

A POCKET GUIDE TO

Writing in History

SIXTH EDITION

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Writing History Papers

- Read the exam carefully. Make sure you understand what each question is really asking. You will not gain points by scribbling down everything you know about the development of Chinese politics from the tenth century through the fifteenth century when the question asks you to discuss the impact of the Mongol invasion in 1260.
- If you are offered a choice, make sure you answer the question you can answer best. This may not always be the one you are drawn to first. One great insight about the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi will not be enough to write a good essay about Maori-British relations in nineteenth-century New Zealand. Be sure that you can cite several pieces of evidence in support of your thesis.
- Take the time to organize your thoughts. Jot down a quick outline for your essay, stating the thesis and listing the evidence you will provide to support that thesis.

Writing the essay. Once you are ready to write, your essay should follow the same format as any other history essay:

- Begin by stating your thesis. *Do not* waste time restating the question; your professor knows what he or she asked.
- Cite the evidence that supports your thesis. If you are aware of any counterevidence, make sure you discuss it. (See 4d-2 for a discussion of counterevidence and how to deal with it.)
- Be sure you stick to the point. Do not go off on interesting tangents that are irrelevant to the question. Referring frequently to your outline will help keep you on track.
- Tie your essay together by stating your conclusions.

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Each academic discipline has its own practices, or conventions, that people writing in the discipline follow when engaged in a scholarly dialogue. Following the conventions for writing in history will make it easier for you to participate in an academic conversation in your field. Moreover, many historians are excellent stylists. Your instructor will pay attention to your writing, so your attempts to learn and follow the conventions of the discipline will be noticed—and worth the effort.

History students are most often asked to write two types of papers: short essays and research papers. Unlike most of the assignments described in Chapter 3, such papers often require you to examine *multiple* (rather than single) sources. Writing a historical essay is a process of synthesis—pulling together different sources, thinking about their relationship, and drawing conclusions about what, taken together, they can tell you about your subject. This chapter provides advice on all aspects of writing short essays—relatively brief papers with limited sources and, frequently, an assigned topic. Full-fledged research papers, which build on the techniques outlined here, are considered in Chapter 5.

4a Approaching a history assignment

When faced with the task of writing a short essay in history, you must first analyze the assignment carefully, making sure to identify and understand *all* of its parts so that you know exactly what you are being asked to do. Some

assignments include very specific and detailed directions, but in many cases the instructor's expectations will be implied, not explicit. To ensure that you fully understand your assignment, you should always do the following:

Determine the key verb. Most assignments include a key verb that will let you know how your instructor expects you to approach the essay. The following example is from a course on the history of Christian-Muslim relations:

Compare the ways in which Fulcher of Chartres (a medieval Christian historian) and Ibn al-Athir (a medieval Muslim historian) explain the Christian success at the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade.

The operative word in the assignment is *compare*. Other assignments may ask you to *trace* the causes or *assess* the importance of a historical event. The key verb tells you how to structure your essay. For instance, an assignment that requires you to *compare* two or more texts, like the example given above, implies that you should give approximately equal weight to each of the sources included in your assignment, consider not only similarities but also differences, and come to some conclusion about the *significance* of the similarities and differences you have identified.

Determine what sources you should or may use. Short-paper assignments usually include specific instructions about which sources you should consider and, sometimes, which ones you may not. You might, for example, be instructed to consider *only* a specific set of newspaper articles or to develop your own interpretation of an artifact without reference to additional secondary sources. Always make sure you understand and follow these instructions.

Analyze and synthesize your sources. When you write a paper, you must, of course, begin by evaluating and analyzing each source you are using, following the advice given in 3a and 3b. For the assignment given above, for instance, you would need to understand what both Fulcher of Chartres *and* Ibn al-Athir thought about the siege of Antioch.

Analyzing each source, though, is not sufficient; you also need to synthesize the information in your sources by identifying specific points of comparison. When you use several sources as a means for interpreting a historical

event, you should take care to integrate evidence from each source throughout your paper. An essay for the above assignment, for example, should *not* take the form of two mini-papers—one on Fulcher and one on Ibn al-Athir—glued together. Rather, it should examine the two sources *as they relate to each other*. You might discover, for example, that Fulcher and Ibn al-Athir agree that the gates to the city were opened for the Christian army by a Muslim cuirass-maker, but that they differ in their interpretation of this event: Ibn al-Athir reports that the traitor succumbed to bribery, while Fulcher maintains that his actions were the result of three divine visions.

