

HUNTER COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about History

When studying people of the past, we come to learn about the diversity of human experience, and we are better able to appreciate the significance and magnitude of world events from a perspective other than our own. From the study of history, we can gain a better understanding of who we are as a contemporary society.

Historians examine the continuity and change in the relationships between events over time or among people(s) in a given period of time. They analyze and evaluate a variety of sources that fall into either of two main categories: **primary sources**, which consist of materials and documents taken directly from the time under study, and **secondary sources**, which are writings of other historians who have written about the time under study. When you, as a student, do research and write papers for a history course, you enter the historical debate, as you gather information, evaluate sources, and begin drawing conclusions. In effect, you become something of an historian yourself. Thus, you will be interpreting and evaluating not only the people, cultures, and events of the past, but also the cultures, attitudes, and beliefs of those who have written about them.

For information and online access to Writing Center handouts on Writing a Research Paper, Writing a Summary, Developing a Thesis Statement, or Documentation Styles, simply click on any of these headings or go to the Writing Center Handouts section of the Hunter Reading Writing Center website at <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu>. Of course, you are always welcome to visit the Writing Center at Thomas Hunter 416, to pick up handouts and to meet with a tutor.

This handout is a guideline; always consult with your instructor for specifications of assignments.

USE OF SOURCES IN WRITING ABOUT HISTORY

Primary Sources

Primary sources are materials written or recorded by people who were directly involved in the events under examination as witnesses or participants. Examples include newspapers, magazines, government documents, speeches, letters, diaries, eyewitness accounts, autobiographies, etc. Primary sources can also include actual objects and artifacts such as works of art, maps, archaeological remains, coins, etc.

Secondary Sources

Interpreting and commenting on primary sources, secondary sources include books and articles in scholarly journals. These texts are helpful as they inform us of the ways in which professional historians have understood historical events. Even though these sources are of great value, history papers, when possible, should not be comprised entirely of material taken from secondary sources. Instead, it is beneficial to study the past in the words of someone who experienced it first-hand. The bibliographies of secondary sources can often suggest further reading of primary sources.

Evaluating Sources

Since primary sources were developed in the time period under investigation, we would naturally assume that what the sources report is accurate. However, eyewitnesses often remember the same events differently, and commentators often have political biases. Remember that the key to understanding is inquiry. Therefore, when using primary sources, always take the following questions into consideration:

- ✓ Who wrote the text?
- ✓ When was the text written?
- ✓ Who is the intended audience?
- ✓ Are there any other sources to use in comparison?

These questions can also be asked of secondary sources, since historians perceive the significance of events from a perspective determined by the values and accumulated knowledge of their contemporary culture.

WRITING ABOUT HISTORY

Thesis Statement

In writing an essay about history, you often need to make a definitive thesis statement. A thesis is a well-focused statement, usually one to two sentences in length, which signals to your reader what your paper is about. Most often found in the introductory paragraph, the thesis offers a substantial assertion and provides the essay with an argumentative claim. For example, one could argue that slavery was or was not the major issue over which the American Civil War was fought.

Once you have written a thesis statement, you will have the necessary focus and underlying theme for the development of an argument to either prove or disprove your claim. (See the Writing Center handout on [Developing a Thesis Statement](#).)

Documentation

When using sources, you will be required to document all borrowed material including ideas, paraphrases, direct quotations, and references to a complete text. Although there are several documentation styles (APA, MLA, Chicago Manual, etc.) that provide guidelines for documentation, each academic discipline has its own preference. At Hunter, the History Department most often requires the Documentation Style One from *The Chicago Manual of Style*, which is a traditional footnote/endnote system.

However, always check with your instructor to find out which style is most appropriate (see the Writing Center handouts on Quotation, Paraphrase, and Plagiarism and Chicago Manual of Style Documentation).

Summaries

When asked to summarize a text, you should include in your summary the author's thesis statement and any important information that is used to explain or support it. Although summaries should not include critical analyses, they should inform the reader of the significant features of the specific text. (See the Writing Center handout on Writing a Summary.)

Book Reviews

Differing from a book report, book reviews often measure the text's strengths and weaknesses while also summarizing its content. When writing a review, it is often necessary to explain *why* and *how* the book was helpful (or not) in understanding its historical subject rather than to only state that it was helpful. Some useful questions for your review are:

- ✓ Does the author argue her/his thesis convincingly?
- ✓ Are the book's underlying assumptions clear and relevant?
- ✓ Is there anything that is unclear?

Although there are many ways to write book reviews, they should always include the following:

- ✓ Summary of the text and the author's thesis and main ideas
- ✓ Reason why the book was written
- ✓ Evidence that supports the author's thesis, including pertinent background information necessary to understand the book
- ✓ Evaluation of the author's evidence and opposing viewpoints
- ✓ Conclusion—why the book is useful (or not)

Annotated Bibliographies

A bibliography is a catalogue of sources directly related to a particular topic. Annotated bibliographies concisely summarize, in one paragraph, each source, relating its relevant information. While compiling an annotated bibliography, you might think about the same questions listed above for book reviews. However, as each annotated bibliographic entry is relatively short, a full analysis of each source cannot be written.

The following is an example of an annotated bibliographic entry:

Duus, Peter. *The Japanese Discovery of America: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books. 1997.

This book explores the relationship between Japan and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, focusing on the dramatic differences between the two cultures and the

uneasiness, confusion, and misunderstandings that arose from the differences. In a short, introductory history, Duus discusses Japanese isolationism, the military and economic factors that led the United States to forcefully open relations with Japan, and the ways in which the Japanese observed and interpreted Americans and their culture. The main body of the text comprises a series of documents, including political pamphlets, autobiographies, eyewitness accounts, broadsheets, and prints. The inclusion of both Japanese and American views of Japan invites a comparison of mutual misunderstanding.

Research Papers

Research papers usually require a melding of primary and secondary sources, comparisons amongst multiple authors, etc. History papers commonly include narrative accounts of “what happened when.” It is imperative that your telling of past events is accurate. Be sure to include *how* and *why* the events happened and explain their significance. In a history paper, professors expect to find an arguable thesis, interpretation of source material, and an appreciation of the significance of the assigned research topic. In most cases, as you will be arguing for a particular perspective on an historical event, be sure to provide sufficient concrete evidence to convince your audience that your interpretation is valid.

When writing a history paper, the writer’s main task is not to communicate personal feeling or opinion but to convince readers to view the subject in a certain, often new, light. The writer should incorporate ideas within the text of the paper that will interest the reader. Since most readers are likely to have a basic knowledge of history, do not supply lengthy, detailed background information. Instead, present the information that is most important and relevant to the topic of your paper. Remember to synthesize your sources and construct a point-by-point argument in support of your thesis rather than simply narrating events chronologically or allowing a single secondary source to dominate your interpretation. Include only those features of the text that are necessary to support your interpretations.

For information on finding sources, visit the following websites:

Horus’ Web Links to History Resources

<http://www.ucr/h-gig/horuslinks.html>

WWW Virtual Library: Index of Resources for Historians

<http://www.ukans.edu/history>

Information in this document comes from the following source:

Rampolla, Mary L. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s. 2001.