**UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH METHODS**

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***What is crucial to grasp is that there is an enormous variety of narrative approaches and that new ones will continue to appear. There is, quite simply, no such thing as a ‘definitive’ treatment of any topic*.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Essentially, writing history is an act of interpretation. Historians attempt to illustrate the past by ascribing meaning to the events, people and activities that are analyzed. “Doing” history means conducting an analysis, highlighting some significance regarding the topic under consideration and, therefore, migrating beyond a narrative or chronicling of the past. As Anthony Brundage observed, history is not a “story with a fixed plot and cast of characters.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Historical meaning constantly evolves relative to the historian’s own present. Therefore, historians constantly revisit and rewrite history.

1. **Introduction**

In Latin, *vade mecum* roughly means “follow me,” and is used in academic circles to indicate a model that students should follow to develop proficiency in a particular task—in this case, the composition of a research paper. Now, writing a paper may not be the easiest of tasks, but with a few guidelines the process can be greatly facilitated, and you can concentrate upon the substance of your paper rather than fretting over the style. By following the examples presented in this guidebook, you will not only begin to present your ideas in a clean and impressive manner that positively impresses your history professor, but you will start to gain an expertise in the mechanics of writing history essays that leap off the page, engage all who read them, and just maybe craft essays worthy of publication.

Let us begin with the general format of the history paper. Whether you are using a word processing program such as WordPerfect or Microsoft Word, all papers should be formatted as you see here: one-inch margins on top, bottom, and both sides, with the text formatted in Times New Roman (12 pt.) font. Avoid using frivolous or interesting fonts, as they can be distracting, to say the least (and they screw up your spacing sometimes if you mix your fonts). Tabs beginning paragraphs should be set at .5 inches. Your text must be double-spaced unless otherwise directed. New versions of Microsoft Word default spacing such that an extra space appears between paragraphs of the same style. Please disable this from the “Paragraph” tab of the “Home” menu by checking on “Don’t add space between paragraphs of the same style.” All papers that are longer than five pages should have a title page, and an unnumbered blank end page is helpful for professors to jot down their comments and suggestions. All pages in a paper, except for the title page, must be numbered, with the number placed either in the top right hand corner, or in the middle at the top of the page

Instructors assigning papers expect students to produce an essay of a prescribed length dictated in the course syllabus, and are usually dogmatic about adherence to this direction. If a professor asks for a paper of a minimum ten pages in length, then make sure that the final draft is ten pages long (not counting the title page and bibliography) and not less than that. More might be acceptable, but check with your instructor on that point.

1. **Identifying topics**

Chapter one of the eighth edition of Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* suggests how you might identify research topics.[[3]](#footnote-3) Keep in mind that the purpose of writing history is to explain why and how the facts support your interpretation. Choose an interesting topic and then prove its value and interest to your reader.

* Your paper will show how/why the research question was worth asking.
* Your paper will show how the evidence supports the argument.

Historians employ facts as evidence to test research questions they ask about a topic. They search for evidence to support the argument that they present about the topic and they account for evidence that appears to contradict their arguments.

**III. Moving from topic to research question**

Your paper needs both a research question and a potential answer to that research question, called a hypothesis. The best research questions present two or three possible answers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Multiple answers indicate that you have selected a good question. The purpose of developing hypotheses is to hone your skills as a critical thinker. Answers to research questions optimally should lead to new questions and the process of critical analysis continues.

The table below differentiates research questions from topics.[[5]](#footnote-5) A topic is never enough for an effective history paper because it lacks meaningful answers.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Research questions**  How did Slaves preserve African Cultures in their everyday lives?  Why did Christianity spread from Byzantium to Russia?  What were medical practices in Islamic medicine from the eighth to the tenth centuries and how did they change?  What were the lives of Indian women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in British-influenced India like? | **Topics, not research questions**  Slave Trade  Russian Orthodox Church Origins  Islamic Civilization and Science  Women and Imperialism |

Keep in mind that historians attempt to answer the question, “*so what?*” Effective research questions help explain a meaningful significance of the events encompassed by the topic. Consult pages 12–18 of Turabian’s *Manual* and your professors for advice. Turabian suggests:

Don’t reject a research question because you think someone must already have asked it. Until you know for sure, pursue its answer as if you asked it first. Even if someone has answered it, you might come up with a better answer or at least one with a new slant.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**IV. Developing a research question**

A history paper is not just a report about a topic. It is not merely the presentation of evidence from sources to construct a narrative about the past. “Historical research,” Jenny Presnell writes, “involves formulating a unique research question and developing an argument by building on others’ research and your primary evidence.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The trick to history writing is transforming the evidence at hand (which is at one point factual information) into a paper that conveys meaningful answers to research questions.