Finally, keep in mind that merely reporting the content of a text or texts, or providing a laundry list of similarities and differences, does not constitute a history essay; underlying every essay assignment in history is the question “Why is this important?” In the sample assignment, the instructor's expectation is that the student will not only analyze both sources and identify their similarities and differences but also draw conclusions about the *meaning* of those similarities and differences and explain why they are *significant*. You might note, for example, that the two texts provide very different perspectives on causation in history: the Christian historian ascribes almost everything that happened during the siege to the direct action of God, whereas the Muslim historian explains the same events without reference to divine intervention. One approach to writing this essay, then, might be to consider the degree to which medieval authors from different religious cultures shared a common set of beliefs about the world: What ideas do they share, and how and why do their worldviews differ?

Stay on topic. Be careful to write about the topic that has actually been assigned. In reading Fulcher and Ibn al-Athir, for example, you may discover that both authors discuss the importance of Jerusalem in their respective religions. Although this is an interesting and important topic, it is not the subject of the assignment.

4b Thinking like a historian

Before you begin to write your essay, you need to become familiar with a number of conventions that historians have established to govern their relationship with their

subject; in other words, you need to learn how to think like a historian. Learning these conventions will enable you to be an active participant in historical conversations.

Respect your subject. When you write a history paper, you are forming a relationship of sorts with real people and events whose integrity must be respected. The people who lived in the past were not necessarily more ignorant or cruel (or, conversely, more innocent or moral) than we are. It is condescending, for example, to suggest that an intelligent or insightful person was “ahead of his or her time” (suggesting, of course, that he or she thought the same way we do).

Do not generalize. Remember that groups are formed of individuals. Do not assume that everyone who lived in the past believed the same things or behaved the same way. Avoid broad generalizations such as “the medieval period was an Age of Faith” or “pre-modern people were not emotionally attached to their children.” At best, such statements are clichés. More often than not, they are also wrong. (For more on the issue of appropriate language, see 4g-1.)

Avoid anachronism. An anachronistic statement is one in which an idea, event, person, or thing is represented in a way that is not consistent with its proper historical time or context. For example, “Despite the fact that bubonic plague can be controlled with antibiotics, medieval physicians treated their patients with ineffective folk remedies.” This sentence includes two anachronisms. First, although antibiotics are effective against bubonic plague, they had not yet been discovered in the fourteenth century; it is anachronistic to mention them in a discussion of the Middle Ages. Second, it is anachronistic to judge medieval medicine by modern standards. A more effective discussion of the medieval response to the bubonic plague would focus on fourteenth-century knowledge about health and disease, theories of contagion, and sanitation practices. In short, you should not import the values, beliefs, and practices of the present into the past. Try to understand the people and events of the past in their own contexts.

Be aware of your own biases. We naturally choose to write about subjects that interest us. Historians should not, however, let their own concerns and biases direct the way they interpret the past. A student of early modern Europe, for example, might be dismayed by the legal, social, and economic limitations placed on women in that period. Reproaching sixteenth-century men for being “selfish and chauvinistic” might forcefully express such a student’s sense of indignation about what appears to modern eyes as unjust, but it is not a useful approach for the historian, who tries to understand the viewpoints of people in the past in the social context of the period under study.

4c Developing a thesis

Your *topic* is the subject you have been assigned to write about (for example, the Salem witchcraft trials, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the rise of the Nazi party). If you merely collect bits of information about your topic, however, you will not have written an effective history paper. A history paper, like many other kinds of academic writing, usually takes the form of an argument in support of a *thesis*—a statement that reflects the conclusion you have reached about your topic after a careful analysis of the sources.

Since the thesis is the central idea that drives a history essay, it is important that you understand exactly what a thesis is. Imagine that you have been given the following essay assignment:

Discuss the role of nonviolent resistance in the Indian independence movement.

