

WRITING A HISTORY ESSAY

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A. ESSAYS – WHAT ARE THEY ALL ABOUT?

We set essays because we want to help you improve your writing skills and your ability to think creatively, systematically and analytically. In an essay you are expected to present a well-constructed and clearly expressed argument based on evidence.

Writing essays is difficult. (The word “essay,” when used as a verb, means to try or to attempt.) To produce good essays requires considerable effort and careful organisation of time and ideas. Inspiration is only a small part of the process, so essays written the night before they are due may be spontaneous, but are unlikely to be thoughtful or thought - provoking.

Remember that your tutors and lecturers are available to discuss any difficulties you may have though please do not leave it to the last minute to see them.

Essays submitted in the History section should follow the referencing conventions known as the University of Chicago style as outlined in Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Copies of this guide are available in the Bookshop and students undertaking a history major are advised to purchase their own copies. Honours and postgraduate students should also consult the full version of the style as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Copies are available in the reference section of the library. Additional style guides are listed in section H.

B. SEVEN STEPS TO PLANNING AND WRITING A SUCCESSFUL HISTORY ESSAY

1. *Establish what you are being asked to argue about.*

Because an essay calls for an argument, you need to read the question carefully to determine what you are being asked, and what responses you can make - supporting, rejecting or offering qualified (dis) agreement.

2. *Read for the essay in order to collect evidence.*

Read any primary sources that may be set in class several times. You may also find it useful to read what other people have thought about the subject, but this should never be a substitute for your own thoughts. Formulate these, at least in outline, before you read the secondary sources, or you may find yourself simply parroting the opinions of others. You are being asked for your point of view, your analysis of the topic.

3. *Formulate your own position, and muster your evidence.*

From your reading, you should now be ready to decide what you will argue.

4. *Outline the essay structure.*

Prepare an outline. In making notes about what you will say in your essay, keep in mind that:

- the purpose of the **Introduction** is to state the position you will be taking and to tell the reader how you will address the subject;
- the purpose of the **Body** of the essay is to present the pieces of evidence that support your essay, and to deal with any evidence to the contrary;
- in writing the **Conclusion** of the essay it is usual to summarise the evidence presented and to restate your argument, confident that you have now provided adequate evidence to justify your position.

5. *Write a first draft.*

Writing drafts helps you to organise your material and clarify your expression. In organising your material you may find it helpful to write each main point, with any exposition, evidence or analysis, on an individual sheet of paper. You can then arrange and rearrange the sheets of paper until you achieve a logical progression to your argument. The points should be developed into coherent paragraphs, beginning with a sentence, which states the main point. A computer makes this process much easier.

6. *Redraft, edit and polish your essay.*

This is essential. When you reread your draft after a few days, you will almost certainly find that it is not as clear or coherent as you remember. What you thought you had said may not necessarily be there on the paper. After a few days, you should be sufficiently distant from that first draft to criticise your own work. Proof read at least three times to check for accuracy. Read it aloud to check for fluency.

7. *Submit your essay.*

Make sure it is on time and follows the guidelines on presentation, formal writing, footnotes, and bibliography and academic misconduct outlined below.

C. HOW TO SAY IT IN FORMAL WRITING

Try to be direct, clear and interesting. Simple words and constructions and short sentences are often best, but variety does prevent boredom. It is important to integrate quotations into the fabric of your argument.

Use appropriate conjunctions and punctuation. You should always quote accurately, but for the purpose of integrating quotations you may make minor changes (you may change a pronoun, for example) as long as you enclose all such changes in square brackets.

Formal writing is always polite. It is not acceptable to use masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to men and women. For example, “man is a literate being.” To avoid sexist language, the plural is often the best solution grammatically. For example, “people are literate beings.”

