History Discipline - Guide to Essay Writing

Preliminary Process
Before you begin to read it is absolutely essential that you understand the meaning of the essay topic. For example, an essay on popular religion in the Middle Ages would require you to understand what is meant by “popular”, what is meant by “religion”, and what is meant by “the Middle Ages”. If you find that you do not understand some aspects of the topic, confer with your tutor. Once you understand the topic, you can determine which types of evidence are relevant to it. Returning to the example of popular religion in the Middle Ages, evidence relating to the nobility would not be relevant, nor would the problem of papal supremacy and the causes of the Reformation. This preliminary process enables you to pose questions relating to your topic, so that when you begin to read the result is not an aimless exercise in ploughing through material. On the contrary, the result should be a critical search for the answers to your questions.

Reading and Note taking
The bibliographies issued with essay assignments usually list the basic books on particular topics, but other relevant books and articles will not be included. Footnotes and bibliographies in these basic books and the subject catalogue in the Barr Smith Library will guide you to this additional material. The really successful essays usually go beyond the books listed for essay assignments.

Historical material can be divided into five different categories.

1. Bask text or reference books. These seek to provide a general introduction to a historical period with an emphasis on telling the reader what happens rather than why. Examples are Lewis Spitz, The Renaissance, and F.K. Crowley, ed., A New History of Australia.

2. Monographs. These focus on a particular set of problems about a period or a society rather than giving a broad general survey. They put forward a closely argued thesis and support their arguments with detailed evidence usually drawn from primary sources. The best monographs challenge established opinions on problems. Examples are Lynn White, Medieval Technology and Social ~jig~, and L.L. Robson, ]~ Convict Settlement of Australia.

3. Interpretive essays. These take the form of a short book. They are usually written by scholars of considerable experience in a given field, who stand back a little from the close and detailed arguments of the monograph and article to offer a new synthesis of the findings of these works. Interpretive essays usually acknowledge their debt to the research of other scholars, whose works are cited in a bibliography attached to the the essay. Examples are Christopher Brooke The Structure of Medieval Society. and G. Blainey, ]~ Tyranny of Distance.

At times the difference between a monograph and an interpretive essay is so fine as to be indistinguishable. For this reason some historians prefer to group them together under a more general title such as “specialist books”.

4. Articles. These are a little like monographs in the sense that they usually raise narrowly defined problems and seek to answer them by a detailed examination of evidence drawn from a variety of sources, very often unpublished. Like monographs, they are likely to challenge established opinion about particular problems, and they are tightly argued. Articles tend to be short (usually 10 to 40 pages) and appear in journals like Past and Present, Journal of Modern History, American Historical Review and Australian Journal of Politics and History. The best of these articles are often collected in such volumes as J. Kaplow, New Perspectives on the French Revolution, Trevor Aston, Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660 : Essays from Past and Present and Denis Hay, The Renaissance Debate.

All the above are collectively known as secondary sources.

5. Primary Sources. These are the raw material of history. The primary sources from which a historian works may take many forms: they might be personal records like diaries and letters; institutional records like documents of the church or parliamentary debates and papers, the minutes of important committees or the rate books of municipal councils; published records like books, newspapers and pamphlets; oral reminiscences by participants; or material records such as buildings or documents. Published anthologies have made some of this material readily available. Examples are J.H. Stewart, ed., Documentary Survey of the French YOh~i~ion, J.M. Porter, ed., Luther Selected Political Writings, C.M.G. Clark, ed., Select Documents in Australian History (2 vols.).

Each kind of material demands its own particular approach by the reader, and it is important to establish the kind of book you are reading before you get into it. Check the list of contents and the preface or introduction, for it is through these that the author conveys his intentions. It is a good idea to start work on an essay with a basic text or reference book, and try to locate the question being studied in its wider historical context. From then you can move on to the monographs, interpretive essays, and articles.

