



# Writing History at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES

## 1 What is History?

It is impossible to answer this question without asking another: what is history for? History seeks to understand the past as an essential instrument of critical reflection on the present. We have gone from the generic narrative history to history as problem, a discipline based on a critical study of documentation, a science which uses academic rules to apply different methodologies to the knowledge of the human being in society over time. Lately, the dissemination of history has lost its negative connotations, according to which making historical knowledge accessible involved a loss of quality. This explains how history is portrayed in the publishing world, the audiovisual media, education or awareness-raising actions in the education sector and for the general public. A command of writing is crucial in all these fields.

## 2 General features of writing in History

According to a classical manual from the Methodic school, historians are not entitled to write badly. They must *always* write well, but without being concerned about creating literature. Indeed, writing is an important part of a historian's work and is a process rather than an innate ability. A historian's written production should go beyond mere description and be analytical, taking into account the chronological sequence (when), examining the relations between cause and effect (why) and assigning responsibilities to events, individuals or groups, and to social, political or cultural phenomena (how).

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All written production has a theoretical basis according to which evidence is selected, filtered and analyzed. The historiographical schools establish methods which determine the categories of these clues and reinterpret them according to the objectives, sensitivities and perceptions provided by the historian's social and personal context. The combination of data and inferences from the past leads to new interpretations of historical materials. This is one of the historian's toughest tasks, but also brings the greatest satisfaction. Writing is central to this procedure, because it allows the materials to be put in order and interpreted, developing the information from the archives

and disseminating findings, ideas and new perspectives. The ethical dimension moreover requires a rigorous treatment of the evidence, with the correct citation of the materials used by the historian, but also the abandonment of premature judgements and bias. Certain minimum principles accepted by the international academic community should therefore be taken into account.

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- Dates, years, decades and centuries are written in Arabic numerals. A comma is never used between thousands in dates. It is preferable to indicate an approximate date with the abbreviation *c.* (*circa*, ‘about’). *BP* (‘before present’) dates are starting to be favoured over the traditional chronology based on the common or Christian era when referring to prehistoric or protohistoric periods.
- The first time they appear in the text, the complete documentary sources from archives and libraries must be cited, specifying the institution (which in subsequent citations should be referred to by its initials or acronym), series, documentary unit, specific reference with as much detail as possible (dossier, book, volume, folio or page number), title, place and date of the specific documentary unit. The usual abbreviations can be used for *folio/s* (*f.* or *ff.*), *page/pages* (*p.* or *pp.*). If any of these details are missing, you should indicate *no date* or *not dated* (*n.d.*), *no place* or *no publisher* (*n.p.*).
- Quotations in the text must be in the original language. It is not necessary to translate the usual languages of academic forums. If you choose to do so, this should be in the footnote or endnote. You can modernize the spelling and grammar of quotations from non-literary handwritten documents to make them easier to understand.
- Literal quotations should be in inverted commas (if they are short) or as a block quote with a specific paragraph format (new paragraph, indented text or smaller text size). Any omission or amendment must be indicated. You cannot use a quotation which is decontextualized from its source, that is to say, which can change the original meaning that it had for the author or in the document. You should therefore avoid second-hand quotations, which refer to a reference from a work that you have not consulted.
- Footnotes or endnotes must be presented rigorously and be useful for the demonstration. You should avoid a proliferation of notes, and should not cite sources and bibliography which have not been consulted. The callout to the note should always be placed at the end of the sentence or paragraph.

