

**History Writing Guide**  
Department of History  
Concordia University  
Gavin Taylor, 2023

## **WRITING HISTORY**

History is a discipline built on persuasion. No matter how many years they log in the archives, no matter how much evidence they unearth in the dusty vaults of libraries, professional historians must always persuade others of their interpretation of the past.

The same, on a more modest scale, is true of history students. Virtually every essay you will be assigned at university will ask you to interpret a specific historical question, and then defend your interpretation to a reader. If you make your argument in prose that is clear, concise and vivid, your reader is more likely to be persuaded by your ideas. Good writing, in other words, is not merely a cosmetic addition to your essay; it is the stuff of clear thought and rigorous argumentation.

The following is an introduction to the basics of writing history essays. It is not meant to be a set of iron laws that may never be violated. Instead, these are guidelines that should help you write better, more persuasive papers.

For additional advice and guidance on writing essays, you should take advantage of [writing assistance from the Student Success Centre at Concordia](#). The Success Centre offers a plethora of resources for students, including in-person consulting and tutorials.

For a more detailed guide to researching and writing history essays, see Mary Lynn Rampolla, [A Pocket Guide to Writing in History](#), which is available through the Concordia Library.

## **READING AN ASSIGNMENT**

One of the keys to writing a good essay is to understand the purpose of the assignment. Your professors often include certain signposts in the wording of the assignment that indicate the direction you should take. Perhaps they want you to assess a historical argument, encourage you to explore a field of inquiry, or apply the methodological tools you have acquired during the course of a semester.

If you understand the purpose of the assignment and have a mastery of the material, you will be well on the way to writing a good essay. Avoid straying too far from the guidelines, and focus on answering the question posed in the assignment.

One of the ways of determining the purpose of the assignment is to look for certain keywords:

1. **“Discuss”**: This word might seem to indicate a more casual, open-ended approach—like having a discussion with a friend. But in this context, it generally means assessing an argument that a historian or group of historians have made, or considering a particular angle on the historical problem. For example, you might be asked to “discuss the role of *gens de couleur libres* in the Haitian Revolution.” The challenge here is to evaluate arguments historians have made about the place of free people of colour in the Revolution. It is not simply a matter of making the case that they did play an important role; to “discuss” this argument is to consider its strengths and weaknesses.

Start by outlining the case that they were an important factor in the Revolution—citing the historians who have made this case—but also consider other explanations for the Revolution, types of evidence that historians have used, the advantages that are gained by viewing free people as well as slaves as agents of change, and so on. A strong thesis should go beyond a simple restatement of the essay question; it should highlight the value and shortcomings of an interpretation of a historical problem.

2. **“Analyze”**: Often this is a prompt for essays that focus on a primary or secondary source, asking you to provide a close reading of its contents. Doing a “close reading” means not merely comprehending a text, but also thinking about its structure, distinctive features, references to other texts, and context.

What are the biases of the author? What were the author’s intentions? If the author is making an argument, what is it—and do you agree with it? How does it compare with arguments others have made on the same subject? Once you have read the source in this fashion—and it often helps to annotate it with a pencil as you read—the “analysis” of your essay should articulate your interpretation to readers. Try as much as possible to formulate your answer as a thesis: what is the main thrust of this interpretation?

3. **“Consider”**: This word is typically used to suggest a possible approach, or list of approaches, to writing the essay. For example, an assignment on the rise of department stores at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries might ask you to “consider mass retailing from the perspectives of race, class, and gender.” This suggestion is usually made because these lenses of interpretation provide a revealing perspective on the subject, and are undergirded by an abundance of scholarly research.

It helps to focus your research and analysis along these lines, but avoid the pitfall of turning your essay into a laundry list. In other words, do not merely discuss each of these factors sequentially in your essay—one paragraph on race, followed a second paragraph on class, followed by another paragraph on gender. Try to integrate your findings into a single, focused thesis that incorporates all of these factors.

A stronger thesis might be something along the lines of: “The growth of the middle class in the late nineteenth century, combined with the increasingly important role of women in

managing household purchases, created a fertile environment for the rise of department stores, although African Americans and other minorities were largely excluded from this emerging consumer economy.”