No one enjoys losing an argument. However the history writer must be cautious to distinguish opinion from an argument supported by evidence. Jenny Presnell’s *The Information–Literate Historian* offers advice about maintaining an objective balance:

Indeed, you are supposed to present your educated opinion and analysis based on your evidence, but you should avoid deliberately incorporating your own personal biases and judgments into your research. As you think about your paper, consider the three voices in your argument: you, as the author, your readers/audience, and your sources.[[8]](#footnote-8) True scholarship considers all opinions, including those critical and counter to your conclusion.[[9]](#footnote-9) If you ignore other historians’ works and primary source evidence that counter your conclusion, your argument is weakened. Good scholarship incorporates them and addresses how and why your argument differs.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Although historical interpretation does, to some extent, express opinions, opinions do not require evidence to prove the validity of claims made by the argument. The effective history paper frames an argument about historical events, defines that argument in terms of existing scholarship about the topic, and uses appropriate evidence to support the claims made by the argument.

**V. Sources**

Consult pages 24–36 of Turabian’s *Manual* and your professors for advice about different kinds of sources for your project. Overall, there are three categories of sources: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

* Primary sources—manuscripts, published sources, archival collections, letters, journals, newspapers, oral interviews, etc.—are the evidence that experienced researchers use to support their argument. Primary sources consist of documents and other materials produced at the time and location of the topic being researched; or produced later, or elsewhere, by witnesses; and which are pertinent to the research question under investigation.
* Secondary sources include research monographs, essays, journal articles, dissertations, theses and conference papers that analyze primary sources. As such, they are second closest to the original source. Secondary sources are vital to answering research hypotheses as you will optimally frame your argument in the context of what other historians have written about the topic.
* Tertiary sources are reference materials such as encyclopedias, textbooks, and book reviews. These works generally are written for non-specialists and should never be cited as an authoritative source. The information contained in tertiary sources is generally considered to be common knowledge, which means that you should consult tertiary sources only for informational purposes. You might consider beginning with tertiary sources to accumulate basic information relative to your topic.

Although a researcher can quickly become overwhelmed by the volume of information and sources uncovered, you should learn to determine quickly how useful a specific source will be for your research project. Skim the introductions and conclusions of secondary sources to assess their worth (especially once you are comfortable with the basic events relevant to your topic).

You will need to develop precise note-taking methods to record the information found in the sources. Every historian employs a different method and you will have to find a system that works best for you. Consult your professors for advice about how they digest their sources. Also, pages 43–46 of Turabian’s *Manual* suggest tips for taking useful notes.

Regardless of your system, be sure to record the words from the sources accurately—take your time and do not misquote. In your notes, record the quote, the source and, if applicable, the page number from the source. Attention to detail is vital to streamlining the research process.

**VI. Citation**

As a general rule, historians do not use the Modern Language Association (MLA) style, or any other sort of in-text parenthetical citation. Historians usually cite sources through notes, either footnotes or endnotes. A footnote is “a note of reference, explanation, or comment” placed at the bottom of a page of text, while an endnote is the same reference located instead at the end of the paper following the text. [[11]](#footnote-11)

Your instructor may specify the use of either footnotes or endnotes. If you have the option of using either, choose one style: do not switch back and forth. Failing to consistently use the correct format for footnotes and bibliographies is one of the basic pitfalls for undergraduate history writers.

Although bibliographic and footnote entries appear remarkably similar, they are quite distinct. Think of bibliographies as the formal entry, which requires periods for punctuation. Footnotes, then, become informal entries, which only use commas and softer punctuation. Remember this distinction and you will more consistently format correctly.

Pages 146–48 of Turabian’s *Manual* outline the basic format for footnotes and for bibliographies. Pages 150–55 cover assorted kinds of bibliographic entries. Pages 155–63 of the *Manual* also provide decent examples of the difference between footnotes and bibliography entries. Consult these pages frequently (especially pages 146–48) until you are an expert.