As you develop your thesis statement, keep the following in mind:

- **A thesis is *not* a description of your paper topic.** Although your reader should not have to guess what your paper is about, the thesis must do more than announce your subject or the purpose for which you are writing. “This paper is about the role of nonviolent resistance in the Indian independence movement” is *not* a thesis statement; nor is “The purpose of this paper is to describe the methods Mohandas Gandhi used to gain Indian independence from Great Britain.” These sentences merely restate the assigned topic.

- **A thesis is *not* a question.** Although historians always ask questions as they read (see 3a for advice on active reading) and a thesis statement arises from the historian's attempt to answer a question, a question is not, in itself, a thesis. "Why were Mohandas Gandhi's methods successful in the movement to achieve Indian independence from Great Britain?" is a valid historical question, but it is *not* a thesis statement.
- **A thesis is *not* a statement of fact.** While historians deal in factual information about the past, a fact, however interesting, is simply a piece of data. The statement "Mohandas Gandhi led the movement for Indian independence from Britain" is *not* a thesis.
- **A thesis is *not* a statement of opinion.** Although a thesis statement must reflect what you have concluded, it cannot be a simple statement of belief or preference. The assertion "Mohandas Gandhi is my favorite political leader of the twentieth century" does *not* constitute a thesis.

In short, a thesis is *not* a description of your paper topic, a question, a statement of fact, or a statement of opinion, although it is sometimes confused with all of the above. Rather, *a thesis is a statement that reflects what you have concluded about the topic of your paper, based on a critical analysis and interpretation of the source materials you have examined.*

For the assignment given above, the following sentence is an acceptable thesis:

From the moment that Mohandas Gandhi decided to respond to force with acts of civil disobedience, British rule of India was doomed; his indictment of British colonial policy in the court of public opinion did far more damage to the British military than any weapon could.

You should note three things about this statement. First, while the thesis is not itself a question, it *is* an answer to a question—in this case, the question posed above: "Why were Mohandas Gandhi's methods successful in the movement to achieve Indian independence from Great Britain?" A thesis usually arises from the questions you pose of the text or texts as you engage in active reading. Second, the thesis is *specific*. In attempting to answer the historical question raised above, the writer did not make a broad generalization like "Gandhi was successful because

people thought he was a good person" or "Gandhi succeeded because the British were treating the Indians badly." Rather, the thesis makes a specific claim: that the contrast between Gandhi's use of civil disobedience and the use of force by the British had a significant impact on public opinion. Third, a thesis is always a debatable point, a *conclusion* with which a thoughtful reader might disagree. In other words, the thesis makes an assertion that sets up an *argument*. It is the writer's job, in the body of a paper, to provide an argument based on evidence that will convince the reader that his or her thesis is a valid one. The thesis, then, is the heart of your paper. It presents what you have concluded about the topic under discussion and provides the focal point for the rest of the essay.

To ensure that your thesis really is a thesis, review the Tips for Writers box on page 46.

4d Constructing an argument

One reason you might find it difficult to develop a thesis statement is that you feel hesitant to come to independent conclusions about the meaning and significance of the materials you are working with; after all, what if your interpretation is wrong? It often seems safer just to reiterate the topic, or ask a question, or state a fact with which no one could argue. But, as noted in 4c, to write an effective history paper, you must be willing to reach a conclusion about your subject that could be challenged or debated by an intelligent reader. While this may seem intimidating, keep in mind that historical issues are seldom clear-cut and that professional historians, working from the same sources, often disagree with each other or form different interpretations. It is unlikely that there is only one correct point of view concerning the topic you have been assigned or only one correct interpretation of the sources you are examining. You do not need to convince your readers that your thesis or argument represents the only possible interpretation of the evidence. You do, however, need to convince them that your interpretation is valid. You will be able to do this only if you have provided concrete evidence from reliable sources in support of your argument and have responded honestly to opposing positions.

Tips for Writers

Testing Your Thesis

Your proposed thesis does no more than repeat the topic you are writing about → It is *not* a thesis.

Your proposed thesis poses a question without suggesting an answer → It is *not* a thesis.