Avoid writing the way you speak. For example: “I reckon this is a very interesting question because everyone knows that this fantastic novel has a lot to do with his own life, but I don’t think it’s that easy to read.” Written language differs from spoken language in terms of:

- **Vocabulary:** avoid the use of slang, abbreviations, childish or heavily attitudinal words;
- **Logic:** do not hang all statements off your own opinion (“I think that”);
- **Sentence structure:** sentences should not be long chains of clauses linked by “because” or “and”; use full stops liberally;
- **Conjunctions:** make use of the written language tools offered by words such as “First, second,” “on the other hand,” “in conclusion,” which help the reader (and writer) to follow the logical organisation of the material;
- **Substance:** avoid sharing truisms or inanities with your reader. For example, “literature is really important.”

Many students have difficulty with the following:

- **Sentence construction.** Make sure that the subject of the clause or sentence is clear, and that each sentence has a finite verb. If these terms mean nothing to you, now is your chance to find out - your tutor is there to be asked. A sentence is not a paragraph.
- **Paragraphing.** Each paragraph should begin with a relatively short “topic sentence” which summarises or introduces the theme of the paragraph. Well designed paragraphs of three to four sentences help the reader to follow your argument.
- **Punctuation.** Use punctuation to mark off elements of meaning and designate their respective values. Be scrupulous with apostrophes.
- **Cliches.** Avoid cliches and colloquialisms - such words and phrases have been devalued.

D. PRESENTATION AND OTHER TRICKY BITS

The brief notes in this section are based on chapters in Turabian, *Manual for Writers of Term Papers*. You should refer to Turabian for fuller information on particular topics. Here are some general instructions:

- Type or word-process your essay on one side of the paper. Computers for student use are available in the CT Building.
- Include a wide margin (at least 4-cm) on the left-hand side of each page for the marker’s comments.

- If you must handwrite your work (for example, if you have a computer breakdown), you are advised to write only on alternate lines of the page to give your marker room for comments.
- All essays should be double-spaced and printed in a clear font such as Times New Roman or Garamond which should be at least 12 pt in size. You may single space the footnotes.
- Number the pages, and fasten them securely.
- Attach a cover sheet, which can be obtained from the School Office or your tutor. Do not use any other kind of plastic sleeve or cover.

Acronyms, Numbers and Dates

- The names of government agencies, associations, unions and other organisations are often abbreviated. Commonly, acronyms are in full capitals with no periods. For example: UN, OPEC, and YMCA.
- Spell out all numbers from one to one hundred and any of the whole numbers followed by hundred, thousand, hundred thousand, and so on. For example: The population of the district was less than four million; there were 365 people in the graduating class.
- The same style should be used for all dates throughout the text. For example: On 28 June 1970 the convocation *Pacem in Maribus* was held.
- Particular centuries should be spelled out. For example: seventeenth-century literature; the eighteenth century. Decades are expressed as one word without an apostrophe. For example: 1890s, 1930s.

Spelling and Possessive Case

- Always use a spell-checker to correct spelling and grammar but do not rely on it exclusively.
- Use Australian/UK forms in preference to American (-ize not -ise forms; -our not -or forms).
- In general, form the possessive of single words by adding an apostrophe and *s*: For example, Jones's book; Marx's ideology. Note there are some exceptions to this rule, including long words ending in *s* and some proper names ending in *s*. For example: for righteousness' sake; Jesus' ministry; the Bradleys' house.
- Confusingly, the possessive of the pronoun "it" is simply "its" - with no apostrophe. "It's" is the contracted form of "it is."

Quotations

Essays must be your own work, that is, they must be written in your own words, presenting your own analysis and arguments. When you use a quotation, use it to reinforce your essay - not to save you from writing it. A "scissors and paste" collection of long quotations connected in a cursory fashion is not acceptable. Only use quotes if they are directly relevant and fit appropriately into your line of argument. All direct quotations, must be accurately reproduced, that is, follow the original exactly.

- If quotations are short (about three lines or less) they can be incorporated into your text, enclosed in double quotation marks. For example: The President of the Miners Federation stated: "The rejection of our claim for annual leave shows the employers' bias in the arbitration process." He then called for mass pithead meetings.
- For a quotation within a quotation, single quotation marks are used. Periods and commas should be placed inside quotation marks; semicolons and colons go outside. For example: "I'm not convinced," said the miner, "that he really meant 'nothing.'"