This section of the guide will provide examples of common types of this citation style, but it is not meant to replace the use of Turabian as a style guide. Here are examples of how to format the citation of:

* + a scholarly monograph,[[12]](#footnote-12)
  + an article in an academic journal,[[13]](#footnote-13)
  + a newspaper article,[[14]](#footnote-14)
  + a published government record,[[15]](#footnote-15)
  + an unpublished government record,[[16]](#footnote-16)
  + a published political speech;[[17]](#footnote-17)
  + court proceedings;[[18]](#footnote-18)
  + a personal letter;[[19]](#footnote-19)
  + an oral interview;[[20]](#footnote-20)
  + a collection of essays by several authors assembled or edited by one or more of them;[[21]](#footnote-21)
  + one essay in such a volume;[[22]](#footnote-22)
  + an encyclopedia article;[[23]](#footnote-23)
  + a book review,[[24]](#footnote-24)
  + the Internet (though one should exercise extreme caution with the Internet, as there is much more trash than treasure in it).[[25]](#footnote-25)

The notes used to illustrate the foregoing categories are all given in the forms used for *initial* citation. *Subsequent* citations to the same sources should be given in abbreviated forms. For the second and subsequent references to an author represented in your notes by a *single title*, supply his or her last name, an abbreviated form of the title of his or her work, and the relevant page number(s).[[26]](#footnote-26) You may encounter, and may have used in the past, the Latin abbreviation *Ibid.* to indicate immediately subsequent references to a source, but this is antiquated and quickly falling out of favor. It can make revision confusing when moving chunks of text around using the highly convenient “cut and paste” function of computer word processing programs.

An important facet to the use of footnotes is not simply to show the reader that you have consulted a source for information that confirms a statement of fact or of opinion, but to show that you have understood the sources you have consulted. It is considered good form to bolster your statements with multiple citations, which demonstrates thoroughness in your research. At times you may find it especially useful to mix primary and secondary sources in a note, though whether you should do this or not is circumstantially dependent.[[27]](#footnote-27) Particularly with regard to statements of opinion or interpretation, it is doubly important to make at least a couple of references to primary and/or secondary sources that buttress your point. It is also prudent, when dealing with an assertion that is opposed to other interpretations, to acknowledge the difference of opinion in the note, which insulates you from an accusation that you have ignored contradictory evidence or the works of your colleagues. Some historians are fond of lengthy citations from numerous sources, but depending on the circumstance it can either be informative or pedantic—in fact quite tedious. Historians occasionally use footnotes to carry on academic feuds, though it is always the best form to let your work speak for itself without stooping to genteel insults.[[28]](#footnote-28) At this stage of your career it is unlikely that you will be offering a novel interpretation of your subject, so your notes will consist essentially of source citations and bibliographic references.

A special note to students using any of the texts in the *Major Problems in History* or other similar series: citing these books poses a challenge, as the primary source documents rarely bear their original titles, but rather titles conferred by the editor(s), while the secondary source excerpts usually do not retain their original titles, either. For regular undergraduate papers, cite them in footnotes this way, while listing the book in the bibliography as a secondary source:

Glenn Quagmire, “Griffin Peterson Founds Quahog,” in Peter Griffin and Lois Griffin, eds., *Major Problems in the History of Quahog*, 3rd ed. (Boston: New England Press, 2010), 45-57.

Please be aware that for honor’s theses and graduate work, this simplified format may not be acceptable.

Finally, your paper should have a good title. In some disciplines such as mathematics or one of the sciences it is simply impractical or impossible to title works in any other way than a bare description of what they are about. “Development of a Quantitative Method for Functional Gene Detection in Pulp and Paper Wastewater Treatment Systems” is a perfect example. However, in history we have the luxury—one shared with other Humanities disciplines—of being able to title our papers more creatively without sacrificing the necessary summary aspects that paper, article, and book titles must have. A catchy title seizes the reader’s attention and can convey a sense of the author’s enthusiasm for the topic, but it should never be used as a smokescreen to conceal a poorly conceived and/or poorly written paper. A method widely used among historians, is to begin with a primary source quotation that encapsulates the work’s subject, followed by a more formal and specific subtitle. A paper on marital affection in seventeenth-century New England would do well to incorporate a line from one of Anne Bradstreet’s poems, “If ever two were one, then surely we.” One could simply title the paper “Marital Affection in Seventeenth-Century New England,” which is simple and accurately conveys the paper’s subject, but is not be as eye-catching as “‘If Ever Two Were One, Then Surely We’: Marital Affection in Seventeenth-Century New England.”

Appended to all term papers should be a bibliography listing *all* sources cited in its preparation. The forms used in bibliographic listings differ somewhat from those used in footnotes. The main difference is that the last names of authors are listed first, in alphabetical order, followed by given names. Also, page numbers for books are omitted, but included for articles and book chapters. It is enough to list all sources in alphabetical order by authors’ last names or, when no author is named, by the first letter of the title (excluding *a*, *an*, and *the*).

This guide includes an example of a bibliography, but it is not intended to replace *Turabian* as a style guide.