When you have completed the preliminary process, you will find that much of the basic reference book was irrelevant to your topic and that the answers given to your questions were superficial. As you move from the basic reference books to the other material, the answers become more complete as well as complicated, and as a consequence your questions will need to be revised. For example,
the topic on popular religion in the Middle Ages might have led you to pose the question, "what were the religious beliefs of the peasants?" The basic reference books would provide you with a list of these beliefs, but the other sources would suggest other questions such as "What is the difference between religion and superstition?" "Were the peasants Christian or pagan?" and "Was their Christianity a thin veneer hiding a pagan soul?" It is through this process of posing and answering questions that the successful essay takes shape.

If your note taking is guided by this process of posing and answering questions, you are more likely to avoid the tedious business of accumulating vast piles of notes taken practically word for word from the books. Such tedium is a waste of time. Moreover, copious, uncritical notes can lead to a serious problem. It is probable that you will copy down practically unchanged the author's own words, without making it clear in your notes that the words are not yours. The danger is that you will then reproduce the author's words as your own in your essay, without quotation marks (inverted commas) or any other form of acknowledgement; this is plagiarism. There are two simple procedures for avoiding this risk: (1) when you are taking notes, try to record the substance of an author's arguments as concisely as possible and in your own words, jotting down at the same time any supporting evidence that you consider important; (2) if you feel it is necessary to copy any passages in the author's own words - because they are particularly well expressed, say, or because you sense the danger of distorting his views if you attempt to summarise them - then be absolutely certain that you put these passages in quotation marks. It is then an easy matter to separate your words from the author's when you write your essay.

You may find it useful to take your notes either on individual cards or on one side only of pieces of paper which can be cut up afterwards. If you use cards, use a new card for each separate idea, quotation, argument, or piece of information. Remember to head each card with the author, title, and page references. Then the cards can be separated according to the requirements of your organization. This will help you to plan your essay so as to present your own argument and to use your material as your own plan demands, rather than following somebody else's argument.

Organisation

Essays come in many shapes and sizes, and may legitimately use any of a wide variety of forms to achieve any of a wide variety of effects. For example some essays chiefly explore or clarify problems, without attempting to solve them. Some make systematic comparisons between different historical processes, forces or ideas. Some may be chiefly expressive, trying to recapture and communicate particular moods or concerns or qualities of past societies. In using one particular form as an example in the following paragraph, we do not suggest that it is the only or necessarily the best model for your essays.

A common and effective kind of essay is the kind that attempts to prove the validity of a hypothesis. For example, suppose the reading on popular religion in the Middle Ages led you to the conclusion that peasants were more pagan than Christian. This conclusion is your hypothesis, and your essay must present evidence in support of it. In other words, you are trying to convince your tutor that your conclusion is the correct one. Good organization is essential for the successful achievement of this goal. To put it quite simply, an essay needs a beginning, middle, and an end, or in other words an introduction, text and conclusion. The introduction places the topic in historical context and points towards the evidence that will be given in the text. All this should be contained in one fully developed paragraph (one sentence does not make a paragraph). The text must convince the reader of the validity of your hypothesis by developing an argument, and in order to be effective an argument contains several main points supported by evidence. Each main point of your argument with supporting evidence ideally constitutes one fully developed paragraph. For an essay of 1500 words, four or five such paragraphs are sufficient; longer essays require more points of argument and/or more fully developed evidence. For some topics and some hypotheses the points of argument will be very evident. For these cases, your only problem will be arranging the points in a sequence that will best support your hypothesis. Other topics and other hypotheses will suggest a vast range of points. For these cases, you will have to decide which points are the most pertinent. Sometimes you may have to decide whether your hypothesis is best supported by a topical format, or a format based on sources or chronology. Finally comes the conclusion. A good conclusion to an essay is more than a mere summary of the argument, although the main points can be reviewed without being repetitive. A good conclusion need not summarize and certainly goes beyond mere summary to clinch the argument with verve and flourish.