Your proposed thesis merely articulates a fact or series of facts → It is *not* a thesis.

Your proposed thesis simply reflects a personal belief or preference → It is *not* a thesis.

BUT

Your proposed thesis:

- suggests an answer to a question you have posed as a result of your reading, *and*
 - is specific, rather than general, *and*
 - is debatable (that is, it asserts a conclusion with which a reader might disagree), *and*
 - can be supported by evidence from the sources
- It is a thesis.

4d-1 Supporting your thesis

To support your argument, you must offer evidence from your sources. Imagine that you have been given the following assignment in a course on the history of science: "Analyze the role played by experiment and observation in William Harvey's *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*." A student writing an essay on this topic would have noticed that Harvey describes his experimental method and his observations in great detail. She would also have noticed, however, that Harvey drew inspiration from the analogy he saw between the sun as the center of

the solar system and the heart as the center of the body, and that this analogy led him to consider whether the blood, like the planets, might move about the body in a circular motion. Her thesis will depend on the conclusion she has reached, after careful and active reading of the text, about which of these elements was more significant in his discovery of circulation. If she concludes that experimentation and observation were more important in Harvey's thinking, her thesis statement might look like this:

Although Harvey sometimes used analogies and symbols in his discussion of the movement of the heart and the blood, it was his careful observations, his elegantly designed experiments, and his meticulous measurements that led him to discover circulation.

If, on the other hand, she concluded that Harvey's philosophical commitments were more significant, she might write the following:

Harvey's commitment to observation and experiment mark him as one of the fathers of the modern scientific method; however, a careful reading of *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals* suggests that the idea of circulation did not arise simply from the scientific elements of his thinking, but was inspired by his immersion in neo-Platonic philosophy.

Note that the writer of this essay could come to *either* of these conclusions after a careful examination of the text. What is essential is that the student support her thesis by constructing an argument with evidence taken from the text itself. It is *not* enough simply to make an assertion and expect readers to agree. In the first instance, she would support her thesis by pointing to examples of experiments Harvey designed and carried out. She might also note Harvey's emphasis on quantification and the care with which he described experiments that could be replicated. In the second instance, she might note the number of times Harvey compares the heart to the sun, thus providing an analogy for circulation. She might also note that Harvey was unable to observe circulation directly, since capillaries are too small to be seen with the microscopes available at the time, and that his belief in circulation therefore required an intuitive leap that could not have been drawn solely from observation or

experiment. In both cases, the student would cite *specific* instances from the text to support her thesis, integrating quotes from the source as appropriate. (For more on using quotations, see 7a-2.)

4d-2 Responding to counterevidence and anticipating opposing viewpoints

Acknowledging counterevidence—source data that does not support your argument—will not weaken your paper. On the contrary, if you address counterevidence effectively, you strengthen your argument by showing why it is legitimate despite information that seems to contradict it. If, for example, the student writing about Harvey wanted to argue for the primacy of experiment and observation in his work, she would need to show that these elements were more significant than his interest in philosophical speculation. If she wanted to argue that his philosophy was more important, she would have to demonstrate that it was his keen interest in the ways in which some philosophers interpreted the centrality of the sun in the universe as a metaphor that allowed him to interpret what he observed about the movement of the blood and the heart in creative new ways. In either case, her argument would need to be based on a consideration of the evidence and counterevidence contained in the relevant source or sources, not merely on her own gut feelings.

Similarly, if you are writing an essay in which you are *examining secondary sources*, you should demonstrate that you are aware of the work of historians whose interpretations differ from your own; never simply ignore an argument that doesn't support your interpretation. It is perfectly legitimate to disagree with others' interpretations; this is, after all, one of the purposes of writing a book review or a historiographic essay (see 3b-3 and 3b-6). In disagreeing, however, it is important to treat opposing viewpoints with respect; you should never resort to name-calling, oversimplifying, or otherwise distorting opposing points of view. *Your essay will be stronger, not weaker, if you understand opposing arguments and respond to them fairly.*

A good argument, then, does not ignore evidence or arguments that seem to contradict or weaken the thesis. If you discover information that does not support your thesis, do not suppress it. It is important to acknowledge *all* of your data. Try to explain to readers why your

interpretation is valid, despite the existence of counterevidence or alternative arguments, but do not imply that your interpretation is stronger than it is by eliminating data or falsifying information. Rather, a successful paper would respond to counterevidence and differing interpretations by addressing them directly and explaining why, in your view, they do not negate your thesis.

