations of books in the bibliography; only in the notes. Parentheses can be used for journal citations to separate volume number from dates.

- When citing an edited collection of articles, insert the editors' names *after* the title of the collection, and not before (note how this is done in the Maltby reference above).
- Be sure to include the page numbers for any articles cited from journals and edited collections.
- **Take care to take proper notes on bibliographic information as you do your research. Do it right the first time. Shortcuts only create extra work in the long run.**

Historical Journals – A Partial Guide

Originally compiled by R.K. Hanks

There are a wide range of historical journals available. The list here indicates a number of ones that focus on European history and international relations and will be useful when researching essays for this course. The following list details those journals available through the University library with an ‘†’ indicating at least partial electronic access. Print versions can be found in either the Arts or the Social Sciences periodicals section of the library. Online access can be gained by typing the journal title into the library catalogue and then following the ‘electronic resource’ links. (A valid student card will be required to read online journals.) Other journals can be accessed through a title search on Google and then following links through the appropriate publisher.

Please note that not being listed on the University library catalogue is not an indication of a journal’s value or significance.

Title	<i>Available at Warwick</i>
Acta Historiae Neerlandica (English)	Yes
Albion	Yes†
American Historical Review	Yes†
(The) American Political Science Review	Yes†
(The) American and Slavic East European Review	No
Annales (French)	Yes†
Annales historiques de al Révolution Française	Yes†
Australian Economic History Review	Yes†
Art History	Yes†
Balkan Studies	Yes
Bulgarian Historical Review	No
(The) Business History Review	Yes†
Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique (Eng/Fr)	Yes†
(The) Cambridge Historical Journal	Yes†
Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies	No
Canadian-American Slavic Studies	No
Canadian Journal of History	Yes†
Catholic Historical Review	Yes†
Central European History	Yes†
Comparative Studies in Society and History	Yes†
Cryptologia	Yes†
Diplomacy and Statecraft	Yes†

Diplomatic History	Yes†
Economic History	Yes
Economic History Review	Yes†
(The) English Historical Review	Yes†
Etudes Balkaniques	No
European History Quarterly	Yes†
European Studies	Yes†
Foreign Affairs	Yes†
French Historical Studies	Yes†
French History	Yes†
German History	Yes†
Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains	Yes†
(The) Historian	Yes†
(The) Historical Journal	Yes†
Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques	Yes
Historical Studies	Yes
History	Yes†
History and Theory	Yes†
History of Education	Yes†
History Today	Yes†
Intelligence and National Security	Yes†
International Affairs (London)	Yes†
International Organization	Yes†
International Review of Social History	Yes†
International Security	Yes†
(The) International History Review	No
Journal of American History	Yes†
(The) Journal of Asian History	No
(The) Journal of Asian Studies	Yes†
Journal of Baltic Studies	Yes†
Journal of Caribbean History	Yes
Journal of Contemporary History	Yes†
(The) Journal of Economic History	Yes†
(The) Journal of European Economic History	Yes
Journal of History and Politics	No
(The) Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies	Yes†
(The) Journal of Italian History	Yes
(The) Journal of Military History	Yes†

Journal of Modern History	Yes†
Journal of Southeast Asian Studies	No
(The) Journal of Strategic Studies	Yes†
London Review of Books	Yes
Mississippi Valley Historical Review	Yes†
(Le) Mouvement Social	Yes†
New York Review of Books	Yes
New York Times Book Review	No
Orbis	Yes†
Oxford Slavonic Papers	No
Past and Present	Yes†
(The) Polish Review	Yes
Political Science Quarterly	Yes†
Review of International Studies	Yes†
Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer	Yes
Revue des deux mondes	Yes
Revue des études sud-est européenne	No
Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale	No
Revue d'histoire de la guerre mondiale	No
Revue d'histoire diplomatique	Yes
Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine	Yes†
Revue historique	Yes†
Revue historique des armées	Yes
Revue internationale d'histoire militaire	Yes
Russian Review	Yes†
(The) Scandinavian Economic History Review	Yes†
Slavic Review	Yes†
Slavonic and East European Review	Yes†
Stanford Italian Review	No
Studies in History and Politics	No
Times Literary Supplement	Yes†
Victorian Studies	Yes†
Vingtième Siècle	Yes†
War and Society	Yes
West European Politics	Yes†

Oh no, your paper exceeds the maximum number of pages allowed! What do you do??

TIPS AND TRICKS

FOR KEEPING YOUR PAPER WITHIN THE PAGE LIMIT

Shrink font size to limits of human perception

If a minimum font sized is imposed, use a font that is 0.2pt smaller. They won't notice, will they?

Take out excessive details of your methodology

Let's face it, nobody really cares (and if they do, why help your competition?)

Border size Rule-of-thumb:

If there is paper exposed, it can be filled (Nature, and other journals, abhors a vacuous submission). If limit exists, apply 0.2pt rule.

Use Max. Abbrev. in Ref. Sec.

Spelling out the journal names will only make it easy for people to look up your competitors' papers.

Rewrite entire paper to make it more concise and easier to understand

Yeah right. Prodigious verbiage establishes your superior intelligence. Also, who has the time?

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Figure 1: A parting thought? Jorge Cham, 'PHD Comics: Keeping your paper within the page limit', PHD Comics, <http://www.phdcomics.com/comics/archive.php?comicid=926>.