## DEVELOPING A THESIS

As a History student, you may sometimes receive a graded paper with comments such as “What is your thesis?” or “You need a stronger argument” scrawled at the bottom of the page. If you are interested in improving the quality of your essays, it is worth considering the meaning of these statements. What exactly is a clear thesis? How precisely does one make a historical argument?

First of all, the word “argument” here is not intended in the sense of a squabble between two people. Instead, it refers to its meaning in philosophy: a set of reasons that persuade others that an idea is correct. A clear historical argument is one that convinces readers that an interpretation of the past is compelling.

But how do you convince people that a version of the past is correct? Historians cannot replicate the past exactly as it happened; the world is too large and varied to be captured in all its complexity. In any event, we lack a complete record of everything that happened. Instead, historians develop a simplified version of the past, in the same way that cartographers map a territory to help us travel from one point to the next. In particular, historians are concerned with questions of causality: they want to know *why* certain things happened. In order to do so, they have to identify certain factors that played an important role in a causal chain. For example, if a historian is trying to explain the outbreak of the Second World War, she might point to the economic stress caused by the Great Depression as the most important reason why countries such as Germany and Japan invaded other territories.

But another historian might emphasize other factors as being equally or more important: resentment over reparations from the Treaty of Versailles, the rise of nationalism, the crisis of democracy, or any number of other things. To assess the validity of these rival claims, historians need to *prove* their interpretations by referring to evidence. This is why primary sources are so important in history; they represent the empirical basis of historians’ interpretations.

Thus when you write a history paper, you must make a claim about the past that is rooted in the sources. But at the same, you should recognize that this is merely your interpretation, and that there might be other ways of looking at the same set of historical facts. Your essays should consequently always be persuasive in tone. You are not regurgitating facts; you are building a case for your particular version of the past. In order to make this case, you need to state it very clearly at the beginning of your essay. This is what we mean by a “thesis statement”: it is your interpretation spelled out in a

concise and unambiguous way. This statement should *not* be a summary of topics. For example, this kind of statement should be avoided:

*Throughout history, people have been in search of freedom. Concerning freedom, some people have launched revolutions to reach this goal. One of these revolutions was in colonial America and started in 1776. This paper will consider the various factors that led to the outbreak of the American Revolution. First, it will examine British finances after the Seven Years War. Then, we will look at British policies toward the colonies such as the Stamp Act and the Tea Act. Finally, the attitude of Americans toward taxation will be considered.*

The problem with this introduction is that it does not really tell us anything. What was the cause of the American Revolution, in this student's opinion? We really have no idea, on the basis of this statement. What is more, none of the assertions in the introduction can be tested with evidence, so it is difficult to empirically prove it right or wrong. To actually make this a thesis statement, the student might rewrite the introduction along these lines:

*The American Revolution was one of the first anti-colonial revolts inspired by Enlightenment ideology. It was set into motion by a financial crisis faced by the British government at the close of the Seven Years War. The high cost of the war forced the government to introduce policies, such as the Stamp Act and Tea Act, which were intended to force the colonists to bear their share of the financial burden. But because the colonists believed that taxes were illegitimate unless voted by their own assemblies, they interpreted these policies as tyrannical plot.*

This thesis statement actually advances an interpretation that identifies various factors explaining why the Revolution happened. The remainder of the essay can prove the veracity of the statement by elaborating on its details and citing sources as evidence.

When you are asked to develop a "stronger thesis", try to determine what your argument is before you sit down to write. It often helps to compare your ideas to those of historians who have written about the same subject. Do you agree with them? If not, why not? Are you convinced by some aspects of their argument, but not others? If so, why? Once you have thought these questions through, it becomes much easier to develop a thesis statement that is actually an argument rather than a list of topics.

## **PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES**

The arguments historians make about the past are always based on sources: scholarly history is generally "empiricist" in that it presupposes that our knowledge of the world is derived from experiences and objects such as interviews, documents, and artifacts. Historians tend to group these sources into two categories:

**1. “Primary” sources** are documents and artifacts that originate from the time of the period under study. These sources are the basis of all history, since scholars must piece together an account of the past using the paper trail left behind by previous generations.