Note: Of course, if the counterevidence is too strong, you will need to adjust, or even completely change, your thesis. Always be open to the possibility that your initial conclusions might need to be modified in response to the evidence you find. (For more on the process of gathering evidence and developing a thesis, see 5b.)

4e Organizing your paper

Even after analyzing an assignment, reading the sources carefully with a historian's eyes, developing a thesis, and finding evidence in the sources that supports your thesis, you may still find it difficult to organize your ideas into an effective paper. History papers, like other academic writings, include an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. This section examines the specific elements that your history instructor will expect to find in each of these parts of your paper.

4e-1 Drafting an introduction

The introductory paragraph of your paper is in many ways the most important one and therefore the most difficult to write. In your introduction, you must (1) let your readers know what your paper is about and provide background information on the texts, people, or problems under discussion; (2) put the topic of your paper into context; and (3) state your thesis. You must also attract your readers' attention and interest. The opening paragraph, then, has to frame the rest of the paper and make readers want to continue reading. There is no magic formula for writing an effective first paragraph. You should, however, keep the following conventions in mind.

Do not open with a global statement. Unsure of how to start, many students begin their papers with phrases like "Throughout history . . ." or "From the beginning of

time . . ." or "People have always wondered about . . ." You should avoid generalizations like these. First, you cannot prove that they are true: How do you know what people have always thought or done? Second, these statements are so broad that they are virtually meaningless; they offer no specific points or details to interest readers. Finally, such statements are so vague that they give readers no clue about the subject of your paper. It is much more effective to begin with material specific to your topic.

The following opening sentence comes from the first draft of a student paper on William Harvey's *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*:

INEFFECTIVE

From ancient times, people have always been interested in the human body and how it works.

Although, grammatically, there is nothing wrong with this sentence, it is not a particularly effective opening. For one thing, it is such a general statement that readers will be inclined to ask, "So what?" In addition, it gives readers no indication of what the paper is about. Will the essay examine ancient Greek medical theory? Chinese acupuncture? Sex education in twentieth-century American schools?

In revising the sentence, the student eliminated the general statement altogether and began instead with a description of the intellectual context of Harvey's work:

EFFECTIVE

For the scholars and physicians of seventeenth-century Europe, observation and experimentation began to replace authoritative texts as the most important source of information about human anatomy and physiology.

From this one sentence, readers learn four things about the subject of the paper: the time frame of the discussion (the seventeenth century), the place (Europe), the people involved (scholars and physicians), and the topic (the importance of experiment and observation in the biological sciences). Readers' curiosity is also piqued by the questions the sentence implies: Why did experimentation begin to replace authoritative texts? Was this change a subject of controversy? Who was involved? How did this change in method affect the science of biology and the

practice of medicine? In other words, this opening sentence makes readers want to continue reading; they want to know the author's thesis.

Include your thesis in the first paragraph. If your opening sentence has been effective, it will make your readers want to know the main point of your paper, which you will state in the thesis. As you read works by professional historians, you may notice that the introduction to a journal article or book may be long, even several paragraphs, and the author's thesis may appear anywhere within it. Until you become skilled in writing about history, however, it is best to keep your introduction short and to state your thesis in the first paragraph. The following is the first draft of the introductory paragraph for the paper on Harvey:

INEFFECTIVE

From ancient times, people have always been interested in the human body and how it works. Harvey was a seventeenth-century physician who performed many experiments and discovered the circulation of the blood.

This introduction begins with the ineffective opening sentence we looked at above. The "thesis statement" that follows isn't really a thesis at all; it is simply a statement of fact. (For more on writing an effective thesis, see 4c.) Moreover, there is no clear connection established between the ideas contained in the opening sentence and Harvey. From this first paragraph, a reader would have no idea what the paper was about, what its central point might be, or what to expect in the pages that follow.

