

WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper

The Challenges of Writing About (a.k.a., Making) History

At first glance, writing about history can seem like an overwhelming task. History's subject matter is immense, encompassing all of human affairs in the recorded past — up until the moment, that is, that you started reading this guide. Because no one person can possibly consult all of these records, no work of history can ever pretend to be comprehensive or universal. At the same time, history's subject matter is partially irretrievable. Barring the invention of time travel, no scholar can experience the past firsthand or recreate its conditions in a laboratory setting. Historians must rely on the fragmentary records that survive from the time period under study, which necessarily reveal just part of the story. For these reasons, the guiding principles behind all historical writing must be *selection* and *interpretation*: the thoughtful selection of topics and questions that seem most interesting, and the responsible interpretation of sources in order to construct meaningful arguments.

Subjective decisions about what to include, what to exclude, and how to understand it make history writing manageable in the first place. No less importantly, they also make it controversial, because scholars are bound to disagree with the judgments of other scholars. You can think of history writing, then, as an ongoing argument or debate over this unavoidable process of selection and interpretation. Your first challenge as a writer is to find a way to enter this conversation.

Common Types of History Papers

History papers come in all shapes and sizes. Some papers are narrative (organized like a story according to chronology, or the sequence of events), and some are analytical (organized like an essay according to the topic's internal logic). Some papers are concerned with history (not just what happened, of course, but why and how it happened), and some are interested in historiography (i.e., how other historians have written history, specifically the peculiarities of different works, scholars, or schools of thought). Some papers emphasize social or cultural history, others political or military history, and still others intellectual or economic (or any other genre of) history. In undergraduate courses, you'll most likely notice a distinction between review essays (often based on your responses to assigned readings from the course syllabus) and research papers (typically requiring additional research in a library or archive on a topic of your own choosing). Different types of history papers naturally require different amounts of research, analysis, and interpretation.

Despite this variety, historical arguments often assume a common form. If you're struggling to develop an argument for your paper, you might want to rehearse one of the following rhetorical gambits (see next section). Think of these approaches as ready-made suits that you can try on and tailor for the purposes of your assignment. Once you decide on a workable argument, declare it to your reader in clear, succinct prose in your *thesis statement*. This initial statement of your thesis will almost always appear in the opening paragraph(s) of a shorter essay or the opening section of a longer paper.

A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

**Ronald H. Fritze, Brian E. Coutts, Louis
A. Vyhnanek**



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discussion **The Journal of Library History** ,1974 **Reference Sources in History** Ronald H. Fritze,Brian E. Coutts,Louis A. Vyhnanek,2004-03-09 Fully annotated and completely updated the most comprehensive guide to reference books in the field of history Reference Sources in History catalogs atlases encyclopedias dictionaries handbooks sourcebooks bibliographies and chronologies and makes sense of it all Its broad scope and systematic organization make it an accessible reliable resource for experienced and inexperienced researchers alike Fully annotated and updated the new edition summarizes hundreds of reference works on every conceivable subject in history from ancient to modern from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe This edition also reflects the dramatic impact of the digital revolution on historical research by integrating a wide range of Internet and CD ROM sources Reference Sources in History is a time saving alternative to searching the reference stacks or getting lost in an online thicket of dubious historical websites Resources in Education ,1998 *The Publishers' Trade List Annual* ,1984 A Brief Guide to the Indonesian Media ,1988 **Program of the ... Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association** American Historical Association. Meeting,American Historical Association,2002 Some programs include also the programs of societies meeting concurrently with the association *Style Guides for Technical Reports, Journal Articles, Dissertations, Term Papers, Publications, Theses* University of California, Santa Barbara. Library,1981 *Civilization in the West: Since 1555* Mark A. Kishlansky,Patrick J. Geary,Patricia O'Brien,1991

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