- Visual resources are increasingly important. When using them, you must respect copyright and image rights, and they must therefore be referenced. It should be weighed up whether to include them in the text and they must have an explanatory caption. You can reproduce original illustrations, but more value is placed on the author's own preparation of infographics or the use of iconographic details.
- Annexes are not secondary, as they provide unpublished materials or complementary information, such as transcriptions or statistical data. However, they must be selected with care, especially regarding length.
- In relation to Internet sources, electronic journals or publications are cited with the URL. If they reproduce printed matter or source materials from digital repositories, the physical documentation citation system can be used. It is not necessary to cite the date of consultation. This is, however, essential for websites without an electronic ISBN or ISSN.
- A compilation of the sources used (not extensive; just general archives and documentary series) and of the primary (from the historical period) and secondary bibliography used must be included at the end of the text. All the bibliographical references from the text must appear, especially if the author-year citation system has been chosen. All sources must have a specific reference in the part of the text where they are used. It is not sufficient to mention them in the bibliography. It is recommended to record just the bibliography cited, not that consulted.

### 3 Common written texts in History

History is disseminated in different formats: summaries of documents, annotated bibliographies, historiographical states of the art, etc. The most usual are document commentaries, reviews and research projects. Research projects can resemble writing an article or essay on a historical topic, tailored to an academic audience or the general public.

**Document commentary.** This is the historian's most important exercise in analyzing the past. Despite the diversity of sources (written, audiovisual, or images), a commentary follows a standard pattern for assessing the document's intrinsic conditions (original or secondary source, information content) and the context of its creation (period, authorship and addressees). The document should be assessed as historical evidence, bearing in mind that there is not a single correct interpretation, but also that only researchers' skill and training can prevent anachronistic interpretations from being made.

**Review.** A critical review of a book has two objectives: to inform about its content and to provide an opinion about its quality. A summary should always be offered, without this being the longest part. The book should be situated in the context of the author's production, and the latter in its historiographical framework. The main ideas should be discussed. A good strategy is to compare them with other bibliographic references and to contrast them in relation to methodology or the novelty of the arguments used. The critique must be honest and references provided to support the observations made.

**Research project.** First, compile the information. This obviously includes the basic, original and unpublished information provided by archives and documentary sources, but also bibliographic information. It is essential to consult online databases and repositories, but you should also look at the books cited in the reference works and their footnotes. This work also involves organizing the information, since it requires you to establish the background to the events, prosopographical records or historiographical foundations. All this makes it more difficult to decide when to start writing. You should not fall into the trap of reading and reading but not starting to write. Once you have most of the necessary information, you should embark on the writing. As the writing progresses, you will have better judgement and be more effective at filling in the information gaps.

Writing about a subject goes beyond explaining it. A good principle may be to formulate the project as one or more questions. This will be the preliminary thesis, which will inspire the search for arguments, with originality in the presentation of possible answers, which can change as new arguments are found. The preparation of a summary with lines of argument will provide you with the main and secondary sections.

The writing phase requires the preparation of an initial version or draft. All sections should be drafted, marking the information or reference gaps which may arise and which will be resolved at a later stage. A continuous writing process should be followed, allowing the entire roadmap to be completed. For longer works, the introductory paragraphs can be left to the end, when you are more inspired and can be more precise. These initial paragraphs are crucial to attracting the reader's attention and must present the subject in a relevant and specific manner.

After writing this draft, you will probably have a more descriptive than argumentative product. A new version is therefore necessary, which should be preceded by a very critical reading of the draft so that repetitions and also explanations which are too reductionist or not sufficiently supported by evidence (that is to say, with facts and citations) are detected. You should avoid circumlocutions. As with truth in a sworn testimony, you should address the thesis, the whole thesis and nothing but the thesis. To increase efficiency, you can leave some time for reflection – a few days would be better than a few hours – between the first and the second version. The order of presentation and questions can change, but you must ensure that the sections and paragraphs are based on very clear arguments, corroborated with logic and rigour in the following lines. This version should be conceptually different from the first draft. This is also the time to find a title for the document.

The conclusions must never include new evidence. They can be a convincing recap of the main ideas, underlining the original contribution compared with the usual per-

spectives on the subject: what distinguishes the work carried out from the state of knowledge on the subject? Or compared with the previous interpretations undertaken by historians? Facts and interpretations should be suitably presented. A good conclusion does not only summarize, but also leads the reader to agree with your thesis.