In the final version of this introductory paragraph, the student uses the revised opening sentence and incorporates a more effective thesis, which is underlined here:

EFFECTIVE

For the scholars and physicians of seventeenth-century Europe, observations and experimentation began to replace authoritative texts as the most important source of information about human anatomy and physiology. This trend is clearly illustrated in the work of William Harvey, who designed controlled experiments to measure blood flow. However, Harvey was not led to his revolutionary discovery of the circulation of the blood by experimentation alone, but was inspired by flashes of intuition and philosophical speculation.

In this introductory paragraph, the connection between Harvey and the rise of observation and experiment in the seventeenth century is clear. Moreover, the thesis statement reflects the author's conclusions and anticipates the argument that will follow; we can expect that in the course of the paper, the author will support her argument by discussing Harvey's experimental method, his philosophical speculations, his moments of intuition, and the role all three played in his theories about circulation.

Plan to rewrite your opening paragraph. Because the opening paragraph plays such a crucial role in the overall effectiveness of your paper, you should always plan on revising it several times. In addition, when the paper is complete, it is important to check each section against the introduction. Does each paragraph provide evidence for your thesis? Is it clear to your reader how each point relates to the topic you have established in your introduction? Knowing that you will have to rewrite your introduction can be reassuring if you are having trouble beginning your paper. Write a rough, temporary opening paragraph, and return to it when you finish your first draft of the entire paper. The act of writing your draft will help you clarify your ideas, your topic, and your thesis.

4e-2 Writing clear and connected paragraphs

In your introduction, you present your subject and state your thesis. In the body of your paper, you provide an argument for your thesis based on evidence from the sources you have been reading and answer any objections that could be raised. You should think of each paragraph as a building block in your argument that presents one specific point. If the point of each paragraph is not clear, the reader will not be able to follow your reasoning and your paper will be weak and unconvincing. (For more on constructing an argument, see 4d.) The following advice will help you write well-organized, cohesive, and persuasive paragraphs.

Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence. Each paragraph should have one driving idea that provides support for your paper's overall thesis. This idea is usually asserted in the *topic sentence*. If you have made an outline, your topic sentences will be drawn from your list of the main points

you wish to cover in your paper. (For advice on making an outline, see 5e.)

Provide support for the paragraph's main point. The topic sentence should be followed by *evidence* in the form of examples, quotations from the text(s), or statistics that support the main point of the paragraph. Make sure that you do not wander off the point. If you include irrelevant information, you will lose momentum and your readers will lose the thread of your argument. Instead, make sure you choose examples that provide clear and sufficient support for your main point. If you are using a direct quote as evidence, make sure you explain to the reader why you are including this quote by integrating it grammatically into your text and framing it in a way that shows how it supports your point. (For more information on how and when to quote, see 7a.)

Make clear connections between ideas. To be convincing, your evidence must be clear and well organized. Transitional words and phrases tell your readers how the individual statements in your paragraph are connected. To choose transitions that are appropriate, you will need to think about how your ideas are related. The following are some transitional words or phrases that indicate particular kinds of relationships:

- **To compare:** *also, similarly, likewise.*
- **To contrast:** *on the one hand/on the other hand, although, conversely, nevertheless, despite, on the contrary, still, yet, regardless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, whereas, however, in spite of.*
- **To add or intensify:** *also, in addition, moreover, further, too, besides, and.*
- **To show sequence:** *first (and any other ordinal number), last, next, finally, subsequently, later, ultimately.*
- **To indicate an example:** *for example, for instance, specifically.*
- **To indicate cause-and-effect relationships:** *consequently, as a result, because, accordingly, thus, since, therefore, so.*

Writing paragraphs: an example. The following is a paragraph from the first draft of a paper on Chinese relationships with foreigners during the Ming period:

INEFFECTIVE

The Chinese were willing to trade with barbarians. They distrusted foreigners. Jesuit missionaries were able to establish contacts in China. During the seventeenth century, they acquired the patronage of important officials. They were the emperor's advisers. Chinese women bound their feet, a practice that many Europeans disliked. Relations between China and Europe deteriorated in the eighteenth century. The Jesuits were willing to accommodate themselves to Chinese culture. Chinese culture was of great interest to the scholars of Enlightenment Europe. Matteo Ricci learned about Chinese culture and became fluent in Mandarin. He adopted the robes of a Chinese scholar. He thought that Christianity was compatible with Confucianism. The Jesuit missionaries had scientific knowledge.

