Types of History Assignments

Department of History
Concordia University
Gavin Taylor, 2023

WHAT KIND OF ASSIGNMENT IS IT?

As you embark on an assignment, consider what its purpose is. Your instructors usually have a learning goal in mind: they want to encourage you to master a body of literature, cultivate certain research and analytical skills, or give you practice in a particular genre of historical writing. Always read the prompt closely, paying close attention to keywords that point to the instructor's expectations. Often the type is labelled explicitly—it might be a "book review" or a "research essay"—but sometimes you might have to work out which style of writing would be most appropriate.

What follows is an overview of the most common kinds of assignments, with tips on how to best approach them. In some cases, the instructor might have particular expectations or guidelines, which always supersede these broad recommendations below. Be sure to always carefully read the assignment before you start researching and writing.

RESEARCH ESSAYS

While shorter assignments tend to be closely tethered to course materials, the research essay allows you to explore a particular topic in greater depth. Your instructor will explain the specific parameters of the assignment, but in general the starting point of a research paper is the library. It is worth consulting with the History subject librarian (see your course Moodle page as well as the links below to find this contact), and also perusing the History research guide and the list of History-related databases for leads on primary and secondary sources at the library. For some subjects, it is also useful to consult the archives of historical newspapers. While it is possible to do this research online, it helps to browse the library stacks in person to see the range of books published on your subject. For library searches, you should familiarize yourself with the Sofia Discovery tool, which gives you access to the holdings of Concordia and other Quebec universities.

After you have gained a grounding in your subject, you should try to refine your findings into a research question. Think about how historians have approached the same subject. What are their main concerns? Is there a consensus on certain issues or contention with respect to others? If there is disagreement, what is the nature of their differences? Are there aspects of the problem they might have ignored? Which primary sources did they use? Are there other sources they might have overlooked? Is there an insight from another field that might be relevant to your topic?

Try to find an angle on the topic that might be novel, provocative, understudied, or revealing. At this point, it should take the form of a question rather than a thesis. For example, if you are studying piracy in the 18th century, you might ask: *Did women become pirates during this period, and if so what was their motivation? How did they enter into a life of piracy?* Typically, the most interesting research questions are the ones that focus on the *why* and *how* of a topic rather than the *who, what* and *when*—although these details become useful in answering the question.

Once you have decided on this question, you should conduct more research in order to find answers. It helps to have a hypothesis to guide your research, but you should have an open mind and be ready to change your ideas as you discover new or contradictory pieces of evidence. Let the sources shape your ideas, and change or modify the direction of your research if you find more promising avenues of inquiry. As the research takes shape, try to develop a tentative thesis that helps to organize and make sense of the sources you have read.

You should also take notes, both to remind yourself of important aspects of the sources and to flag pieces of evidence relevant to your essay. If you come across telling quotes or interesting details, jot down the references in a form that can be readily converted into a footnote. Look for patterns in the evidence and record specific instances that reveal the patterns. For example, in a paper dealing with the notion of *equality* in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, find passages in which he describes Americans treating one another in an egalitarian manner. Be sure to write down the page numbers as well as relevant quotations. Once you start writing your essay, you will find it useful to have these references handy.

As the thesis becomes clearer in your mind, you should be ready to start writing. It helps to begin with an outline. Take a look through your notes and think about how the evidence could best be used to prove your thesis. Do not simply organize the sources in the order in which you read them; think about how the evidence could be categorized logically, thematically, or chronologically. As you assemble this material, consider how the categories could help to support your main argument. Then formulate this train of thought in note form; it should be your guide as you turn your thoughts into writing.

Quotations are the most effective way of communicating the contents of your sources, but use them sparingly. Avoid the temptation of stringing together long block quotes as pieces of evidence. Instead, paraphrase them when possible, quoting only when the text communicates information that is vivid, telling, or pertinent. When you do quote a source, be sure to attribute it—indicate in the body of the text who wrote or spoke the words, adding a footnote with a more detailed citation.

With the outline in hand, also think about how to use the introduction and conclusion to frame the essay. The introduction in particular is crucial to catching the attention of the reader and introducing your main argument. It is often useful to revisit the introduction once you have completed the rest of the essay.

Finally, when the essay is completed, proofread it thoroughly and try to look at it with a fresh pair of eyes. Is it logically consistent? Are there typos or spelling mistakes? Are there any details you might have missed? Mark these problems down and make the changes in your text. Often an essay requires multiple revisions before it takes its final shape.

BOOK REVIEWS

One of the more common assignments in high school is the "book report": typically, students are asked to summarize the contents of a book and indicate whether or not they liked it. The scholarly book review, however, demands more than a simple demonstration of reading comprehension. The goal in this assignment is to lay out an author's argument and subject it to critical examination. While you should provide an overview of the book's contents, this summary should be kept to a paragraph or two; the meat of your review should be a critical assessment of both the author's argument and the evidence used to support it.

