



Writing Resources Center

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Writing a History Paper: The Basics (Example Essay Included)

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.

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

Example Essay Prompt: The assignment is to write a 5-7 pp. paper in which you assess the effectiveness of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. You must use secondary sources and two primary source documents.

Before you begin your research, it can help to rephrase the assignment in the form of questions you will need to answer. For the above prompt, these questions are: Was the New Deal a success? Why or why not? In order to answer these, you will also have to consider two additional questions: What was the New Deal? What problems was it supposed to solve?

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.

Example Essay Research: Read several different works to get a sense of how different historians have analyzed the New Deal's effectiveness.

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.

Example Essay Thesis: After reading several works, weigh the evidence and decide whether or not you think the New Deal was effective. Your answer to that question will be the thesis of the paper. In this case, you have concluded that while the New Deal did not actually end the Depression and that some of its programs were unsuccessful, the bulk of the evidence demonstrates that the New Deal restored public confidence, promoted a partial economic recovery, and created many beneficial programs. You state your thesis as follows: "Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it successfully restored public confidence and created new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans."

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.

Example Essay Supporting Evidence:

- A. The activity of Roosevelt's first "Hundred Days" in office helped restore public confidence by showing that the government was actively promoting recovery.
- B. The "Bank Holiday" helped place the banking industry back on sound footing.
- C. Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) put Americans back to work and accomplished important projects that benefited the public.
- D. The New Deal created Social Security, which helped millions of people at the time and continues to help millions of Americans today.

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.

Example Essay Contrary Evidence:

- A. The New Deal did not end the Depression.
- B. The Supreme Court declared some New Deal programs unconstitutional.

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: Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it successfully restored public confidence and created new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans.

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 (Remember that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal, you need to identify what problems the New Deal was intended to solve.)

A. Problems of the Depression that the New Deal tried to solve

1. Sense of despair
2. Collapse of financial system
3. High unemployment
4. Shrinking economy

III. Supporting Evidence

A. Restored Public Confidence

1. Sense of Roosevelt's personal concern for people (quotation from woman on FDR's first radio address)

2. Flurry of government activity in "Hundred Days"

B. Improved America's Financial Health

1. Bank Holiday

2. Created government agencies such as FDIC to protect people's savings

C. Reduced Unemployment

1. CCC put people to work. Ex: building park facilities (quotation from CCC worker)

2. WPA put people to work and performed needed construction tasks (number of people employed through WPA)

D. Created Social Security

1. Provided immediate benefits to the elderly (amount of assistance provided in first five years)

2. Has become a cornerstone of financial security for senior citizens

IV. Contrary Evidence

A. Did not end the Depression

1. World War II did, but New Deal reduced the Depression's worst effects

2. Some New Deal Programs, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, were declared unconstitutional. But at least Roosevelt tried to find solutions.

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. For example, in this

sample essay, you might consider any or all of the following points: the legacy of the New Deal, the impact of World War II on the American economy or the continued growth of social programs in postwar America.

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*.