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**VII. Basic Mechanics**

A paper should have a strong outline beginning with an introductory paragraph (or paragraphs) that contains your thesis sentence(s). Novice writers tend to refer to themselves in these openings—“I will prove that . . .” or “It is my intention to show how . . .”—and you should avoid doing that. It is far more preferable to write “The purpose of this essay is to prove that . . .” or something to that effect without referring to yourself. The same rule applies to references to the reader (“As we shall see . . .” or “You may ask . . .”). You might notice that some professional historians violate this rule, but just as artists have to learn the rules before it is permissible to break them, so the same axiom applies to budding scholars.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The body of the paper should lay out the author’s argument in a natural, logical manner, buttressed with evidence from both primary and secondary sources properly cited, and the paper should end with a concluding paragraph that summarizes the argument and restates the thesis (preferably using different wording). Take great pains to avoid grammatical and spelling errors, many of which can be detected simply by reading your paper aloud—preferably to someone else. An excellent resource for students is William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style*, which will guide students for the rest of their student careers and beyond.

Think about beginning your paper with a hook, a historical anecdote that catches the reader’s attention and sets the tone for the entire paper. Then you are situated to precisely state your argument relative to the hook and then you can proceed through the body of the paper. Also, you should always remember that the conclusion is the opportunity to prove the point for writing the paper. If the purpose of historical writing is to demonstrate meaning and significance, the conclusion should clearly express that significance. It should not summarize the body of the paper – the reader just read all of that material and it does not need to be restated.

You should deliberately pay attention to the tone used throughout your paper because the tone can distract from the evidence you present and the argument you make. Avoid using overstatements when more neutral language works effectively. Do not engage in personal attacks and avoid using language that is inflammatory, harshly critical, etc. In short, attempt to present the facts in a neutral, objective manner.

Some very basic mechanical considerations must be addressed, which tend to do the most damage to students’ papers in terms of their evaluation. These are among the most common mistakes that emerging—and even some experienced—writers make, and getting familiar with them will help you avoid them.

1. Watch your sentence structure. Sentences should not be short and choppy. You should provide some variety. A succession of loose, short sentences is annoying (as you’ve just noticed). Short sentences are not always bad, and can often be effective, but an entire paper of such sentences shows a lack of effort and writing experience. Develop appropriate compound and complex sentences for your paper.

2. Syntax refers to the way words are put together to construct a sentence. Avoid convoluted syntax, which is almost the opposite problem of short, choppy sentences. If one of your long, complex sentences makes no sense, syntax is probably the problem. Often syntax is poor when the subject is separated from the predicate by a long series of phrases or modifiers. Another problem of syntax is misplaced modifiers. The modifying phrases are so far away from the words they modify that the sentence’s sense becomes murky.

3. Pay attention to the rules of paragraphing. Treat each paragraph as a miniature essay in itself. Each paragraph should contain one main idea, expressed in a topic sentence. After the topic sentence, include at least one sentence (preferably more) supporting the paragraph’s main idea. Finally, bring the paragraph to a close with some kind of concluding thought, one that links the topic of the paragraph to the main thesis of the essay. A good paragraph has at least four—or more commonly five or six—sentences, most of them compound sentences.

4. Use transition sentences that link one paragraph logically and smoothly to the next.

5. The following constructions are weak and you should avoid them, or at best only very sparingly: “it is,” “it was,” “there are,” “there is,” “there were,” “this is,” “this was,” “it would,” and “there would.”

6. Avoid the phrasing, “the fact that.”

7. Avoid the word “truly.” Similarly, use “very” and “really” with extreme caution.

8. Avoid the following words and phrases as they add nothing to your argument: “actually,” “basically,” “generally,” “usually,” “as you know,” and especially “needless to say” (if it does not need to be said, then do not say it!).

9. Use the pronoun “this” very carefully. Many writers overuse the word, especially when using “this” as the subject of a sentence. When doing so, the antecedent is often unclear. For example: “Work began on the senator’s controversial proposal and his speech. This was a difficult project.” What was difficult? Was the work on the proposal and speech difficult? Was the proposal difficult? Was the speech difficult?

10. Spacing between sentences is a rule currently in transition. The older tradition was to use two spaces, the newer tradition uses only one. Please follow the guidelines of your instructor. However, spacing after periods used in abbreviations, as well as semicolons, is always only one, and not two.

11. Do not use contractions in formal writing, except when quoting original sources.

12. Do not use abbreviations, except when quoting original sources.

13. Ensure that you do not have a problem with antecedent agreement by always looking at each item to determine that the word is close to and agrees with the antecedent.

14. Do not use the verb “felt” instead of “thought,” “considered,” or “believed.” One cannot *feel* a fact or opinion, which requires thought and reflection.