- Quotations longer than three lines should be indented and single-spaced (the rest of the text being double-spaced). Indented quotations do not need quotation marks.
- Do not use ellipsis points (three dots) before or after a quotation. If an omission occurs within a quotation you should indicate that something has been omitted by three ellipsis points.

- If you are quoting someone else's quotation, your footnote reference must indicate both the original and the secondary source of your quotation. Do not cite as your source an original document unless you have read that document. For example:

1. Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur" (The death of an author), *Manteia*, vol. 5 (1968); trans. Stephen Heath in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147; quoted in Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 372-73, n.9.

(In fact - why not look up the original and create your own citation? It really is much easier.)

E. FOOTNOTES

Why Use Footnotes?

In general, footnotes serve four main purposes:

- To cite the authority for specific facts, opinions, paraphrases or exact quotations;
- To make cross-references;
- To make incidental comments or amplify a point in the text (though it is bad style to do this too often);
- To make acknowledgements.

Footnotes are necessary to acknowledge all quotations and key ideas from your sources that are not common knowledge. For example, "The Bastille was stormed on 14 July 1789" is common knowledge and does not need to be referenced. On the other hand, "Some historians argue that the storming of the Bastille had little impact on the overall outcome of the revolution" refers to scholarly opinion and should be supported with relevant citations.

Insert the footnote number at the end of the sentence to which it refers and number consecutively from the beginning to the end of the essay. For ease of marking and reading, put footnotes at the bottom of each page, not at the end of the essay. For every thousand words you write you should generally supply somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five footnotes.

Other Points About Footnotes

- Failure to acknowledge another author's words or ideas is dishonest and is one of the cardinal sins in essay writing in History. It is called **plagiarism**, and may attract serious penalties.
- You will often find that the notes in the works you read can lead to valuable additional sources for your own research. Therefore, you, in turn, should lead the reader to your sources. This strengthens the authority of your work.
- In order to be able to construct footnotes, it is essential to keep a note of the name of the author, the book or article and the number of the page where the key point or quotation is to be found. Keep this information in the margin or in the text of your notes so that you can easily write your footnotes along with the text of your essay.
- Do not quote from encyclopedias or from your lecture or tutorial notes. Also, avoid non-scholarly web-sites. They are not acceptable sources of reference.

F. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Why does an Essay need a Bibliography?

In conjunction with footnotes, a bibliography allows your reader or marker to identify and verify the information provided in your essay. The bibliography lists the sources used in writing the essay; it should not be a list of everything in the library which is relevant to the topic.

General Instructions

- Place the bibliography on a separate sheet at the end of the essay.
- Include all books and articles consulted and which appear in your footnotes whether actual quotations are taken from them or not; never list an item that you have not actually read.
- Divide the Bibliography into Primary Sources and Secondary Sources. A primary source is a document or other artifact that is contemporary with the historical events described in your essay. Secondary sources are sources that are not eyewitness or contemporary records but were written and published by historians and other scholars who were not present at the time of the events they describe.
- Within these categories, a strict alphabetical arrangement according to the surnames of the authors should be used. When there are two or more authors' names, only the first is inverted in the bibliography.
- Note that the form of reference for a bibliography entry differs from that used in a footnote. The differences are outlined in the following set of examples.

G. EXAMPLES OF FOOTNOTE AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC ENTRIES

In the following examples, N indicates the note form of a reference and B indicates the same reference as it should appear in your Bibliography. Some points to note:

- In Chicago style, do not use the abbreviation "p." or "pp." for page ranges, simply provide the number after a comma.
- Do not use the terms, *ibid.*, *op. cit.* or any other latinism. Instead, use brief titles for all subsequent references.
- Provide the city (not the suburb or country) of publication.

Books - Single Author

N 1. Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144-47.

B Macintyre, Stuart. *A Concise History of Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Books - More than One Author, Translator or Editor

N 1. Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), 32.

B Jacquart, Danielle and Claude Thomasset. *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson. Oxford: Polity Press, 1985.

Component Part by One Author in a Work by Another

N 1. Paula Hamilton, "The Knife-Edge: Debates About Memory and History," in *Memory and History in Twentieth-century Australia*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 132.