An essay on popular-religion in the Middle Ages could begin by noting the traditional view of the period as an age-of-faith and by claiming that this view is based on the study of the educated elite; it was much different for the mass of illiterate peasants. This is what is meant by placing the hypothesis in its historical context. As for the text, that is, the point in your argument, a chronological format would be suitable, but perhaps a format based on sources would be the better of the two. Hence, the first, paragraph of the text details the evidence from inquisition-records; the second from popular literature such as folk tales and songs, the third from upper class assessments of peasant superstitions, and the fourth analyzes demographic evidence such as illegitimacy rates. These four fully developed paragraphs should be analytical and argumentative, designed to convince the reader that the hypothesis is correct. Finally, the conclusion could return to the statements made in the introduction and contrast the "age of faith" with the "age of superstition".

Style and Grammar

Good prose is the product of hard work and painstaking revision, and there is no easy way to develop an individual or arresting style. But there are ways of making sure your essay says what you mean and says it intelligibly. Here are some simple guidelines you may find helpful.
1. Begin writing with a clearly formulated plan of what you intend to write. Leave yourself plenty of time to write and revise your drafts; drafts begun the day before essays are due invariably suffer as a result. Always assume that you will have to rewrite and polish your drafts substantially; don’t submit your first preliminary draft.

2. Writing good prose does not require the use of long words or complex, heavily-punctuated sentences. Profundity comes from the quality of your insights, not the size of your words. When you re-read your essay drafts, check to see that you have said what you mean, that you have said it as simply and clearly as you can, and that all the commas and semi-colons you have used are necessary. Try reading the draft aloud: if you are unable to speak it effortlessly it probably means you should rewrite it. You may like to ask somebody to read it over for punctuation and clarity of expression. They may see things that you can not because you are too involved in what you have written.

3. Remember that the conventions of grammar and spelling are essential for easy and unobstructed communication. It is very difficult for a reader to plough through bad grammar and poor spelling and still follow your argument. If you know you have a bad record for faulty grammar and spelling, ask somebody else to check your drafts.

4. Paragraphs indicate that you are introducing a new point in your argument. As a general rule each paragraph should contain a single point. The function of the paragraph is to elaborate that point and support it with appropriate evidence and documentation. Paragraphs that continue for pages indicate either an argument out of control or a point elaborated to unnecessary lengths.

5. One simple procedure can help avoid several problems. Familiarize yourself with all the evidence you intend to use in one paragraph so that you can write the entire paragraph without referring to your notes. This procedure helps avoid unwitting plagiarism (the inclusion of other authors’ sentences and phrases), “cut and paste” essays - (taking one sentence from author A, the next from author B, and so on) and essays which read as if they were lists (caused by writing one sentence, stopping to look at notes, writing another sentence, and so on).

6. Read ‘Historians and Language’ copies of which are available in the History Office.

**Presentation**

What an essay says is obviously more important than such matters as margins, footnote form, and double spacing. Admittedly, some of these matters are included simply because they make an essay easier to read and to mark. Others, however, are just as essential to an essay as an introduction, text, and conclusion.

You are strongly urged to type your essay or have someone type it for you. Bulletin boards throughout the university list the names and telephone numbers of professional typists, whose services are usually inexpensive. If you type your own essay, check that the type is clean and the ribbon in good condition. If you cannot have your essay typed, make sure your handwriting is legible.

For all essays, handwritten or typed, observe the following:

- Use good quality paper.
- Write on one side only.
- Leave a margin of at least one inch on all four sides (top, bottom, left and right).
- Write on every other line, in other words, double space.
- Number each page.
- Begin the introduction on page 2, leaving the first page as the title page.
- Include the following information on the title page: full title of your essay
  - your name
  - date
  - subject
  - name of tutor
  - day and time of tutorial

In order to argue effectively you need to convince people of the reliability of the evidence used to support the main points of your argument. This is the primary function of documentation (footnotes) in an essay. Original ideas of course need no documentation, nor does detail which is either common knowledge or indisputable (for example “Elizabeth I was Queen of England between 1558 and 1603”). Matters of fact or interpretation important to the argument and not indisputable common knowledge need documentation, as do all direct quotations.