Although each sentence is grammatically correct, this paragraph as a whole is very confusing. In the first place, it has no clear topic sentence; readers have to guess what the writer's main point is. This confusion is compounded by unclear connections between ideas; the paragraph lacks transitional words or phrases that alert readers to the connections that the writer sees between ideas or events. The paragraph is also poorly organized; the writer seems to move at random from topic to topic.

The following is a revised version of the same paragraph:

EFFECTIVE

The Chinese of the Ming dynasty were deeply suspicious of foreigners; nevertheless, Jesuit missionaries were able to achieve positions of honor and trust in the imperial court, ultimately serving the emperor as scholars and advisers. At first glance, this phenomenon seems baffling; upon closer consideration, however, it becomes clear that the Jesuits' success was due to their willingness to accommodate themselves to Chinese culture. For example, one of the most successful of the early Jesuit missionaries, Matteo Ricci, steeped himself in Chinese culture and became fluent in Mandarin. To win the respect of the nobles, he also adopted the robes of a Chinese scholar. Moreover, he emphasized the similarities between Christianity and Chinese traditions. Because of their willingness to adapt to Chinese culture, Jesuit missionaries were accepted by the imperial court until the eighteenth century.

This paragraph has been improved in several ways. First, a topic sentence (which is underlined) has been added to the beginning. Readers no longer need to guess that this paragraph will address the apparent contrast between sixteenth-century Chinese suspicion of foreigners and the imperial court's acceptance of Jesuit missionaries.

Second, the author has clarified the connections between ideas by including transitional words and phrases. These transitions (which are italicized) illustrate several different kinds of relationships—including contrast, cause and effect, and sequence—and allow readers to follow the writer's argument.

Third, the paragraph has been reorganized so that the relationships between events are clearer. For example, the revised paragraph states explicitly that the Jesuits' adaptation to Chinese customs was the key reason for the success of European missionaries during the Ming dynasty; this connection is obscured in the original paragraph by poor organization. Finally, the writer has removed references to foot binding and to European interest in China during the Enlightenment. Both are interesting but irrelevant in a paragraph that deals with Chinese attitudes toward Europeans.

4e-3 Writing an effective conclusion

Your paper should not come to an abrupt halt, yet you do not need to conclude by summarizing everything that you have said in the body of the text. An effective conclusion performs two vital functions. First, it brings the paper full circle by reminding the reader of the thesis and reiterating the *most important* points that were made in support of the thesis. Second, it answers the main question that your reader, having read the entire paper, will want to know: "Why is this important?" Thus, it is usually best to end your paper with a paragraph that states the most important conclusions you have reached about your subject and the reasons you think those conclusions are significant.

Note: A common pitfall for students is to end the paper with some new idea or fact. You should avoid introducing new ideas or information in the conclusion. If an idea or fact is important to your argument, you should introduce and discuss it earlier; if it is not, leave it out altogether.

The following is the first draft of the conclusion for the paper on Christian missionaries in China:

INEFFECTIVE

The Jesuit missionaries were sent to China in the Ming period. Some had good relationships with the emperor, but others didn't. Some learned Mandarin and dressed in court robes. The pope wouldn't let the Chinese worship their ancestors, but some Jesuits thought that Confucianism and Christianity were compatible. Another interesting aspect of Chinese culture at the time was the practice of footbinding.

This conclusion is ineffective for several reasons. First, there are no verbal clues to indicate that this is, in fact, the conclusion. In addition, it is too general and vague: Which missionaries had good relationships with the emperor, and which didn't? Moreover, while it lists some of the key elements of the paper, it fails to indicate how these ideas are connected. Most important, perhaps, this conclusion does not suggest why the various ideas presented in the paper are important; it fails, in other words, to answer the questions "So what? Why is this important?" Finally, a new topic is introduced in the last sentence.