Before you start writing the review, take some time to consider the book's context:

1. Find out a little more about the author/s. What is their field of study? What other books and articles have they written? Are they embroiled in a historical debate or are they staking out a new field of inquiry? Often these questions help you to understand the significance and intent of the book.

2. What is the ideological orientation of the author/s? Are they Marxist? Feminist? Liberal? Conservative? Answering this question can be difficult if the authors do not wear their politics on their sleeve, but remember that everyone has an ideology—sometimes it is disguised or not openly stated.

Then think about the contents of the book itself:

1. Try to summarize the author/s' subject and argument in a few sentences. Describe the chronological and geographical extent of the book, as well as the people and groups it analyzes. Consider why the book begins and ends at particular dates—why would the author/s choose to frame their subject in this way? Does the title of the book tell us something significant about its contents? Next, consider the thesis of the book, and how it is proven by evidence. Often books have a broad thesis bolstered by a number of supporting arguments. What are those arguments and do they fit together coherently? It helps to closely read the book's introduction and conclusion, which typically provide a summary and recapitulation of the thesis.

2. Think about the structure of the book. How are the chapters organized—chronologically, thematically, or according to some other logic? Does the organization of the book support or detract from its argument?

3. Consider how the book relates to other works on the same subject. How would you classify the book in terms of its type of history, and what is its focus—gender, class, race, economics,

environmental studies, or something else? Why was the book written and what was its intended contribution to the field? If you can identify the kind of history the author/s are writing, it becomes easier to evaluate the arguments.

4. Consider the kinds of sources the author/s use. Are they consulting government documents? Private correspondence? Legal documents? Newspapers? Diaries? Material culture? Images? Oral histories? Think about how the primary sources shaped the author/s' interpretation. Do the documents or interviews reflect the perspective of a particular interest group or social class? Are the inferences drawn from sources fair and reflective of the subject? Are there existing sources that the author/s might also have consulted?

5. Think about the style of the writing. Is it analytical or literary? Is the argument expressed clearly or is it obscured by turgid prose? Does the style of writing fit with the subject? Are there any stylistic or factual errors in the text? Are there appropriate illustrations, maps, and other supporting materials?

Once you have pondered all these questions, you can organize your thoughts into the form of a review. The review does not need to have a clearly-stated thesis in the manner of a research essay, but it helps if you can express your critique of the book in a lucid and concise manner. In general, you can organize the review in the following way:

1. Introduction: Try to attract the reader's attention by explaining the significance of the book, whether within an academic field or in relation to a social or political issue. Indicate what you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the work—you can elaborate on this assessment in the remainder of your review. Present the author/s' thesis, but try to limit your summary to no more than a paragraph.

2. Development: You do not need to give a chapter-by-chapter overview of the book. Instead, focus on your assessment of the book's strengths and weaknesses. Try to understand the author/s' intentions, but also be clear about their biases and the limitations of their approach. If you make criticisms, provide concrete examples.

3. Conclusion: Recapitulate your assessment of the book. If possible, relate your conclusion to your opening remarks, and discuss how the value of the book to its broader field.

Begin your essay with a full and precise bibliographical reference to the book under review. When quoting from the book, normal practice is to include the page numbers in parentheses after the quotation. You should, however, quote sparingly. If you cite arguments from other authors, use Chicago-style footnotes.

RESPONSE/REACTION PAPERS

The "response" or "reaction" paper is a common tool that professors use to jump-start discussion on a set of readings. The point is to get you thinking about how the readings relate to one

another, as well as the distinctive perspectives they offer on a particular topic. Sometimes the paper may be based on a single text; in that case, try to situate it in the context of other class discussions or lectures, depending on the prompt of the assignment.

The tone of a response paper is typically more informal than that of an essay, but it should remain scholarly in its outlook. The key is to demonstrate an ability to think critically about the readings. It is not merely an exercise in reading comprehension: you should do more than summarize the texts and express an opinion about them. You should find connections between the readings and explain how they address the broader subject of the week's class. Avoid purely subjective statements such as "I enjoyed this article" or "this chapter was boring"; while you should view the works through your own interpretive lens, the point is to synthesize and analyze the intellectual work of others.

As you are doing the assigned readings, consider each text individually. What is the subject tackled by the authors? What is their argument? What sources and evidence do they use? Which assumptions are they making? What are the strengths and shortcomings of the text, and how might an author approach the same subject differently?

Also consider how the texts relate to one another. Do the authors agree or disagree? Are they addressing different aspects of the same topic? Are there portions of one text that challenge or disprove those of another? Sometimes professors deliberately choose articles that take opposite sides of an issue; try to explain what the nature of the disagreement might be, while being fair to both sides.

