

## 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. During 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 *selective* and *interpretive*: 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 review one of the following rhetorical gambits (see next section). Think of these approaches as ready-made tools 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 sections 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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*Style Guides for Technical Reports, Journal Articles, Dissertations, Term Papers, Publications, Theses* University of California, Santa Barbara.

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## **Table of Contents A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper**

1. Understanding the eBook A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
  - The Rise of Digital Reading A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
  - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
  - Personalized Recommendations
  - A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper User Reviews and Ratings
  - A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper Free and Paid eBooks
  - A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper Public Domain eBooks
  - A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper eBook Subscription Services
  - A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper eBook Formats

- ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
- A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper Compatibility with Devices
- A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper Enhanced eBook Features

7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience

- Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
- Highlighting and Note-Taking A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
- Interactive Elements A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

8. Staying Engaged with A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

- Joining Online Reading Communities
- Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
- Following Authors and Publishers A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

- Benefits of a Digital Library
- Creating a Diverse Reading Collection A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

10. Overcoming Reading Challenges

- Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
- Minimizing Distractions
- Managing Screen Time

11. Cultivating a Reading Routine A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

- Setting Reading Goals A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
- Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time

12. Sourcing Reliable Information of A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper

- Fact-Checking eBook Content of A Brief Guide To Writing The History Paper
- Distinguishing Credible Sources

13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
- Exploring Educational eBooks

14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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