When you read a primary source, you should not only try to understand its contents; you should also think about how it can be used to tell us more about the historical period in question. What are the biases of the author? What was the intention of the author in writing the source? How trustworthy is the source? What insight does the author offer about the historical period in question?

Historians typically treat their sources as “evidence”, much in the same way that a lawyer proves a case by using forensic investigations or the testimony of witnesses. Historians reconstruct the past through the study of sources, and then prove the validity of their interpretations by citing documents and artifacts. As you read primary sources, you should think about how they might be used to understand and interpret past societies.

**2. “Secondary” sources** are historians’ interpretations of the past, which typically take the form of books and journal articles. Reading secondary sources is challenging in its own way: it requires you to think about how historians have interpreted particular events and processes, and to analyze the virtues and shortcomings of their interpretations.

While historians often present their findings as statements of fact, they usually are making arguments in response to the findings of other historians. Their arguments are necessarily selective; they choose to cite certain documents or pieces of evidence, while leaving others aside. As a history student, you should start to think about how the work of historians is influenced by their methods (which documents they choose to study, or the theoretical framework they use to understand the documents), their ideological orientation, as well as their contemporary environment.

While a strong thesis statement is essential to a good essay, the persuasiveness of your argument ultimately rests on the marshalling and presentation of its evidence. As you read the sources, always take notes—think about details, quotations, anecdotes, and lines of argument that help you make sense of your subject.

Remember that the use of evidence in your paper is necessarily selective; it is not possible to present all the research you did on a subject. Instead, think about how you would like to frame your analysis, including and highlighting pieces of evidence that best support your argument. Do not, however, distort or exclude details that might contradict your thesis. Imagine how sources might be interpreted differently, and address the contradictory evidence directly. Rather than ignoring these possible objections, try to account for them in your essay.

## INTRODUCTIONS

The opening paragraph of your essay is an opportunity to grab the attention of your reader. Never assume that you are writing for a professor who is already an expert in your subject; imagine you are addressing an intelligent reader who is unfamiliar with the topic. The introduction should place your subject in context and also make it clear why it is interesting, whether to specialists or to the layperson.

At the same time, you should also present your thesis in the introduction. Generally speaking, you should be able to distill the main argument of your essay in a sentence or two in the opening paragraph. Doing so will provide your readers with a clear understanding of what you are trying to communicate in your essay, while also offering them signposts that will guide them through your supporting arguments.

There are many ways to begin an essay, but some common approaches are:

1. You might begin with an **anecdote** that sets the scene for your essay. For example, if you are writing about early French exploration of Canada, you could sketch a vignette of Jacques Cartier's encounter with Iroquoians in Stadacona in 1534. This kind of opening has the advantage of being evocative and eye-catching, but it is important that you artfully transition to thesis statement. You need to explain how the anecdote illustrates or typifies the argument you are trying to make.
2. Another possibility is to use a **narrowing "funnel"** approach in which you begin with a broad statement and then tighten the focus to a more specific point. For example, you might begin with the observation that "in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of European monarchs sponsored expeditions across the Atlantic to claim territory in the Americas." You could then narrow your claims to something more specific: "In the case of France, these expeditions were an outgrowth of the fisheries and other forms of maritime commerce originating in Brittany and Normandy."
3. Conversely, one could adopt a **widening "funnel"** approach that begins with a specific statement and broadens to a more general point. Here the case of Jacques Cartier might be used to discuss broader patterns of French trade or the role of Valois monarchs in overseas trade. The challenge in this case is to explain how the specific relates to the general.
4. It is also possible to directly address a **scholarly argument** in your introduction. When you write an essay, you are entering into a conversation with other historians. Your thesis statement, in some sense, is a summary of your contribution to this conversation. (To think about how your argument relates to the work on the subject, consider the kinds of questions you would ask if you were writing a historiographical essay.) An introduction of this kind might follow several different patterns:

- a) If there are opposing schools of interpretation on the subject, outline their arguments in general terms, and situate your own interpretation within the framework of the debate
- b) If there are shortcomings or gaps within the literature on a subject, explain what they are and indicate how your essay will help to address them
- c) If you are examining an existing body of scholarship using a novel methodology or interpretive lens, explain how your approach will shed new light on the subject

Before you start to write, think about which of these approaches best suits your subject. Sometimes writing the introduction helps to clarify what your argument is; it can also be useful to re-write your introduction after you have completed the rest of the essay, since your ideas might change as you put them to paper.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the final paragraph, you should tie the various strands of your essay together and recapitulate your main argument. It helps to re-read the introduction and body of your essay, thinking about your main thesis and the evidence used to support it.

