

# A Cheat Sheet for Writing Term Papers

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Authors use certain conventions to enhance their writings. Historians are no exceptions. The following provides a brief introduction to some select points. Choose from the list below or read through this entire document for general coverage.

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## List of Topics

- Introductions and a Thesis
  - Evidence
  - Time and Timing
  - Verb Tense
  - Some Common Errors
  - Quoting and Paraphrasing
  - Notes (Citations)
  - Citing Published Sources (Including Electronic Sources)
  - Citing Unpublished Sources
  - Bibliographies
  - Primary Sources
  - Secondary Sources
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**Introductions:** Should contain a strong statement of your point/argument/thesis. That is, does the evidence you examined support, extend, or refute some existing interpretation? The introduction should also alert the reader to the topical and chronological scope of the paper. (Topics should be listed in the same order that they appear in the paper.)

**Thesis Statement:** A thesis statement is not a conclusion. Do not, write, for example, "The case of 'X' is an example of 'Y'." This is a conclusion. A thesis statement is not a declarative regarding what your paper "is about." Instead, a thesis statement should set up the paper so that you can spend your time stating your case regarding one or more questions or arguments. For example, this might be a thesis statement: "The case of \_\_\_\_, when viewed in light of an historically situated analysis of method, demonstrates how \_\_\_\_." (While it may be simplistic, having the word "how" in the statement may help you formulate a strong thesis statement that is not a conclusion.)

**Analysis:** This involves some description, but contains comment, reflection, or comment on issues at hand. Descriptive works can sometimes have analysis, but authors often lapse into description for description's sake. This is basic "storytelling" or spinning out a "narrative."

**Evidence:** Provide it! Any general statements and assertions need to be followed by specific examples. One good strategy is to think "for example" each time you make some broad point.

**Time and Timing:** These elements are very important in historical writing. Be certain to specify when things happened as precisely as possible. Rather than writing that something happened in the 1800's, tell the reader that it was early, mid-, or late 1800's. Get to decades, years, months, and even days when it is important. Be certain to get the sequence of events straight. When something happened should generally be at the beginning of a sentence.

Avoid the following words and phrases at all cost:

- Eventually....
- Throughout history....
- Gradually....
- Once upon a time....

Do these *really* pin things down? NO!

**Ahistorical statements:** Historians will often dislike the use of statements that place things outside their context and assume that humans have always been the same. Thus, statements about "human nature" are problematic because those who use them assert that time, place, and context do not matter. Likewise, the term "inevitable" is a problem in that there is no way for people to affect the course of events and, effectively, no history!

**Presentism:** This is a tough issue and there is not complete agreement among historians. Some historians argue that asking questions of the past that are important today but not necessarily of the time under investigation constitutes "presentism." Thus, they would argue, asking what women did in some past setting when women were not included in the previous histories comes out of a modern concern for women and their position in society is "presentist" and "political." I strongly disagree. All of us ask questions of the past that relate to our current historical and cultural contexts. Problems of presentism arise when we *automatically assume that people in the past thought like us*. If I assume that in the distant past they thought the oppression of a particular group was wrong because I do today, I would be guilty of presentism (especially without good evidence). I would not be guilty of presentism, however, if I wanted to investigate the lives of the people I believed to be oppressed in that system and if I described it as oppressive. (The term anachronism is much like presentism, at least in terms of this application.) We can't say that Native American women in the 700s thought of themselves as "feminists," because that label simply wasn't used at the time. We could say that their actions forwarded the place of women in their particular society and that it was, for all practical purpose, a feminist development.

**Verb Tense:** Stick with past tense.

**Passive Voice/Construction:** Because historians are concerned with cause and effect, with the provision of evidence to determine who is acting in a particular setting, we try to avoid the use of passive voice or construction. Your sentences should invariably reflect WHO IS DOING WHAT TO WHOM OR WHAT with the main actors (as well as time and place) at the beginning of most sentences. Some symptoms of passive voice are: (1) the presence of a "to be" verb (is, was, etc.) next to another verb; or (2) the main actor in a sentence absent or placed at the end of the sentence. For example:

- "Native Americans were removed to reservations."
  - In this sentence, it is not clear who is forcing the removal. We have a situation in which "were removed" signals a problem and the lack of an actor, such as "federal Indian agents," creates another.
- "Native Americans were removed to reservations by federal Indian agents."
  - The insertion of the agents into the sentence as the main actors helps, but it is still wordy and indirect.
- "Federal Indian agents removed Native Americans to reservations."
  - This version of the sentence is much more direct and to the point. It does not suffer from passive voice!
- "It was in the 1850s that the government removed Native Americans to reservations."
  - This version of the sentence is good in that it identifies the time frame early, but "It was... that..." is wordy, indirect, and ineffective. Simply state: "In the 1850s, the government...."