15. Do not overuse the verb “became.” Historians often describe how events unfold or how one set of circumstances changes. In writing about such changes over time, writers use the word “became” too frequently. “Became” is a listless word that lacks action or precision. Another verb that is similarly abused is “proved.” For example: “The decision proved to be difficult for Gen. Washington.” Substitute a different verb in most cases. Use “proved” sparingly, and your paper will prove to be a good one.

16. Avoid close-word repetition. Poor writers often use the same word or variation of it several times in succession. For example: “He **organized** a large **organization** of workers. This **organization** proved to be the strongest in the region, and Chavez became a leader among **organized** laborers.” Note also the wimpy verbs “proved to be” and “became.”

17. Do not use nouns as verbs. Journalists frequently use that device to save space and cut down on words. Formal writing should not include nouns as verbs, a very common example being “His action **impacted** the future of the children.” Another journalistic device you should avoid is the use of nouns as adjectives. For example: “a State Department spokesperson” or “my wrestler father can whip your musician father any day.”

18. Know when to use “which” and when to use “that.” Avoid using “which” very much, though remember that there must almost always be a comma after the word preceding it, whereas one does not use a comma before the word preceding “that.”

19. When you first mention the name of a person, be sure to include the given name as well as the surname. Include also the birth and death dates in parentheses next to the name at first mention, but only for key figures pertinent to your narrative. Subsequent references to the person usually do not require the first name unless you need to be clear because your paper includes more than one person with the same surname.

20. Avoid excessive use of capital letters. Capitalize only what your secondary sources capitalize, unless you are quoting from primary sources.

21. Do not develop a paragraph using a “first, second, third” construction.

22. Strive for gender neutral language except when describing the realities of an earlier time. For example, today a man or a woman can operate in politics and thus be a chair*person* or spokes*person*, whereas in the nineteenth century such would not be case, and then one should write about chair*men* and spokes*men*. However, it is antiquated to refer to countries or naval ships using feminine pronouns like “she” and “her.” Do not do it.

23. Be consistent with your use of dates. Do not mix “28 May 1754” with “May 28, 1754.”

24. Spell out numbers from one to ninety-nine, and use ordinals for numbers 100, 1,000, 10,000, etc.

25. You are advised to use the form “a historian,” which has replaced the antiquated phrase “an historian.”

26. Begin immediately to keep your own style sheet of commonly made mistakes. Include on your list the manner in which you will write certain titles or names that you use often, so you can assure consistency of use.

Regarding punctuation . . .

1. Be sure to put a second comma after the year when writing a date.

*Correct:* The Battle of Saratoga began on October 7, 1777, around mid-morning.

*Correct:* The Battle of Saratoga began on 7 October 1777 around mid- morning.

*Incorrect:* The Battle of Saratoga began on October 7, 1777 around mid-morning.

2. Be sure to put a second comma when identifying a city and state.

*Correct:* I moved to Sulphur Springs, Texas, in 2003.

*Incorrect:* I moved to Sulphur Springs, Texas in 2003.

3. A comma should go before the coordinating conjunction between two independent clauses.

*Correct:* The crowd screamed loudly for their team, and the players won the game.

*Incorrect:* The crowd screamed loudly for their team and the players won the game.

4. Do NOT place a comma before the conjunction if the clauses are not independent clauses.

*Correct:* The student worked hard and made the top score in all of her classes.

*Incorrect:* The student worked hard, and made the top score in all of her classes.

5. Book titles and names of journals, magazines, and newspapers should be *italicized*, **not** underscored.

6. Place periods and commas inside quotation marks (the rule in American usage). For example, “If we lived in Great Britain,” Professor Smith noted, “the opposite would be true.”

7. Place footnote or endnote numbers outside quotes in the text. For example, “Professor Smith finds violations of this rule annoying.”22

8. Punctuation other than a period or comma (question marks, exclamation marks, and semicolons, for example) belong outside the quotation marks unless they are part of the quoted phrase.

9. “It’s” is a contraction for “it is.” The possessive form of “it” is “its.”

10. Do not italicize “et al.,” which means “and others” in Latin, and is used when one does not wish to give the names of all of the authors of a work that has more than three authors.

11. In describing decades use 1950s, not 1950’s.

12. For times, use 10:00 a.m./p.m. or 10 a.m./p.m.

13. When describing a season of the year, use “spring, 1771,” not “spring of 1771.”

14. When citing a newspaper, include the place of publication if the possibility for confusion exists. For example, use *Richmond Gazette* (Ga.) if you do not mean the *Richmond Gazette* that was published in Virginia. However, when it is obvious it is not necessary, as in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* or the *Daily Oregonian*.

