

Steps for Writing a History Paper

Writing a history paper is a process. Successful papers are not completed in a single moment of genius or inspiration, but are developed over a series of steps. When you first read a paper prompt, you might feel overwhelmed or intimidated. If you think of writing as a process and break it down into smaller steps, you will find that paper-writing is manageable, less daunting, and even enjoyable. Writing a history paper is your opportunity to do the real work of historians, to roll up your sleeves and dig deep into the past.

What is a history paper?

History papers are driven by arguments. In a history class, even if you are not writing a paper based on outside research, you are still writing a paper that requires some form of argument. For example, suppose your professor has asked you to write a paper discussing the differences between colonial New England and colonial Virginia. It might seem like this paper is straightforward and does not require an argument, that it is simply a matter of finding the “right answer.” However, even here you need to construct a paper guided by a larger argument. You might argue that the main differences between colonial New England and Virginia were grounded in contrasting visions of colonization. Or you might argue that the differences resulted from accidents of geography or from extant alliances between regional Indian groups. Or you might make an argument that draws on all of these factors. Regardless, when you make these types of assertions, you are making an argument that requires historical evidence. Any history paper you write will be driven by an argument demanding evidence from sources.

History writing assignments can vary widely—and you should always follow your professor’s specific instructions—but the following steps are designed to help no matter what kind of history paper you are writing. Remember that the staff of the History Writing Center is here to assist you at any stage of the writing process.

1. Make sure you know what the paper prompt is asking.

Sometimes professors distribute prompts with several sub-questions surrounding the main question they want you to write about. The sub-questions are designed to help you think about the topic. They offer ideas you might consider, but they are not, usually, the key question or questions you need to answer in your paper. Make sure you distinguish the key questions from the sub-questions. Otherwise, your paper may sound like a laundry list of short-answer essays rather than a cohesive argument.

A helpful way to hone in on the key question is to look for action verbs, such as “analyze” or “investigate” or “formulate.” Find such words in the paper prompt and circle them. Then, carefully consider what you are being asked to do. Write out the key question at the top of your draft and return to it often, using it to guide you in the writing process. Also, be sure that you are responding to every part of the prompt. Prompts will often have several questions you need to address in your paper. If you do not cover all aspects, then you are not responding fully to the assignment. For more information, visit our section, “Understanding Paper Prompts.”

2. Brainstorm possible arguments and responses.

Before you even start researching or drafting, take a few minutes to consider what you already know about the topic. Make a list of ideas or draw a cluster diagram, using circles and arrows to connect ideas—whatever method works for you. At this point in the process, it is helpful to write down all of your ideas without stopping to judge or analyze each one in depth. You want to think big and bring in everything you know or suspect about the topic. After you have finished, read over what you have created. Look for patterns or trends or questions that keep coming up. Based on what you have brainstormed, what do you still need to learn about the topic? Do you have a tentative argument or response to the paper prompt? Use this information to guide you as you start your research and develop a thesis.

3. Start researching.

Depending on the paper prompt, you may be required to do outside research or you may be using only the readings you have done in class. Either way, start by rereading the relevant materials from class. Find the parts from the textbook, from the primary source readings, and from your notes that relate to the prompt.

If you need to do outside research, the UCLA library system offers plenty of resources. You can begin by plugging key words into the online library catalog. This process will likely involve some trial and error. You will want to use search terms that are specific enough to address your topic without being so narrow that you get no results. If your keywords are too general, you may receive thousands of results and feel overwhelmed. . To help you narrow your search, go back to the key questions in the essay prompt that you wrote down in Step 1. Think about which terms would help you respond to the prompt. Also, look at the language your professor used in the prompt. You might be able to use some of those same words as search terms.

Notice that the library website has different databases you can search depending on what type of material you need (such as scholarly articles, newspapers, books) and what subject and time period you are researching (such as eighteenth-century England or ancient Rome). Searching the database most relevant to your topic will yield the best results. Visit the library's History Research Guide for tips on the research process and on using library resources. You can also schedule an appointment with a librarian to talk specifically about your research project. Or, make an appointment with staff at the History Writing Center for research help. Visit our section about using electronic resources as well.

4. Take stock and draft a thesis statement.

By this point, you know what the prompt is asking, you have brainstormed possible responses, and you have done some research. Now you need to step back, look at the material you have, and develop your argument. Based on the reading and research you have done, how might you answer the question(s) in the prompt? What arguments do your sources allow you to make? Draft a thesis statement in which you clearly and succinctly make an argument that addresses the prompt.

If you find writing a thesis daunting, remember that whatever you draft now is not set in stone. Your thesis will change. As you do more research, reread your sources, and write your paper, you will learn more about the topic and your argument. For now, produce a “working thesis,” meaning, a thesis that represents your thinking up to this point. Remember it will almost

certainly change as you move through the writing process. For more information, visit our section about thesis statements. Once you have a thesis, you may find that you need to do more research targeted to your specific argument. Revisit some of the tips from Step 3.

5. Identify your key sources (both primary and secondary) and annotate them.

Now that you have a working thesis, look back over your sources and identify which ones are most critical to you—the ones you will be grappling with most directly in order to make your argument. Then, annotate them. Annotating sources means writing a paragraph that summarizes the main idea of the source as well as shows how you will use the source in your paper. Think about what the source does for you. Does it provide evidence in support of your argument? Does it offer a counterpoint that you can then refute, based on your research? Does it provide critical historical background that you need in order to make a point? For more information about annotating sources, visit our section on annotated bibliographies.

