

Writing in History

Introduction

Students new to history writing may be confused at first about what the process entails. Writing history is not simply stringing a lot of historical “facts” together in some sort of chronological order. It is the process of shaping known facts into a coherent whole, one that explains cause and effect and addresses the meaning or broader impact of an event. In other words, history as an academic discipline is an interpretive craft. Historians are not particularly interested in describing a static picture of something or someone in the past, but rather in tracing how something changes over time.

History writing involves answering a “historical question.” This question may ask why an event occurred, who or what caused it, why it happened when it did, or what impact it had. It may also address how a situation or institution changed over time. The important thing to remember is that history writing does not only explain what happened, but also why it happened the way it did.

There is no single historical narrative. Every event involves many perspectives. Even if we knew every possible fact about a past event, there would still be room for debate over how those facts fit together. Moreover, the evidence that survives is never comprehensive. Although surviving documents—letters, diaries, newspapers, interviews, photographs, maps, government documents, etc.—may provide some information about an event, they cannot get us into the minds of every participant. And in most cases only a few of these sources exist at all.

It is therefore the job of the historian to reconstruct past events from whatever evidence he or she can find. This explains why historians keep writing articles and books about the same subjects. As historians discover new sources of evidence, ask new questions, and reinterpret the known facts, they come up with different explanations of the past. Thus, historians are involved in conversations with each other. They are in conversation with historians who preceded them, who might have looked at the past with very particular questions or prejudices. They are in conversation with their peers, addressing the validity of a particular piece of evidence, and different interpretations of what happened and what it might mean. When you write a history paper, you are entering into that conversation.

Types of sources

History writing comes in two main types: primary-source based and secondary-source based. **Primary sources** are sources contemporary with the event you are studying; for instance, newspapers, letters, court records, or historical accounts based on interviews with actual participants involved in the events. **Secondary sources**, which include history textbooks, are books and articles that are written after the event. This does not include memoirs or other accounts written by participants in the event. Those are considered primary sources.

Secondary-source based papers

Many undergraduate history writing assignments will be secondary-source based. You will be asked to read and analyze a text or set of texts written by historians about a past event. The key in a secondary-source based paper is to figure out what arguments the authors are making, and to determine whether or not you agree with them. Keep in mind, history is an art of interpretation. It is quite possible you may think a historian has misinterpreted the meaning or importance of some evidence. Once you have figured out your opinion, you can build a paper that, based on the evidence offered by other authors, engages them on their historical questions, or you can combine their evidence into a new historical argument of your own.

Primary-source based papers

Some specific types of historical writing assignments will be primary-source based. These typically include advanced papers such as honors theses or seminar papers, for example. A professor might also provide a primary source document for you to analyze for a shorter assignment.

Determining your research question(s)

Your first job is to come up with a good historical question, a manageable question given the time constraints and space limitations you're operating under. A good question (or set of questions) is the first prerequisite for a good history paper. Ideally, it's a question whose answer truly intrigues you, a question you know you don't know the answer to when you set out to conduct your research.

A problematic question because it's too big: Why did many American women oppose suffrage in the 19th century?

A more manageable question: Why did one particular Southern woman who was the wife of a slaveowner oppose suffrage?

Unless you are writing a very specific assignment, like a historiographical essay, you will need to pick a question that allows you to find some good primary sources to investigate. If no primary sources are available to help you come up with an answer to your question, you'll need to pick a different question!

Obviously, in the example above you can't answer the question you've chosen unless you can find a Southern woman who expressed her views on the topic of suffrage and whose papers are accessible to you, as well as other materials from the time period. You might fine-tune or adjust your question somewhat as you begin to determine what kinds of sources are available.

Investigating your sources

Your next step will be to investigate as many primary sources as you can, to compare and contrast them and see if they allow you to come up with a coherent, chronological story that at least partially answers your question. You are now "working up" the evidence.

Almost all good history writing involves storytelling. You will undoubtedly need to investigate sources other than this one Southern woman's writing to come up with a detailed, meaningful story. The strength and originality of your paper will depend to a large extent on

the quality of the primary sources you consult. To find the “story” embedded in your sources, your first step can be to begin to construct a **chronology**. As you do this, you’ll probably use not only your subject’s life story but also relevant historical events that were unfolding during her lifetime, affecting her point of view. You will undoubtedly need to consult secondary sources to help you make the chronology as complete and accurate as possible. You will try to see some connection between your subject’s experiences, her views, and larger historical events unfolding during her lifetime. These “larger” events might be local, regional, national or international in scope. A warning: Don’t get too carried away with your chronology; you aren’t constructing the history of the world! Some events will be relevant to your topic; others won’t.

In addition to reading her papers as primary sources, you might check to see if other family members’ papers are available that would shed light on her views. You also might consult newspapers or books she was likely to have been influenced by at the time, for example, prescriptive literature about Southern women’s role. Be creative at this stage! Songs, postcards, political oratory or poems popular at the time your subject was developing her views could even be useful as primary sources. Keep going until you feel you have the elements of a coherent story that answers your initial question, at least in part, and then examine it closely. Did this woman’s views change over time? What external events might have shaped her views? At this stage, you’ll consider which primary sources are most useful and what pieces of evidence you might quote from.

This “work up stage” is also a great time to read up on the secondary literature to see if and how historians have previously addressed the questions you are asking. Do you agree with them? Is there a raging debate in the field? Consider these as you move to your final step.

Making a historical argument

Your last and most important step is to make a historical argument in answer to your original question. Your argument or thesis will help you organize your material, the story you’ve constructed, into a strong essay. Without an argument, you will have difficulty structuring your paper or creating any dramatic tension. Remember: your argument should stress how something changed over time. Relate your argument, the position you are taking in this conversation, to the secondary literature you read.

Technical Considerations

Tense: Historians typically deal with things that happened in the past. As a general rule, write your papers and essays in the past tense.

Citations: Since you will be constructing your argument from evidence, you need to be meticulous about documenting where your evidence comes from. You can refer to *The MLA Handbook*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, or Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* for citation format specifics. The **MOST IMPORTANT** thing to remember is to include all the necessary information. The point of a historical citation is to allow your reader to find whatever you are referring to. Some universally true facts do not require citation (e.g. “Boston is the capital of Massachusetts”), but it is better to err on the safe side: when in doubt, cite. It is also important to cite any authors from whom you have taken evidence or arguments. As mentioned, history is an interpretive art; a historian’s interpretation requires a citation, even if you do not use a direct quote. You may

find the program [EndNote](#), available free to members of the Duke University community, very helpful for keeping track of and annotating sources.

Bibliography: Start constructing your bibliography as soon as possible. Make sure you write down all the information you will need from your primary and secondary sources as you go along, so you can cite them properly in the footnotes and in the bibliography. History writers can be dismayed if they wait to construct a bibliography at the last moment and find they don't have all the necessary information written down. Again, [EndNote](#) is useful for keeping track of citation details.