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Writing a History Paper: The Basics

1. Identify the assignment's goals. Have the assignment's goals in mind as you familiarize yourself with your sources/evidence, develop a thesis, outline your main points, and write your essay. Tip: Before you begin your research, it can help to rephrase the assignment in the form of questions you will need to answer.

*Note: Always follow your professor's specific guidelines before the general suggestions in this handout.

2. Begin your research, keeping the assignment's goals in mind. Reread the information on your topic in your assigned readings. If original research is required, you should look for a list of suggested further readings at the end of chapters and search Swem Library's catalog and electronic databases. Take notes that will help you formulate a thesis and create an outline. Be sure to keep track of where the information you are writing down comes from. You will need this information to do your citations.

3. Formulate a thesis. A thesis is the central argument of your paper, based on the evidence you have discovered in your research. Give some thought to your thesis before outlining. Ask yourself, "What is the main question that I am trying to answer in this paper?" and "What is the one point that I want the reader to come away with after reading my essay?" Your thesis is like a coat rack upon which you will hang your supporting evidence. It should present your *analysis* of the meaning and significance of the source(s). Accordingly, your thesis should be argumentative, not descriptive.

- Example of a *descriptive* "thesis": "In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine presented his views on why the American colonists should break with Great Britain."

*Note: No one would ever disagree with this statement since it only tells us what the author did and says nothing about the meaning or significance of Paine's work.

- Example of an *argumentative* thesis: "Thomas Paine's use of plain language, biblical analogies, and egalitarian rhetoric explains the enormous appeal of *Common Sense*."

*Note: A writer could easily prove this argument by examining the three points listed in the sentence.

4. Find supporting evidence for your thesis. You should have done most of this work during your initial research, but you may wish to find additional information that will strengthen your argument. Remember that you have a page limit. Limit yourself to the evidence that you believe best supports your thesis. When you find evidence that contradicts your thesis, do not ignore it! As a historian, you should present contrary evidence, but show that the evidence that supports your thesis outweighs it. You might even consider reworking your thesis to account for this contrary evidence.

5. List contrary evidence. You will touch upon these points briefly in your paper, but you do not want to spend excessive time on them. Acknowledge and describe the contrary evidence, but not in such depth that it undermines the evidence that supports your thesis.

6. Complete your outline. An outline does not need to be anything more than your thesis and a list of the supporting evidence. You can add as much or as little detail to this as you deem helpful. Do not get bogged down creating an overly detailed outline.

An outline should start with your thesis statement. Beneath your thesis, note what your introduction will include (e.g. background information necessary to understand your thesis and supporting evidence). Then list your items of supporting evidence and contrary evidence. If you think it will help, note where you will place quotations, statistics, etc. Finally, indicate where you will conclude your essay.

Your completed outline might look like this:

Thesis:

I. Introduction

A. Introduce the topic in a way that will catch the reader's attention. [See the HWRC handout on "Interesting Intros" available on our website or in the History Writing Resources Center.]

B. State your thesis. In many cases, the thesis is the last sentence of the introductory paragraph, but you may place it anywhere in the paragraph for reasons of style or in accordance with your professor's instructions.

C. Review the main points of evidence you will cover later in the paper to support your thesis.

II. Background

III. Supporting Evidence

IV. Contrary Evidence

V. Conclusion

Your conclusion should not repeat your introductory paragraph. Although you should briefly summarize how the evidence supports your thesis and how it outweighs the contradictory evidence, you should also use the conclusion to consider the larger implications of your topic.

7. Start writing! Here are some tips to keep in mind:

-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.

-Remember to analyze! A history essay should *not* be a restatement or summary of historical content. Essays typically call for you to *analyze* a primary source's meaning or themes and topics surrounding a historical event.

-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.

-Remember to cite your material! Be sure to follow your professor's guidelines. In general, history papers follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*.