The Writing of a Historical Essay or Research Paper

Whether you are writing an in-class essay exam or a 20-page research paper, there are some basic guidelines which you should keep in mind.

Writing an Essay

An essay is not simply a list of facts. You must organize the facts into themes which support a central argument or thesis. This thesis should be introduced in the beginning of the paper and developed throughout the paper one step at a time. The stronger your thesis, the easier it will be for you to develop a strong argument. Use an outline to organize your thoughts in a clear, coherent and logical manner and to guide you in writing the essay. Organizationally, the essay has three main parts:

1. Introduction. Use the introduction to state your thesis, outline the main points you will make in the essay, and describe the conclusions which you will draw in the essay. History essays are not mystery papers; the reader should know from the beginning what your conclusions are. Use the introduction to draw the reader into the essay. Often it is easier to write your introduction *last*, after you clearly know what arguments you develop in the essay.
2. Body. The body is the bulk of your paper, the place where you present your facts and develop your thoughts and arguments. The body can be developed chronologically, thematically, geographically, or in any number of ways, but you must make it clear how you are approaching and organizing the material. While you write the essay, keep in mind the following points:
    - Write in paragraphs. Each paragraph is a unit of thought limited to one major idea. Each paragraph should relate to and support your thesis or central argument. Use specific and concrete examples to support your general statements. Be sure your facts are correct and that they support your argument.
    - Use good grammar. This includes writing in complete sentences, using past tense instead of present tense when appropriate, using active verbs instead of passive ones, varying your vocabulary, and avoiding sexist language (i.e.--don't use the generic "he" or talk about the history of *man* when you mean the history of humans or people). If you have taken an English composition class, bring those skills into your essay.
    - Write analytically, not descriptively. Do not just explain *what* happened, but also try to explain *why* it happened and why it is significant. Facts are important, but without interpretation they become meaningless.
    - I am not looking for any "correct" answers. Rather, it is more important that you are able to use the material to develop an argument which supports your point of view.
    - You will be rewarded for independent and original thought. Don't be afraid to give your opinions and interpretations of the material (this is your thesis!). Be

critical of your readings and the lectures. Look for new ways of approaching the material. When you disagree with an author's views, say so.

- Be creative. Make your essay interesting to read. Write as if you are teaching someone something that is new and interesting. This will automatically make your paper a better one.

3. Conclusion. The conclusion can be as simple as a restatement of your introduction. It should emphasize your thesis, and briefly summarize how you have proven it in the body of the paper. In this way, your paper is cyclical--you end up where you started. You can also use the conclusion to state your own interpretations, to assess and argue with the material you have read, and to point to gaps in our historical knowledge.

As your assignment is to write a three to five page paper, you may find it most useful to follow the five-paragraph model where the first paragraph is the introduction, the next three form the body, and the final paragraph is the conclusion. The introduction and conclusion frame your essay, and the body presents the information necessary to support your thesis. Each of the three paragraphs should concern one specific issue which supports your main argument. This format, of course, can be modified as necessary to meet the specific needs of your topic. If you are writing a 20-page research paper, the introduction might be several paragraphs long.

The Form of the Research Paper

The physical form and appearance of a research paper is important. In historical studies, a standard guide is Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. This guide is available in the reference section of the library. Briefly, the following are important elements you should keep in mind when writing a research paper:

1. The Title Page. The first page of the paper should contain only the title of your paper, your name, the name and/or number of this class, and the date.
2. The Text. The text should contain an Introduction, Body, and Conclusion (as laid out above).
3. References In any formal essay or research paper (including three-page papers) you must document the information you use in the writing of the paper. This is to let the reader know the sources of the information you use and is accomplished through a system of citations and a bibliography. You must include both; failure to do so will result in a lower grade for your paper.

> 1. James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532-1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 110.

Footnote or in text (author, pg #)

→ www.bartleby.com/141/ White Elements of style.

link to a free copy of Elements of Style.

Excellent book!

Appearance

Your historical essay should follow these standards:

1. The paper must be neatly typed, double-spaced on white paper with a one-inch margin on the top, bottom, and sides of each page. Be sure to use a dark, clear ink (no worn-out dot-matrix ribbons run on draft quality). If it is hard to read your essay, it will also be hard to follow your argument. All pages, except for the title page, should be numbered.
2. Please number the pages of your essay (except for the title page). If you can not figure out how to make your word processor do this automatically, add the numbers by hand.
3. You *must* proofread your paper. Papers with numerous misspelled words and grammatical mistakes will be penalized. Read over your paper before handing it in and make corrections as necessary. Often it is advantageous to have a friend proofread your paper for obvious errors. Handwritten corrections are preferable to uncorrected mistakes. If you use a computer, you are expected to use a spell-checker; failure to do so indicates a lack of effort on your part and you can expect your grade to suffer accordingly.
4. Use a standard 12 point typeface. Smaller or compressed type and papers with small margins or single-spacing are hard to read. It is better to let your essay run over the recommended number of pages than to try to compress it into fewer pages. Likewise, large type, large margins, large indentations, triple-spacing, increased leading (space between lines), increased kerning (space between letters), and any other such attempts at "padding" to increase the length of a paper are unacceptable, wasteful of trees, and will not fool your instructor.
5. Staple your paper in the upper left-hand corner. Please do not put your essay in a special folder or plastic binder as these make it more difficult to read and grade your paper and you will not get it back.