



The Michael and Kathleen Clem History Writing Center

of the

Harrison Ruffin Tyler Department of History

347 James Blair Hall

Write1@wm.edu

www.wm.edu/hwc

Important Tips for Writing History Papers

This handout contains general tips for writing history papers. As always, be sure to follow your professors' guidelines and consult them if you have any questions.

1. *In general, write in the simple past tense.*

By definition, history is concerned with the past, and since you're writing about the past, you need to write in the past tense.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: Roosevelt orders the banks closed until auditors verify that they are solvent.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: Roosevelt ordered the banks closed until auditors verified that they were solvent.

Of course, there are exceptions to this. For example, when writing about an author, the present tense is acceptable.

EXAMPLE: "Historian Stephanie McCurry argues..."

2. *Avoid excessive use of the passive voice.*

The passive voice often fails to identify who or what is performing the actions you are describing. Also, the passive voice tends to result in excessive use of various forms of the verb "to be," which leads to wordiness. Phrasing sentences in the active voice allows you to use active verbs that are more descriptive.

PASSIVE VOICE: Many programs were created to put Americans back to work.

ACTIVE VOICE: The government created many programs to put Americans back to work.

In the passive voice example, the reader does not learn who created the programs. Was it the government, private corporations, or some other organization? The active voice clearly indicates where the programs originated.

3. *Avoid the use of the pronoun "I."*

Unless your professor instructs you otherwise, you should avoid the use of "I" in college writing, as it is too informal.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: I think that the WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

4. Avoid the use of qualifying terms.

Terms such as "possibly," "probably," "seems," "may," and "might" indicate weaknesses in your argument. In some cases where evidence is almost completely lacking, such words can be used, but when the preponderance of evidence points in one direction, do not use qualifiers.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: The "Bank Holiday" probably restored public confidence in the financial system.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The "Bank Holiday" restored public confidence in the financial system.

5. Vary sentence structure.

Blend brief, direct statements with longer, more complex sentences. This improves the flow of your paper and makes it more readable. Too many short sentences make your paper choppy and difficult to read. An endless string of long sentences confuses the reader.

6. Be sure pronouns agree with their antecedent.

If a pronoun replaces a plural noun, you should use a plural pronoun. When replacing a singular noun, you should use a singular pronoun. If you name several people in a previous sentence, be careful not to use a pronoun that could apply to any one of them; the reader won't know to whom you are referring.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: After consulting his advisors, Franklin Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping to end the Depression. They immediately presented these programs to Congress.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: After consulting his advisors, Franklin Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping to end the Depression. He immediately presented these programs to Congress.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: Two women, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, played crucial roles in the New Deal. She served as FDR's secretary of labor.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: Two women, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, played crucial roles in the New Deal. Perkins served as FDR's secretary of labor.

7. Avoid slang.

Unless slang appears in a direct quotation you are using, slang should not appear in your paper.

8. Omit needless words.

State your ideas as directly as possible. Excessive use of adverbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases can clutter a sentence and obscure your points. Many students load their papers with "filler" words in order to meet a minimum length requirement. This is obvious to the reader and does more harm than good. It is better to use additional evidence rather than additional words.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: The CCC kept many thousands of workers busily employed in constructing long hiking trails through America's beautiful national parks.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The CCC employed thousands of workers to construct hiking trails in national parks.

9. Know your audience.

Identifying your audience helps you determine what information and how much of it you will include in your essay. Your audience for a history paper is usually the professor or the teaching

assistant who will grade it. This leads many students to assume that their audience is already familiar with most of the material. As a result, student writers often take shortcuts by failing to place information within its context, or by neglecting to define terms. Writing this way puts you at risk of providing insufficient information; when grading the essay, the instructor is likely to assume that you are not familiar with the context or terms. One way to overcome this problem is to write your paper so that a general reader who is unfamiliar with the topic could read and understand your essay. You might ask a friend who fits this description to act as your "ideal reader" and point out areas in your paper that are unclear or have other problems. If you have any questions, ask your professor about their expectations in this area.

10. *Be judicious when quoting.* Only quote directly when the quotation clearly and succinctly states the point you wish to make or illustrates a point you have made. When the quotation is wordy or provides only basic facts, you should paraphrase the material. Whether you provide a direct quote or paraphrase the material, you will need a proper citation.

11. *Use strong topic sentences.* The first sentence of a paragraph should announce the subject of the paragraph *and* the significance of the information that follows. The topic sentence is essentially the thesis of an individual paragraph. Do not place your strongest points in the middle or at the end of the paragraph.

12. *Read your draft aloud.* Hearing your own words, or having someone else listen to them, can help you identify run-on sentences, awkward phrasing, and other problems that might otherwise escape your attention. This is one of the most effective ways to proofread your work before turning it in.

13. *Cite sources properly.* Be sure to follow your professors' guidelines. In general, history papers follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Reference works, such as Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* can also be helpful. There are also handouts that cover documentation on the HWC website.