#### Some Common Errors:

Many times students confuse singular entities and plural entities. Take following sentence: "The government was wrong so they had to fix the problem." Government is singular, so the pronoun "they" should really be "it."

- All of these are singular and the pronoun you need to use is "it" not "they"
  - the government
  - the company
  - the university
  - the union
- In order to make them plural, or "they," you'd have to add something such as:
  - government officials
  - company employees
  - university faculty members
  - union organizers

Students also have real problems with the use of apostrophes. Here are some basic guidelines:

- It's or Its? "It's" equals "it is" while "its" is a possessive pronoun. Because there should be no contractions in a formal paper, you would never use "it's" and therefore all other time you would use "its." Easy!

- 1980's or 1980s/ '80s or 80's? My preference is for you to always specify the century and to not use an apostrophe. Therefore, you'd consistently use 1980s. Easy.
- American's or Americans'? The first is singular and belongs to one American. The second is plural and belongs to many Americans. (You know this, you just need to proofread better!)

Here are some other points of confusion:

- Then or than? The first refers to time, or "it happened then." The second refers to a comparison, or "he is taller than I."
- Effect or affect? The first is an impact, the second you should most commonly use to mean a show of something or a pretense, to take on the appearance of something.
- Compliment or complement? The first is saying something nice, the second is adding something to the an original often with the implication that it is different than the original but that it completes it and makes a whole.
- Capital or capitol? The first is a reference to money and to the main political city in a polity. The second is a specific reference to the building in which either the U.S. Congress meets or where the state legislature meets.
- Principal or principle? The first means first in rank, the main person or actor. The second generally means a rule, law, or idea.

### Quoting and Paraphrasing:

For quotes, pick only those passages that seem **exemplary**, that jump off the page and tell you and the reader the **essence** of your argument in a way that is **particularly unique** to that author/source.

### General Guidelines:

- Quotes should not be things that are ordinary statements, especially general passages from the textbooks. Quotes should be from people at the time, not from the authors of the textbook (unless you are quoting them for their interpretations).
- To paraphrase, cast the statement in your own words. A simple modification of a word or two is not really paraphrasing. One strategy is to read the source, then set it aside and imagine that you are going to write the same information in a formal letter to a friend. In other words, use your own words!
- Quotes need to be introduced. For example, you might write: Early European American migrants to the region wrought tremendous environmental change, but they did not fully understand the consequences. In 1854, Axtell Johnson of Whidbey Island wrote to family in Illinois: "[The Quote Goes Here]."<sup>57</sup> Note that the context is set, the quote is introduced, and the source cited.

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Notes: Are used to show the source of your information or ideas borrowed from another author as well as to add explanations that would otherwise detract from the text. These should be sequentially numbered in the text (usually with a superscript) and may either be at the bottom of the page as footnotes or at the end of the text as endnotes. Most word processing programs will do either and different professors have their own preferences. Mine is for endnotes.

General Guidelines--When to use a note:

- After a direct quote to show the source.
- After a specific point of information or interpretation that is not common knowledge. ("Common knowledge" is a tricky phrase.) In general, when you've gotten the information or interpretation from another source and it is fairly detailed, the source needs to be cited.
- After a point that requires additional clarification such as a special term or phrase, a point of historiographical debate which requires more explanation than possible in the main body of the paper.

Careful and consistent use of notes not only assures that you have given credit where it is due, but helps avoid unintentional plagiarism. (With proper notes, your problem might be poor paraphrasing—a less serious issue than plagiarism. See discussion above on quoting and paraphrasing.)

A paragraph may contain several notes. This is not a problem, though to avoid too much clutter, some authors use "omnibus notes" or one note for the sources consulted for an entire paragraph. Even with omnibus notes, you will need to place notes directly following quotes or throughout the paragraph for explanatory purposes.

