

Tips for Writing in History

Writing history papers can initially seem like a daunting task, so we're offering these tips to help you as you write papers for your history classes!

Start with a Strong Thesis

History is an argument about the past. Your thesis statement should reflect that. Make sure your thesis is precise, relevant to the prompt, and defensible with historical evidence. Example thesis statement: *"The Korean 38th Parallel and the Vietnamese 17th Parallel illustrate the Cold War pattern of arbitrary border drawing, portraying the out-of-touch practice's rationales and disastrous consequences."*

Understand Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Great history papers employ a mix of primary and secondary sources; primary sources are ones contemporaneous with the historical event (ex: newspapers, speeches, laws, and/or radio broadcasts from the time period), while secondary sources are sources written outside of the time period by people who never witnessed the event/period firsthand (ex: scholarly books, articles, your professor's lecture). Employing a thoughtful mix of both primary and secondary sources to support your argument provides a strong, diverse backbone to your writing.

Know when to Paraphrase vs. Directly Quote

Effective history papers (unless specified otherwise) bring outside sources in conversation with the writer's argument. Direct quotation can serve to really hammer home your point; however, too much direct quotation can distract from your own original writing. That is why great history papers strike a balance between quoting sources directly vs. paraphrasing ideas within sources in the writer's own words.

Emphasize Analysis over Summary

Strong history papers do not simply summarize -- they go beyond summary and analyze the events in a logical and critical way. Think to yourself when writing, "how does this summary/evidence support my claim" and then explain within your writing.

Avoid Making Generalizations

Avoid making grand generalizations about a person, group of people, nation, or time period. While it's important to have a strong and pointed argument, it is always best practice when writing history papers to acknowledge the nuance and possible dissent within the subject, illustrating the complexity of history as opposed to painting history in black and white. For example, fascist regimes generally have had voices of opposition from within, so when discussing Germany in the 1930s, pointing out the presence of internal opposition can stand to illustrate a more wholistic history

Write in the Past Tense

History focuses on the past. Pay special attention to ensure you write about historical actions/rationales in the past tense. (We know this may be different advice than what you have received in other, non-historical writing classes such as English!)

Avoid the Passive Voice

Writers should generally avoid writing with passive voice but should especially avoid it when writing about history. Writing in the passive voice will cloud who's doing the historical action and can make your argument unclear or can make it sound unconfident.

Use Academic, Formal Language

Writing in history requires formal academic language and a professional tone. You'll also want to write out numbers -- besides dates

Don't Forget Chicago Style Citations

Most academic history papers use Chicago Style (Notes/Bibliography) for formatting, including footnotes. Ensure your compliance with this format unless your professor has specified otherwise. For tips on formatting your papers using Chicago Style (Notes/Bibliography), visit The Chicago Manual of Style Online or The Purdue Owl.