On the other hand, do not merely restate your thesis in the conclusion. Try to expand it to make a broader point, pivot to a related subject, or suggest future directions for research. Try to avoid trite or cliché statements such as “only time will tell” or “throughout history, change has been a constant.” The conclusion does not need to be grandiose or bold; it is simply a reminder to your readers of where you have taken them, and how you reached your destination.

## COMMON STYLISTIC MISTAKES

### 1. Mixing Tenses

History papers should be written in the past tense. Other fields might encourage you to write in the “literary present,” which makes writing more vivid, but history deals with events that took place in the past. Make sure that you do not switch between the present and past tense in your essays, even if you are paraphrasing or analyzing a text that is written in the present tense.

**Avoid:** *Machiavelli contends that “one must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.”*

**Instead:** *Machiavelli contended that “one must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.”*

## 2. Passive Voice

One of the keys to writing well is to use the active rather than the passive voice. Sentences written in the active voice communicate ideas more directly and clearly, because they make it clear that the subject of a sentence is the person performing the action. An example of the active voice is:

*Jefferson’s brother gave him the book.*

The passive voice makes the subject the receiver of the action, resulting in a more convoluted sentence:

*The book was given to Jefferson by his brother.*

The key is to always make the actors the subjects of your sentence.

**Avoid:** *Community activism was described accurately by Lizabeth Cohen.*

**Instead:** *Lizabeth Cohen accurately described community activism.*

Other examples of passive voice, to be **avoided**:

*The process of modernization in any society can be seen as a positive change*

**Instead:** *Modernization is a positive change in any society.*

*The president was presented as an honest man.*

**Instead:** *Observers said the president was an honest man.*

*Kennedy's support for the plan was documented in a letter to his brother.*

**Instead:** *Kennedy outlined his support for the plan in a letter to his brother.*

You can change a passive voice sentence to the active voice if you:

1. Locate the verb of the sentence. (*The weapons of mass destruction **were found** inside an underground bunker.*)
2. Determine who the actor of the sentence is—this person may or may not be used in the passive voice sentence. Write the sentence so that the actor performs the action. (***The soldier** found the weapons of mass destruction inside an underground bunker.*)



### 3. Wordiness

Concise writing is the key to clear communication. You should express your ideas with an economy of words. Make your points as succinctly as possible.

**Avoid** the phrases *this is*, *there are*, and *it is* at the beginning of your sentences.

**Avoid:** *It is evident that the reason that Wilson decided to enter the war was his commitment to multilateral diplomacy.*

**Instead:** *Wilson decided to enter the war because he was committed to multilateral diplomacy.*

Make sure that the real subject is the subject of the sentence; make sure that the real verb is the real verb.

**Avoid:** *In Handlin's argument, there are many indications that he misunderstood the nature of immigration.*

**Instead:** *Handlin did not understand the nature of immigration.*

**Avoid** the following phrases, which tend to be unnecessary and obscure the meaning of your sentences:

*The reason why is that* (**instead:** *because*)

*This is a subject that* (**instead:** *this*)

*In spite of the fact that* (**instead:** *despite* or *although*)

*Due to the fact that* (**instead:** *because*)

*in the event that* (**instead:** *if*)

*because of the fact that* (**instead:** *because*)

**Avoid** a long word when a simple one will do: *use* rather than *utilize*, *explain* rather than *explicate*, *make* rather than *construct*.

### 4. Capitalization

The general rule is to capitalize formal names (such as surnames, titles, names of companies or associations, names of nations or places, titles of films or books) but to leave common names in lower case.

So, for example, it is *President Eisenhower*, but the *decisions taken by American presidents during the twentieth century*.

