

Writing Guide for History Papers

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Writing is one of the most important skills you can learn in college. I expect you to work hard on your writing and to hand in carefully researched, well-organized, and polished papers. You should submit papers that you would feel comfortable sharing with classmates or publishing for the campus community. In other words, keep an audience in mind beyond the professor and strive for the highest quality you can produce. And I will give you the level of detailed, productive comments that you would expect after your hard work.

The most effective writing is clear, concise, and simple. Be certain every word in your paper matters. Edit as if you could receive \$10 for every word eliminated. Read the essay, "The Principles of Poor Writing," and do the opposite of its ironic, humorous guidelines.

Pay particular attention to passive voice; avoid it at all costs. You can spot passive voice by finding cases where you use the verb "to be" (is, are, was, were, have been, etc.) followed by an "ed" ending on a verb. For example: The revolution was started by bandits. Rewrite as: Bandits started the revolution. In many cases, the passive voice obscures meaning in history papers because it hides historical actors. Grammatically speaking, these sentences lack a subject. For example: Pancho Villa was seen as a hero. Seen by whom? Who saw Pancho Villa as a hero (and who didn't)? Rewrite as: Many landless peasants in Northern Mexico saw Pancho Villa as a hero. If you avoid all forms of the verb "to be," you will avoid passive voice and write more engagingly.

Your papers should also adhere to these guidelines:

- Follow the assignment, including required page lengths
- Take a stand, have an argument, say something you mean—and present this in a thesis statement that appears in the paper's introduction
- Organize your paper so that readers can follow it logically and easily; explain this organization in your introduction
- Introduce quotes in your own words; use quotations in moderation
- Make sure each paragraph has a topic sentence and transition
- Don't plagiarize (remember: you have to cite *ideas* as well as quotations)
- Cite properly with an acceptable citation system; historians use footnotes and follow the Chicago Manual of Style: www.chicagomanualofstyle.org
- ***Proofread as if your life depends on it***

Grading Scale:

A+ = 98%	A-/A = 93
A+/A = 97	A- = 92
A/A+ = 96	A-/B+ = 91
A = 95	B+/A- = 89
A/A- = 94	B+ = 88 etc.

Paper Grading Guidelines

These are general criteria for paper grades. While exceptional performance in one area can sometimes compensate for mediocre performance in another area, you must normally meet all the criteria to receive the better grade.

A

- an original analysis (not regurgitation) that is exceptional, creative, and unique
- a sophisticated and clear argument expressed in a thesis statement and throughout the paper
- accurate citations that consistently adhere to an acceptable citation style
- solid evidence to support all assertions and prove your thesis
- recognition of and effective challenges to counter arguments
- polished writing with clean, neat transitions and almost no syntax errors
- explicit engagement with the required assignment *and* with broader course themes
- demonstrates a mastering of the assigned documents and course readings

B

- an unpolished version of the A paper
- has all the information but is not original or creative; lacks the author's own analysis
- portions of the paper are descriptive rather than analytical
- writing errors appear with some frequency; a few inaccurate citations
- argument of the paper or the paper's organizational logic are not explicitly clear
- evidence not always provided or not effectively employed
- leaves doubt about the depth of understanding of course readings or lectures

C

- summarizes readings rather than analyzing them (i.e., reads like a book report)
- failure to fulfill completely all aspects of the assignment, including assigned page length
- sloppy writing with no apparent proofreading; paper gives indication of hurried work
- little evidence supporting assertions in paper; few citations or inappropriate citations
- lack of an argument or analysis
- suggests limited understanding of course issues and themes
- contains claims or assertions that are wrong
- suggests incomplete or hasty reading of assigned materials

D

- lack of understanding of the course materials
- neglect of an entire component of the assignment
- significantly short of required length of assignment
- incoherent writing, logic, or organization
- failure to fulfill assignment, which includes both the writing assignment and the reading

F

- blatant misunderstanding of the assignment and course
- never handed in or extremely late
- maliciously poor quality
- plagiarized in one or more sections