When documenting an essay, observe the following:

- Number footnotes consecutively throughout the essay, so that the number of the last footnote is the total number of footnotes in the essay.
- Indicate the material being documented in the text by placing a simple arabic numeral slightly above the line, as shown below. This should appear at the end of the sentence or at other places of punctuation, following the material that is being documented.
Wrong
James Westfall Thompson has argued that domestic politics were responsible for the French Wars of Religion, but according to De Lamar Jensen the Wars can only be understood in the context of the foreign policies of Philip of Spain.

Right
James Westfall Thompson has argued that domestic politics were responsible for the French Wars of Religion but according to De Lamar Jensen the Wars can only be understood in the context of the foreign policies of Philip of Spain.

There is no need to include a set of full-stops (periods) at the beginning or end of direct quotations. The only function of a set of full stops in a direct quotation is to indicate that part of the original text has been left out. If the part left out is totally within one sentence, only three full stops in the set are needed (...). Four full stops are required (.....) if the part left out includes the end of a sentence. Direct quotations four or more lines in length should be indented and single spaced and require no quotation marks (inverted commas). Shorter quotations should be included in the text:

When the King ordered Alias to marry Gibouin, she remarked, "ah, God, ... here is an evil message." After being informed that the king would not permit her to refuse, Alias stated,

I could die of grief! I would rather be burnt alive than that the king should force a greyhound to lie with a watch dog. God will allow me to bring up my child till such times as he can carry arms.

While there are various conventions but no one standard form for footnotes of bibliographical entries, footnotes must supply certain minimum information in a consistent form throughout the essay. This information is as follows:

Books
Author's initials, or first name, and surname (same for editor and translator, if any)
full title, underlined
place and year of publication number of volumes -
volume and page number(s) (for footnotes only)

Articles
Author's initials, or first name, and surname full title or article, in quotation marks
full title of journal, etc., underlined
volume and/or number and date (year) of journal
pages occupied by article, or page(s) from which your specific reference is derived (footnotes only).

Don't forget to include page references in the footnotes. The first reference to a source in a footnote must always be given in full. Subsequent references to the same work may be given in abbreviated form by noting only the author and page number. When using two or more sources by the same author, then an abbreviated form of the title is necessary to indicate which work is being cited. Use ibid. for consecutive references to the same source. To separate your text from the footnotes type a line 10 spaces in length, as shown below.

3. Ibid. 1, p.16
8. Ibid.

The bibliography should be the last page of your essay. It should include all works which were used to prepare the essay, even if they have not been cited in notes, but do not include books which you have not consulted. Use the same form for the bibliography as was suggested for footnotes, the only differences being that the works should appear in alphabetical order by the author's surname and that precise page numbers are not required, except to denote pages of a journal or anthology occupied by an article or essay. A useful convention is to list first primary then secondary sources.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

A Secondary Sources
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Helpful Hints
Some helpful hints to improve the presentation of your written work. Bibliography listings should always take this form

Author
Book title underlined
place
date of publication

1. Titles without authors, such as newspapers, are underlined. The titles of journal articles are placed in quotation marks followed by the journal's title underlined
2. The first citing of a reference must be in full, plus page number. Subsequent references to the same work should be given in the form e.g.
   Wolfe, op.cit., p.
   This means you are referring to the same work but a different page number. If consecutive references are to the identical page you simply put ibid. That is, in the same place.
3. Footnotes, as the name suggests, should be at the foot of the page and not listed at the back with the bibliography
4. There seems to be some confusion in the use of its and it's. It's is a contraction of it is, the apostrophe indicating the absence of the second i.
   Its is the singular possessive. (It is the one exception to the rule applying to the possessive case in which an apostrophe is used.)
5. The use of the colloquial contractions can't and didn't in written work is unacceptable; in speech perhaps, in the written word, no.'
6. Bought is from the verb To Buy
   Bought is from the verb To Bring
7. Bourgeois is the correct spelling of this adjective. The noun is bourgeoisie.