What are the three dots: ... ??? Ok, these are called ellipses. They indicate that you've taken something out of the quote or rearranged it. They should only appear in the middle of the quote, not at the beginning or end, because we understand as readers that you probably took your quote from something much longer. You also use ellipses plus punctuation. Thus, a quote with ellipses would look like: "When I went to war, ... I never expected to see so much carnage."

What's up with those square looking parentheses? These are brackets [ ] and indicate that you've added something to the quote that was not in the original. If I see parentheses in the quotes, I assume that they were in the original.

What does [sic.] mean in a quote? Ok, so because it has brackets around it, it is something you have added, right? The term means, more or less, "as in the original." You use it when you want to signal that this was a particular phrase or spelling in the original and not some typo on your part. In cases where the original was in some non-standard dialect, you would not use many of

these indications, but would tell readers in an early note that you have retained original spellings, etc.

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#### Citing sources in notes:

The following is just a starter. For more examples and other possibilities, see *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) or Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) or the latest releases of these same volumes. Gary Hillerson, *StyleEase Chicago/Turabian, Version 2.5* (StyleEase 2002) is a CD-ROM compatible with Microsoft Word. I have not tried it, but students may find it useful. There is, however, good reason to learn the basic rules as historians can end up dealing with some very complicated sources that will not always be fully covered even in the *CMS*. DO NOT confuse note style with bibliographic references!!!

#### Published Sources:

(Remember that titles are italicized or underscored.)

- A single author book: Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 37-38.
- A single author article: Linda Gordon, "Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935," *American Historical Review*, 97 no. 1 (1992), 19-54.
- An essay or chapter in an edited volume: Reed Ueda, "The Changing Path to Citizenship: Ethnicity and Naturalization during World War II," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 217-240.
- An electronic source (web document): Chris Friday, "A Cheat Sheet for Writing Term Papers," March 1996, <http://www.wvu.edu/~ccfriday/cheat.html/> (accessed May 5, 2005).

#### Unpublished Sources:

(Usually listed with the most specific portion first and the location last.)

- A letter: Warren Magnuson to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, March 26, 1943, file 38, box 512, Warren G. Magnuson Papers, Manuscripts Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, Washington.

- An oral history interview: Albert Smith, interview by Esther Mumford, August 1976, Washington State Oral History Collection, Olympia Washington.
- An unpublished piece of writing (a manuscript): Paul Baker, "Memoirs, 1912-1993," Paul Baker Papers, Manuscripts Division, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, Washington.

#### Additional Points:

- Legal and government documents require special citations. See Wilson Library's Quick Reference Guide to *Chicago Manual of Style* or Turabian, *Manual for Writers*.
- Only use "p." (page) or "pp." (pages) to clarify a citation if it is particularly complicated.
- Recurring citations require special treatment.
- Use *ibid.* to mean "exactly as the note above," which means all of the note immediately above with the exception of that which is listed as different in the current note. If there is more than one source in a note, then the use of *ibid.* indicates that both are sources for the following note, so in general you would avoid *ibid.* in such cases. If you had a single source in one note and wanted to use *ibid.*, in the next, it would look like this:
  - Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 37-38.
  - *Ibid.*, 39.
- Numbering:
  - In the text: start with 1 for the first note, 2 for the second, etc. DO NOT restart each page and DO NOT number items in a bibliography and then have numbers out of sequence in the text.
  - Start numbering anew and give full first citations with each new chapter of a longer study (theses will probably be the only occasions for this).

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**Bibliographies:** Are different than notes and are a list of works cited in the notes given alphabetically by the author's family name (or title if no author is given). Like notes, a bibliography should not be padded just to impress readers. Provide only relevant sources, not everything you read or saw listed in some computer listing. The same goes for notes. In general, I will not ask you to provide bibliographies attached to your papers and essays because I want you to master the use of notes and their form first. It is too easy to conflate the two.

**Secondary Sources:** Are those materials published after the fact. These might include most books in the library; articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals that recount some past event; certain types of government publications such as historical surveys.

**Primary Sources:** Are those materials created at the time period or later by a person involved in the events under consideration. These may be published or unpublished, depending upon the nature of your study. Primary sources might include, letters written at the time by participants, newspaper or magazine accounts from the time period, photos from the time, memoirs or oral histories completed after the event, and certain government documents such as hearings or reports contemporary to the era being studied.