B Hamilton, Paula. "The Knife-Edge: Debates About Memory and History." In *Memory and History*, ed. Kate Darian Smith and Paula Hamilton (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 110-32.

Journal Article [Published two to six times per year]

N 1. Richard Waterhouse, "Minstrel Show and Vaudeville House: The Australian Popular Stage, 1838-1914," *Australian Historical Studies* 23 (1989): 366.

B Waterhouse, Richard. "Minstrel Show and Vaudeville House: The Australian Popular Stage, 1838-1914." *Australian Historical Studies* 23 (1989): 366-385.

Magazine or Newspaper Article [Published monthly or daily]

N 1. Patrick Carey, "Home at Last," *Irish Daily Independent* (Dublin), 16 June 1904. [If the newspaper is cited only once, there is no need to include it in bibliography. If references are more frequent, the bibliography should list the periodical with the time range consulted for research in the essay.]

B *Irish Daily Independent* (Dublin), 1900-1914.

Thesis or Dissertation

N 1. Anne Williams, "Managing the 'Feeble-minded': Eugenics and the Institutionalisation of People with Intellectual Disability in New South Wales, 1900 - 30." (Ph.D. diss., University of Newcastle, NSW, 1998), 43.

B Williams, Anne. "Managing the 'Feeble-minded': Eugenics and the Institutionalisation of People with Intellectual Disability in New South Wales, 1900 - 30." (Ph.D. diss., University of Newcastle, NSW, 1998), 43.

Public Documents and Archival Sources

The rules relating to these sources are too complex to be given in brief. You should refer to the relevant section of Turabian or the full Chicago style. British Foreign and State Papers, to provide one example, are referred to as follows:

N 1. Foreign Office, "Austria: Proclamation of the Emperor Annulling the Constitution of 4th March, 1849," *British Foreign and State Papers, 1952-53*, 41:1298-99.

B United Kingdom. Foreign Office. "Austria: Proclamation of the Emperor Annulling the Constitution of 4th March, 1849." *British Foreign and State Papers, 1952-53*.

Electronic Source<<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/departement/hi/carey/mla.html#www>>

To cite sources available via the World Wide Web, give the author's name (if known), the full title of the work and any reference number, the full web address, and the date of your visit (since web sites change rapidly).

N 1. Joseph Banks, Endeavour Journal, 19 April 1770, Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 03.615, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<http://www.slsw.gov.au/Banks/series_03/03_start.htm> (8 Dec. 1999).

B Banks, Joseph. Endeavour Journal, 19 April 1770. Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 03.615, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<http://www.slsw.gov.au/Banks/series_03/03_start.htm>(8 Dec. 1999).

Subsequent references

If there are subsequent references to works that have already been cited refer to the work by surname, short title and page number. Do not use Ibid. or any other Latin abbreviation for immediately following references, just repeat the short title citation:

2. Macintyre, *Concise History of Australia*, 35.

3. Paula Hamilton, "The Knife-Edge," 85.

4. Banks, Endeavour Journal, 20 April 1770.

5. Banks, Endeavour Journal, 20 April 1770.

H. FURTHER READING

Books

AGPS. *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 5th ed. Canberra: AGPS Press, 1994. 686.2252 STYL 1994

The Chicago Manual of Style. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 14th ed. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Mauch, James E. *Guide to the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: A Handbook For Students And Faculty*, 4th ed. New York : M. Dekker, 1998. 808.02 MAUC 1998

Germov, John. *Get Great Marks for Your Essays*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996. 808.042 GERM

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers Of Research Papers*, 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999.

Lester, James D. *The Essential Guide To Writing Research Papers*. New York: Longman, 1999. 808.02 LEST

Peters, Pam. *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995. R428.00994 PETE c.3

Peters, Pam. *The Macquarie Student Writers Guide*. Milton, Qld.: Jacaranda, 1989. Huxley R428/M1

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 808.02 TURA 1987

Li, Xia and Nancy B. Crane. *Electronic Styles: A Handbook for Citing Electronic Information*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 1996