While it might seem like this step creates more work for you by having you do more writing, it in fact serves two critical purposes: it helps you refine your working thesis by distilling exactly what your sources are saying, and it helps smooth your writing process. Having dissected your sources and articulated your ideas about them, you can more easily draw upon them when constructing your paper. Even if you do not have to do outside research and are limited to working with the readings you have done in class, annotating sources is still very useful. Write down exactly how a particular section in the textbook or in a primary source reader will contribute to your paper.

6. Draft an outline of your paper.

An outline is helpful in giving you a sense of the overall structure of your paper and how best to organize your ideas. You need to decide how to arrange your argument in a way that will make the most sense to your reader. Perhaps you decide that your argument is most clear when presented chronologically, or perhaps you find that it works best with a thematic approach. There is no one right way to organize a history paper; it depends entirely on the prompt, on your sources, and on what you think would be most clear to someone reading it.

An effective outline includes the following components: the research question from the prompt (that you wrote down in Step 1), your working thesis, the main idea of each body paragraph, and the evidence (from both primary and secondary sources) you will use to support each body paragraph. Be as detailed as you can when putting together your outline.

7. Write a first draft.

This step can feel overwhelming, but remember that you have already done a lot of work and—armed with your working thesis, source annotations, and outline—have all the tools you need. Do not feel that you have to work through your outline from beginning to end. Some writers find it helpful to begin with the section in which they feel most confident. Look at your outline and see if there is one part that is particularly fleshed out; you may want to begin there. Your goal in the draft is to articulate your argument as clearly as you can, and to marshal your evidence in support of your argument. Do not get too caught up in grammar or stylistic issues at this point, as you are more concerned now with the big-picture task of expressing your ideas in writing.

If you have trouble getting started or are feeling overwhelmed, try free writing. Free writing is a low-stakes writing exercise to help you get past the blank page. Set a timer for five or ten minutes and write down everything you know about your paper: your argument, your sources, counterarguments, everything. Do not edit or judge what you are writing as you write; just keep writing until the timer goes off. You may be surprised to find out how much you knew about your topic. Of course, this writing will not be polished, so do not be tempted to leave it as is. Remember that this draft is your first one, and you will be revising it.

When you are writing up the evidence in your draft, you need to appropriately cite all of your sources. Appropriate citation has two components. You must both follow the proper citation style in your footnotes and bibliography, and document always but only when such documentation is required. Remember that you need to cite not just direct quotations, but any ideas that are not your own. Inappropriate citation is considered plagiarism. For more information about how and when to cite, visit our section on citations.

8. Revise your draft.

After you have completed an entire first draft, move on to the revision stage. Think about revising on two levels: the global and the local. The global level refers to the argument and evidence in your paper, while the local level refers to the individual sentences. Your first priority should be revising at the global level, because you need to make sure you are making a compelling and well-supported argument.

A particularly helpful exercise for global-level revision is to make a reverse outline, which will help you look at your paper as a whole and strengthen the way you have organized and substantiated your argument. Print out your draft and number each of your paragraphs. Then, on a separate piece of paper, write down each paragraph number and, next to it, summarize in a phrase or a sentence the main idea of that paragraph. As you produce this list, notice if any paragraphs attempt to make more than one point; mark those for revision. Once you have compiled the list, read it over carefully. Study the order in which you have sequenced your ideas. Notice if there are ideas that seem out of order or repetitive. Look for any gaps in your logic. Does your argument flow and make sense?

When revising at the local level, check that you are using strong topic sentences and transitions, that you have adequately integrated and analyzed quotations, and that your paper is free from grammar and spelling errors that might distract the reader or even impede your ability to communicate your point. One helpful exercise for revising on the local level is to read your paper out loud. Hearing your paper will help you catch grammatical errors and awkward sentences.

Here is a checklist of questions to ask yourself while revising on both the global and local levels:

- Does my thesis clearly state my argument and its significance?
- Does the main argument in each body paragraph support my thesis?
- Do I have enough evidence within each body paragraph to make my point?
- Have I properly introduced, analyzed, and cited every quotation I use?

- Do my topic sentences effectively introduce the main point of each paragraph?
- Do I have transitions between paragraphs?
- Is my paper free of grammar and spelling errors?

Remember, start revising at the global level. Once you are satisfied with your argument, move onto the local level.

9. Put it all together: the final draft.

After you have finished revising and have created a strong draft, set your paper aside for a few hours or overnight. When you revisit it, go over the checklist in Step 8 one more time. Read your paper out loud again too, catching any errors you might have missed before.

At this stage in the process, you need to make sure you have taken care of all the details. Your paper needs to have a title that does not just announce the topic of the paper, but gives some indication of your argument. Reread the paper assignment and make sure you have met all of the professor's requirements: Do you need page numbers? A separate title page? Will you submit your paper electronically or in hard copy? Have you followed all of the stated formatting guidelines (such as font-size and margins)? Is your bibliography appropriately formatted?

10. Congratulate yourself. You have written a history paper!