While an analytical approach is recommended, you should also feel free to think out loud in the response paper. If portions of a text do not make sense to you, explain what seems unclear. If you feel that an aspect of the topic remains unexplored in the readings, do not hesitate to bring it to light—and explain how it might offer a better understanding of the subject.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS

Historiography literally means the study of historical writing; when historians refer to the "historiography" of a subject, they typically mean the variety of approaches that scholars have taken to its study. A historiographical essay on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, for example, should not focus on a singular explanation of the event itself. Instead, it should provide insight into the various schools of interpretation that have framed our understanding of the subject: "orthodox" Cold War American justifications of the bombing, "revisionist" critiques of the same, "post-revisionist" reassessments, and so on. In other words, it should be a *history of history* that explains the evolution of how scholars have tackled a specific question.

An annotated bibliography is a good starting point for drafting a historiographical paper, but the essay should do more than summarize a series of books and articles. The focus should be on a problem that ties the works together. For example, the overarching question of a historiography of the Hiroshima bombing might be whether it was necessary for the Americans to win the war,

or if it was a warning shot in the emerging Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The essay should be a discussion of the answers that historians have provided to this question, explaining how and why these answers have differed. Try to consider the social milieu and historical context in which historians were writing, as well as their source base and methodology (which evidence did they choose to consider, and which interpretive lens did they use to interpret it?).

The essay itself should be something more than a series of book reviews strung together. The challenge is to find an interpretive thread that that runs through all the works under review. Historian Jeremy Popkin has identified four common approaches to organizing historiographical essays:

1. The "historiographical-evolution" approach: This is a fruitful way of making sense of something that has been the subject of scholarly attention over a long period of time. Historians are always in conversation with one another, and the historiography paper can be a means of recreating their discussion of a particular subject. For example, a historiography paper on the causes of the French Revolution might begin with the work of liberal 19th-century historians such as François Mignet and Jules Michelet, who viewed it as a triumph of the liberal-democratic values of the bourgeoisie. In the early 20th century, this liberal consensus was supplanted by the work of Marxists such as Georges Lefebvre, who understood it as a product of the social forces that ultimately gave rise to capitalism. But this Marxist orthodoxy was in turn challenged by liberal revisionists such as François Furet in the later 20th century, who emphasized the contingency of events and the primacy of political aims. If you adopt this approach, you are effectively telling a story about how these interpretations evolved over time, with an emphasis on how each interpretation was a response to the last.

2. The "rival-schools" approach: In some cases, you may find a subject in which historians are divided into two opposing camps when it comes to their interpretation of a subject. The emphasis here should be less on developing a chronology, and more on outlining the philosophical underpinnings of the two schools of interpretation. Is the difference based on ideology or methodology? Is it informed by conflicting theoretical approaches? In this case, the essay would be an opportunity to outline and explain these differences, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each side. You can use various works to illustrate and elaborate on the nature of the scholarly divide.

3. The "different aspects of the problem" approach: This is useful when historians have approached a subject from a variety of different angles. In the case of the French Revolution, it might be an opportunity not to focus on an explanation of its causes, but rather to consider the many dimensions of the Revolution that historians have studied. Some might have considered the period as a political-ideological struggle, focusing on the history of ideas; while others might be more focused on social history, emphasizing the role of class and gender in the Revolution, with peasants and artisans as the central figures of their study. Still others might be more focused on how the Revolution played out in particular regions, underlining the distinctiveness of local social and political dynamics. The challenge here is to explain and illustrate how historians might take radically different approaches to the same subject, often by reading the same sources in divergent ways.

4. The “thematic” approach: Rather than analyzing works in their entirety, this essay would find a shared theme that runs through various histories of a subject. For example, one might focus on the question of “leadership” in a paper discussing the military history of the American Civil War, examining how different authors incorporated this factor in their treatment of battles and campaigns. Rather than discussing books or articles in their entirety, you should think about how each work reflects a particular theme, and in turn demonstrates its importance to the broader subject.

No matter which approach you take, you should consider how the various works relate to one another. A historiography paper maps the territory of a scholarly field, and it helps to locate each interpretation in relation to the others. Once you have drawn a sketch of this map in your mind, it becomes easier to organize your essay.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to identify the important primary and/or secondary sources on a subject while also mastering the bibliographical format of the Chicago Manual of Style. As a starting point, it is worthwhile to consult with Concordia’s subject Librarian for History, whose contact information is available on your course’s Moodle page. You should also make use of searchable History-related databases at the Library, which allow you to find relevant books, articles, documents and other sources.

In this type of assignment, you should list the bibliographical information of the various sources you find, but also briefly comment on the contents, argument, methodology, and usefulness of each source. These comments demonstrate your mastery of the material and can also lay the foundation for a research paper, operating as a guide to understanding the subject in greater depth. The bibliography should list each source (usually alphabetically, by the author’s last name), with comments underneath each entry.

It is sometimes advisable to break the bibliography into a number of subsections based on the type of source: for example, primary sources might be listed separately from secondary sources; or books could be separated from journals or unpublished theses. It is also possible to present your research as a bibliographical essay, with each work integrated into a longer work of prose—this is closer to a historiographical essay, but it permits you to discuss the works sequentially without necessarily drawing broader conclusions about the field.

ORAL HISTORIES

For guidelines on oral history research, methods, and ethics, see the Resources page of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling website.