15. When abbreviating countries with compound names, such as the United States of America or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it is necessary to use periods, but not spacing between the letters. The same goes for the initials of government agencies. The exception is if an acronym is employed, especially with regard to social and political organizations, and pieces of military hardware.

*Correct:* U.S.A. and U.S.S.R.

*Incorrect:* USA and USSR, or U. S. A. and U. S. S. R.

*Correct:* AWAC planes and PETA members

*Incorrect:* A.W.A.C. planes and P.E.T.A. members

16. Capitalize a title used directly before a name, but otherwise do not do so. For example, “President James Madison was a protégé of former president Thomas Jefferson.” Also, “King Louis XVI enjoyed the privileges, but not the governing duties of being king of France.”

17. When discussing money, use “$175” instead of “$175.00,” and with regard to large amounts, avoid the temptation to use 0s. “£145 million” is better than “£145,000,000.”

18. When citing birth and death dates, as well as dates for events or phenomena that stretch over a series of years, use (1775-83) rather than (1775-1783). The lone exception would appear in the title of your paper if such a date is used, for example: “New Light Newspaper Polemics in Connecticut, 1739-1745.”

19. Be precise when giving people’s names, especially when dealing with fathers and their sons. Follow what other historians use, and when naming historians in your notes and bibliographies, use what appears on the dust jacket or front cover.

20. When deleting bits of text in a quotation, one uses periods of ellipsis to indicate the omission. There must be a space between each period, as well as from the words preceding and proceeding from the ellipsis.

*Correct:* “The nature of this offense . . . is beyond imagination.”

*Incorrect:* “The nature of the offense…is beyond imagination.”

Sometimes one will end a sentence with a quotation at which the periods of ellipsis appear at the end, in which case an additional period must close the sentence normally.

*Correct:* “Lord Cornbury would often don the garb of a woman and stand upon his balcony in public. . . .”

*Incorrect:* “Lord Cornbury would often don the garb of a woman and stand upon his balcony in public . . . .”

Neglect of these basic “nuts and bolts” concerns is what can do the most damage to a paper, regardless of the quality of the ideas within. It is important that one have good, insightful ideas, but even more important that one express them in a clean, precise manner indicating a keen intelligence.

**VIII. Advanced Mechanics**

Perhaps no point of English grammar is more controversial than passive voice. In American usage, passive voice is considered weak, reducing people and events to an inability to influence what happens; as though people and events are directed by impersonal—perhaps divine—forces beyond anyone’s control. It also gives an impression that inanimate objects are somehow capable of independent action or volition. However, in British usage the passive voice is not so derided, though English grammarians urge caution in its use. In fact, as historians discussing past events, it is patently impossible to avoid using the passive voice at least a little bit! Nevertheless, the alternative of using the active voice is not a bad one to cultivate, though the emphasis in the United States on eradicating the passive voice in preference for the active voice borders on obsession. Americans project an image around the world as people of action, and thus their writing must be equally vigorous and devoid of any hints of weakness or vacillation. Now, none of this is to say that weak language is alright for you to use, but the passive voice is not something to fear or to avoid entirely.

What is the passive voice, after all? It is a form of sentence construction that tends to force the reader to reach the end of a sentence before learning the entire meaning of the sentence, and is usually made up of a form of the verb “to be,” followed by a verb in the past tense. For example: “The paper **was read** by the girl” or “My first trip to Boston shall always **be remembered** by me.” There are better ways to put these thoughts using the active voice: “The girl read the paper” and “I shall always remember my first trip to Boston.” Passive voice occurs when the subject of the sentence is not the entity performing the action, which is the verb. That is, the grammatical subject (the first part of any sentence) is not the “doer” of the action described by the verb. In the first example presented above, the paper is not the actor, but rather the girl, though the sentence in passive voice implies that it is the paper performing the action, which it obviously cannot. In your writing, make sure that the subjects of your sentences are the ones actually performing the actions described by your verbs. Passive voice sentences always ask the question, “By whom or by what?” Sometimes this question is answered, and sometimes it is not. The prepositional phrase “by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_” at the end of a sentence or independent clause is a big clue. If your sentence ends in “by” something or somebody, then you most likely have a passive sentence:

Form of *to be* + past participle = passive voice.

Here are two more good examples of passive voice: “The economic situation would not **be improved** *by* statehood, as the opposition once contended.” “A narrow line of thinking about the issue **had been adopted** *by* leaders of the western powers.”

