

WRITING HISTORY: THE ONE-PAGE TUTORIAL¹

Step 1: History is basically an EDUCATED GUESS ABOUT THE PAST.² When you write, you will most likely have to show that you know something about the past and can craft that knowledge into a thoughtful interpretation answering a specific question.

Step 2: Dissect the question. Identify:

- Opportunities to show what you know. Look for verbs like: Summarize, Outline, Review ...
- Opportunities to show what you think. If you're lucky, they will be just as obvious. Look for key words like: Why, How, Compare, Contrast, Analyze, Discuss, ...

Even simple questions, such as "Did peanut butter kill Elvis?", are a plea for both knowledge and interpretation. A simple "yes" or "no" is not a valid answer when writing a historical essay. You need to provide an argument based on supporting evidence before reaching a conclusion.

Step 2 ½: Dissect any other guidelines. There may be hints in parts of a handout/lecture/discussion. This is especially true for questions that are longer or begin with an explanatory section.

Step 3: Read with an eye towards writing. You will have to read before you write and reading with a purpose will save time and money. When you read, ask yourself:

- What are the facts? What are the opinions? What is the argument?
- How does this text relate to the themes of the lecture/notes/tutorial?
- What does this text say? What does it not say?
- How do I react to this text? Does it leave questions unanswered?
- How could I explain it to someone else (summary, diagram, and/or critique)?

Step 4: List what you know, what you think, and what others think. This is important because it helps you develop an argument about the question.

Step 5: Make an argument. At this stage, it only has to be a rough argument but you need to make one before you can move any farther through the writing process. If you encounter "writers block", try:

- Look back at your reading from Step 3 and your list from Step 4.
- Do some free-writing or other organizational technique (for example, "cubing").
- Talk it over with someone.
- Take a break!

Now, do any of your ideas seem significant? Do they tie in to some theme of your reading or course? Do you have enough information to PROVE any of these statements? If so, then you can move on to the next step. If not, you may need to do some more reading (or some re-reading).

Step 6: Organize. Figure out a logical way to explain and prove your argument. The best thesis statements both take a position and give readers a map to guide them through the paper. An example of a basic outline is:

1. Introduction.
2. Background.
3. Argument.
4. Counter-Argument.
5. Conclusion.

Step 7: Write! Use your research to fill in the content of your outline. Don't forget to cite.

Step 8: Revise.

- Check your organization.
- Check your content.
- Check your style, grammar, and citation.

Step 9: Submit your paper!

OTHER REFERENCES (AVAILABLE AT HISTORY FACULTY LIBRARY):

Storey, William K., Writing History for Students (OUP, 2004).

Marius, Richard, A Short Guide to Writing About History, 3rd Ed. (Longman, 1999).

¹ This work is mainly based on <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/history.html>

² Arnold, John H., History: A Very Short Introduction (OUP, 2000) 12-3.