The last phase consists of checking the documentary references, assessing whether to include illustrations, maps or statistical tables, the footnotes and a careful preparation of the bibliography, in order to avoid plagiarism errors. The final correction consists of ensuring that the basic spelling, grammar and style rules and conventions are fulfilled.

## 4 Writing conventions in History

The management of sources must take into account chronological order and logical presentation. It should be recalled that the historian's text always has the dual dimension of the arguments made by the author and of the information which grants the work academic reliability, thanks to the references, notes and citations.

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Writing in history is thus based on a rationale of causes and effects, free from anachronisms and always meticulous with the references, which can develop arguments, paraphrases or citations. In the latter case, when referring to a secondary bibliography, they must form part of the author's logical analysis and not be presented solely as the authority justifying the arguments. A principle of contextualization and of lexical precision must always be followed, so as to avoid simplifications and thematic, ideological or geographic isolation. Eurocentric, Western or gender biases are especially problematic. A good antidote to these is a comparative approach and applying the global dimension of the analysis as a method and perspective.

## 5 Selected works and websites for writing in History

1. *Initiation aux études historiques*. Reine-Marie Bérard, Bénédicte Girault and Cathérine Rideau-Kikuchi (dir.), Paris.  
<https://reader.epubcloudservice.com/process/reader/book.php?ean=9782380941210>  
 In paper and online formats, this is a recent publication which offers a summary of methods and sources, specific approaches to periods and to historiographical tendencies. A resource with the basic foundations of theory and ethics for the profession of historian.
2. *Redacción de textos. Recomendaciones para presentar trabajos académicos*. Leonor Zozaya-Montes.  
<https://redaccion.hypotheses.org>  
 The author has an established track record in distance education, teaching documentary and historiographical techniques. She has a remarkable collection of educational images and resources.
3. *Guide méthodologique en Histoire*. Université de Montréal.  
[https://histoire.umontreal.ca/public/FAS/histoire/Documents/3-Ressources-services/Ressources-formulaires/Guide-methodologique\\_2019\\_1er\\_cycle\\_version\\_finale.pdf](https://histoire.umontreal.ca/public/FAS/histoire/Documents/3-Ressources-services/Ressources-formulaires/Guide-methodologique_2019_1er_cycle_version_finale.pdf)  
 The University of Montreal's history studies guide focuses above all on formal aspects, but also makes precise and apt references to questions of style and methodology.
4. *A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper*. Harvard College Writing Center.  
[https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg\\_writing\\_history.pdf](https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_history.pdf)  
 This very concise guide on history follows the outline of the famous documents of the Harvard College Writing Center.
5. *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students*. Patrick Rael. Bowdoin College.  
<https://courses.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/>  
 This is the most classic online manual recommended for American academia.
6. *Writing of History at Queens College*. Peter Conolly-Smith. Queens College.  
<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/index.html>  
 This is a website with strategies and key practical resources in the field of writing on history.
7. *Writing a good history paper*. Hamilton College.  
<https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/writing/writing-resources/writing-a-good-history-paper>  
 This work is presented in a very methodical and agreeable manner. It offers excellent advice on how to overcome final revising and editing difficulties.

8. *Learning to do Historical Research: A Primer Drafting, Revising and Editing.* Genya Erling and Trish O’Kane.

<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/writing.htm>

This comprehensive compendium of guidance on writing in history forms part of a complete research guide. This part in particular recommends rewriting and editing, making academic or informative writing more meticulous.

9. *Biblioteca en Línia.* Termcat, Centre de Terminologia.

<https://www.termcat.cat/ca/biblioteca-en-linia/biblioteca-terminologica/arees-tematiques/Història>

This is a collection of references from history dictionaries, vocabularies and lexicons compiled by the Catalan Language Terminology Centre.

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