As noted above, it is nearly impossible to avoid the passive voice completely in historical writing, but its constant appearance can become annoying, as it does indicate a certain laziness on the part of the writer. Here is another example: “The measure was approved by a vote of two to one.” Who actually approved the measure—the vote? Obviously a vote is not a living entity that can do anything, so you have to look elsewhere in the paragraph to find the answer, and if more than one person or body is mentioned, then confusion can easily arise, even if the writer—and possibly the reader—knows what the answer is, based on the context. Nevertheless, the point is to increase one’s precision, and the frequent appearance of the passive voice increases the potential for confusion, which indicates an insufficient grasp upon the subject matter on the part of the writer, even if no such deficiency really exists. To aid in identifying passive voice, you can set up Microsoft Word to identify it, though it will not find every appearance of it, and only rarely will it offer a correct alternative:

Click on the FILE tab. From the dropdown tab, select OPTIONS. On the menu to the left, click the tab for PROOFING, and under WRITING STYLE, click on SETTINGS. Make sure that PASSIVE SENTENCES is checked.

Microsoft Word should be configured by default to find passive voice when performing a grammar check, but if somehow it is not so configured, it will not hurt to see to it that it is. A grammar check should be performed on your draft once at the very least, and preferably several times before submission.

Always be concise. Never use five words when two words are enough. Always try to use active verbs to ensure concise phrasing. Work to limit the use of “to be” verbs. You should strive to place subjects and verbs near the beginnings of sentences, to reduce over-reliance on adjectives and adverbs that complicate sentences.

Always remember that you are the author of your paper. You should attempt to seize authorial control. Never let the organization or voice of another author substitute for your voice or determine your paper’s organization or argument. Whenever possible, try to paraphrase your sources. Keep the use of block quotes to a minimum, mostly for effect or when the original words state the case perfectly.

Certain other technical points should still be addressed that can help you avoid your papers ending up dripping with angry red ink. Most historians prefer that you write in the past tense. There is something called the historical present tense in which writers treat historical figures who are no longer living as though they are indeed still alive (“Thomas Jefferson is unsure if the Congress will approve the Louisiana Purchase” or “Now Washington has to figure out how to get his army across the Delaware quickly and silently”). While not incorrect, this tense is usually best employed when writing for a popular audience: it can create a sense of immediacy. Professional historians often find it jarring. Keeping your verb tenses straight is a challenging balancing act, but the rule of thumb for history papers is to make sure that past events are spoken of in the past tense, while present-day discussions of past events by historians are treated in the present tense. For example: “Jonathan Edwards described the beginnings of the Great Awakening in New England in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God* (1734), which historian Frank Lambert argues in *Inventing the ‘Great Awakening’* is an example of the kind of publicity campaign by prorevivalists that ‘invented’ the Great Awakening.”

Avoid making grandiose, generalized statements of the obvious, which is a fair definition of a *platitude*: “Throughout history human beings have done terrible things to each other,” or “The American Revolution was a significant event.” A related danger to avoid is reductionism—boiling down a complicated series of events, characteristics, or dynamics to a single idea or interpretation, especially if it suits your personal or political opinions. For example: “The delegates to the Constitutional Convention wished to preserve a government controlled by rich, old white men,” or “The moral reformers of the antebellum period of American history were nothing more than a bevy of repressed puritans seeking to shape and control American society and politics.” Platitudes and reductionist statements indicate an unwillingness or inability to engage the complex realities of history and the range of scholarly opinion of a particular subject.

**IX. About Book Reviews**

From time to time, you may be required to write a book review, which is a different kind of task than the composition of a research essay. A review is a scholarly assessment of a scholarly book, either a monograph or a work of synthesis that not only summarizes its content, but also analyzes the arguments made therein to judge their merits. It is not merely a summary of the book’s content, but an analysis of the historian’s thesis (argument) and his/her use of primary and secondary source evidence in support of it.

When tasked with writing a book review—especially for the first time, the first thing you should do is look up a series of book reviews to get a sense of how they are written and organized. Most book reviews are short-form—500-1,000 words—and appear in the last section of a scholarly journal such as *The American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*. However, longer reviews—1,000-5,000 words—are found in *Reviews in American History*, which is a journal devoted only to book reviews and not to the presentation of new scholarship. All of these journals can be accessed through JSTOR, and offer excellent examples of the book review format.