## 5. Punctuation

### Apostrophe

Use an apostrophe to denote possession: *the media's problem, the children's toys*

Do **not** use an apostrophe to form a plural. **Avoid** the following: *the 1950's, they were hero's, they were VIP's.*

Use an apostrophe to indicate that a portion of a word has been omitted or truncated: e.g., *the Great Depression of the '30s, he was suffering from 'roid rage.*

### Colons and Semicolons

Use a colon, rather than a comma, to introduce a direct quotation longer than a short sentence.

*Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in 1932: "This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."*

A colon introduces a list or an explanation.

*The new immigration consisted of a wide variety of groups: Chinese, Laotians, Vietnamese, Guatemalans, Ecuadoreans.*

*The president considered several options: increase the number of troops, withdraw voluntarily, or resort to large-scale bombing.*

A Semicolon separates two clauses.

*The '60s were a decade of contrasts; hippies rubbed shoulders with organization men.*

Do **not** use commas or semi-colons instead of colons.

**Avoid:** *The American people were faced with a single problem, overconfidence.*

### Ellipsis (...)

Use three spaced periods to indicate an omission from a text or quotation.

*The decision... rests solely with your elected representatives, not with the media.*

Use an ellipsis only inside a sentence, not at the beginning or end.

**Avoid:** “... the decision rests solely with your elected representatives, not with the media,” the pundit said.

### Quotation Marks

Use quotation marks to enclose direct quotations. They should be followed by a footnote mark, placed outside the quotation.

*The sheriff said, “I don’t care what those people think.”<sup>1</sup>*

Alternate double and single marks in quotations within quotations.

*“Charles Beard cited Jefferson’s contention that ‘man was a rational animal endowed by nature with rights and with an innate sense of justice and that he could be restrained from wrong and protected in right by moderate powers confided to persons of his own choice.’”*

Quotations of five lines or more should be set aside as a block quote—but generally avoided altogether.

*Hayden underlined the loss of direction in American society:*

*Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. But we are a minority—the vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally-functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present.*

## **6. Spelling**

Spell-check catches most spelling errors in papers, but there are many homonyms that lead people astray.

Among these are:

*Affect/effect*

Affect is a verb (e.g., *The move affected him deeply*), while effect is a noun (e.g., *The effect of the move was profound*).

*Dependant/dependent*

---

*Dependant* is a noun meaning someone who depends on another. (e.g., *He was a single man without any dependants.*) *Dependent* is an adjective, meaning depending on—e.g., *He was dependent on their charity.*

*It's /its*

*It's* is a contraction of *it is*—avoid using this term in essays, as you should not be using contractions at all. *Its* is the possessive of *it*—e.g., *The game reached its end.*

*Loose/lose*

You *lose* a game when your shoelaces become *loose*.

*Navel/naval*

*Navel* means your bellybutton; *naval* refers to the navy.

*Populace/populous*

*Populace* is a noun referring to the people of a country; *populous* is an adjective meaning *having a large population*.

*Than/then*

If you have more *than* enough time, *then* you can work a little more on your spelling.

*Where/were*

*Where* refers to a place, *were* is the past tense of *are*.

## FORMATTING AND CITATIONS

As a general rule, History essays should be written in 12-point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should be double-spaced. On the title page or at the top of the first page, include your name and student number, along with the title of the assignment and the course number. Essays should be paginated; the convention is to start numbering on the second page (in MS Word, choose Insert → Page numbers... → Format...).

History follows the Chicago Manual of Style/Turabian approach. [Consult the Concordia Library webpage on this style](#) as you write your essays. History uses the **Notes and Bibliography (N & B)** system; you should format your footnotes and bibliographies accordingly.

### Sample Footnote References:

#### Books:

John William Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law: The Wounded Knee Trials* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), 58.

Firstname Secondname, *Title* (City: Publisher, Year), page reference.

Journal articles:

Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau, "The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era," *Ethnohistory* 44 (1997), 434-438.

Author, "Article Title," *Journal Title* Volume # (Year of Publication), page reference.

**Sample Bibliographic References:**

Books:

Child, Brenda. *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*. Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Lastname, Firstname. *Title*. City: Publisher, Year.

Journal articles:

Anderson, Gary C. "Early Dakota Migration and Intertribal War: A Revision." *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (1980), 17-36.

Lastname, Firstname. "Article Title." *Journal Title* Volume # (Year of Publication), pages.