A standard student book review usually contains the following elements, structured according to the following order:

1. Introduction

2. Summary of the content, including identification of the author’s thesis

3. Analysis of the evidential support for the book’s argument

4. Comparisons to similar works, the place of the book in the historiography of

the subject; survey of scholarly review literature (optional)

5. Conclusion.

It is important to limit your analysis of the book to its strengths and weaknesses, and not get into whether or not you “like” the book. If the book is well written or poorly written, certainly make note of that, but the focus must remain on the quality of the thesis and the strength of the supporting evidence. That said, book reviews can sometimes be arenas where historians with sharply contrasting viewpoints do battle, and in such cases a reviewer might condemn a book less on its own shortcomings and more for simply not being the book that the reviewer would have written. This is not usually a problem for students, since they often lack deep historiographical knowledge, but any well-trained history student can recognize a book’s thesis and evaluate it on the basis of the evidence that an author (or authors) uses. Do not be daunted by your relative lack of experience!

1. Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 4th ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2008), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brundage, *Going to the Sources*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Turabian, *Manual for Writers*, 19–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jenny L. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students*, 2nd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Turabian*, Manual for Writers*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jim Cullen, *Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think about History* (Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell, 2009), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A nice discussion about including counterarguments may be found on pages 92–94 in the 5th edition of William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA., Houghton Mifflin Co.,1974), 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Homer J. Simpson, *Frosted Donuts and the Nuclear Power Plant Safety Inspector* (Springfield, MA: Springfield UP, 1998), 231-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tony Soprano, “Waste Management and the Legitimate Businessman,” *Journal of Organized Crime* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 142-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lisa Simpson, “Why Do We ‘Vote Quimby’ Every Four Years?” *The Springfield Herald*, 13 Dec. 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Minutes of the Mayor’s Committee on Waste Management, June 10, 1993,” *Springfield Government Documents*, 12 vols. (Springfield, 1988-2000) 4:102-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Quimby Secret Directive No. 57,” 15 April 1996, File 114.1, Joseph Quimby Papers, Springfield Historical Society, Springfield, MA. Used with permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Diamond” Joe Quimby, “Why You Idiots Should Keep Electing Me,” in Waylon Smithers, ed., *The Stump Speeches of Mayor “Diamond” Joseph Quimby, 1990-2000* (Springfield, MA: Springfield UP, 2001), 303-07. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Deposition of Luigi Risotto v. Marion Anthony ‘Fat Tony’ D’Amico,” in Lionel Hutz, ed., *Records of the Trial of “Fat Tony” D’Amico* (Capital City, MA: Capital Press, 2009), 317-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Vito Corleone to Hyman Roth, 12 Oct. 1936, Vito Corleone Papers, New York Historical Society, New York. Used with permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Silvio Dante, in interview with the author, 13 April 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ned Flanders, ed., *The Early Theological Writings of Rev. Timothy Lovejoy* (Springfield, MA: Inspiration Press, 1999), 45-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rev. Timothy Lovejoy, “How Ned Flanders Nearly Drove Me from the Ministry,” in Homer J. Simpson, ed., *Ned Flanders is an Annoying Person* (Springfield, MA: Springfield UP, 1993), 78-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lisa Simpson, “The Lemon Tree Incident,” s.v., *Encyclopedia of Springfield*, Seymour Skinner, ed. (Springfield, 2002), 566-567. Specialized encyclopedias are much more acceptable than general ones like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *Wikipedia*, which are not acceptable resources for college students. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Moe Sizlak, review of Barney Gumbel, *My Life through a Beer Mug*, in *Springfield Quarterly* 56 (Oct. 2002), 69-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Jebediah Springfield and the Founding of Springfield,” Springfield Digital Library Manuscript Collection. <http://www.springfield.com/history/js/founding.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Simpson, *Frosted Donuts*, 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Tony Soprano to “Feech” Lamanna, telephone conversation recorded through an F.B.I. wiretap, 15 September 2003; David Chase, *A World All Their Own: A Study of Organized Crime in Northern New Jersey, 1955-2005* (New York: Criminal Press, 2005), 258-289. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Carmella Soprano, *The Mafia Wife’s Household Companion* (Newark: Bada Bing Press, 2002), 45-51; Marge Simpson, *Cooking for a Man with a Big Appetite* (Springfield, MA: C. M. Burns, Inc., 1999), 16-33. For a contrasting opinion, see Adriana Lacerva, *Why Cook When You Can Eat Out?* (Paramus, N.J.: Paramus Press, 2001). Mario Batali, in his dense analysis of southern Italian cuisine, argues that Italian food is not inherently high in fat and carbohydrates, but rather it is Italian-American cuisine that is fattening. My own work contradicts this splitting of hairs. See Mario Batali, *Southern Italian Cuisine* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003) and John Howard Smith, *“That’s One Spicy Meatball”: Italian Food and Its American Expressions* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Most historians tend to do this in the preface of a monograph, which is a little less formal than an introduction or a chapter. It is rare to see it in a journal article. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)