In the revised version of the conclusion, these problems have been addressed:

EFFECTIVE

Thus, if we look at the experience of the Jesuits in China, it seems that their success or failure depended largely on the degree to which they were able to adapt to Chinese culture. The most successful missionaries learned Mandarin, adopted Chinese court dress, and looked for parallels between Christianity and the teachings of Confucius. It was only when the Church became more conservative—forbidding Chinese Christians, for example, to venerate their ancestors—that the Christian missionary effort in China began to fail. Ultimately, willingness to accept traditional Chinese culture and practices may have been a better way to gain converts than preaching complicated sermons.

This conclusion has been improved in several ways: It includes key transitional words (*thus*, *ultimately*) that indicate that the writer is drawing conclusions. It reiterates the important elements of the paper's argument

but leaves out information that is either very general ("the Jesuit missionaries were sent to China in the Ming period") or too vague ("some had good relationships with the emperor, but others didn't"). Moreover, unlike the earlier version, it is explicit about how the key topics in the paper—the flexibility of the Jesuit missionaries in adapting to Chinese culture, the parallels the missionaries drew between Christianity and Confucianism, and the institution of more conservative policies—are related. It does not add any new topics, however interesting those topics might be. And, most important, this version, unlike the first draft, clearly outlines the significance of the conclusions that the writer has reached: The Jesuit experience in China tells us something about the relationship between culture and religious belief.

4f Revising for content and organization

One of the biggest mistakes you can make with any writing assignment is to leave yourself too little time to revise and edit your work. A paper written the night before it is due is never of the highest caliber and usually bears the hallmarks of careless writing: sloppy mistakes in reasoning, awkward constructions, poor word choice, and lack of clear organization. To write an effective history paper, you *must* allow yourself time to review your paper, preferably at least twice: once to revise it for content and organization, and once to edit it for sentence style and grammatical correctness. (For advice on editing for style and grammar, see 4g.)

The word *revise* comes from the Latin *revisere*, which means "to look at again." When you revise a paper, you are, quite literally, looking at the paper again with critical eyes. To begin revising your paper, you need to read it critically, as if it were someone else's work. (For advice on critical reading, see 3a.) You should read for logic and clarity, making sure that your evidence is sufficient and that it supports your thesis. Be ruthless: Eliminate all extraneous material from the final draft, however interesting it may be. For instance, if you are writing about the role that Chinese laborers played in the westward expansion of the American railroads, do not spend three paragraphs discussing the construction of the steam locomotive. If your paper concerns the American government's treatment

Tips for Writers

Revising for Content and Organization

- Does the first paragraph introduce the subject of the paper and provide information about the texts, people, or problems under discussion?
- Does the paper have a real thesis that is *specific* and *debatable*? Is the thesis clearly stated in the first paragraph?
- Does the paper provide sufficient evidence to support the thesis? Has counterevidence been carefully considered and addressed?
- Is the paper's argument clear and logical? Has the evidence from sources been synthesized into a cohesive structure?
- Have historical subjects been treated with respect? Does the paper avoid generalizations, anachronisms, and bias in both its language and its assumptions?
- Does each paragraph address one specific point, stated clearly in a topic sentence, and does each point support the paper's central argument?
- Is each paragraph clearly and logically organized? Do transitional words and phrases signal relationships within and between paragraphs?
- Has any irrelevant or extraneous material been eliminated?
- Does the conclusion tie the paper together?
- Is the paper properly documented? (See 6b and Chapter 7.)

of Japanese citizens during World War II, do not digress into a discussion of naval tactics in the Pacific theater. You must be willing to rearrange the order of material, do additional research to support weak points in your argument, and even change your entire thesis, if necessary. Obviously, you need to allow plenty of time for this part of the writing process, which may involve several drafts of the paper. The questions in the Tips for Writers box above will help you revise the content of your own paper or write an effective peer review for a classmate.

4g Editing for style and grammar

Once you have finished revising your paper for matters of content and organization (see 4f), you are ready for editing, the final stage of the writing process, in which you focus on sentence style and grammatical correctness.

Although historians have long been just as concerned with proper grammar as English professors are, it is beyond the scope of this manual to cover the basic grammatical rules such as comma placement, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun usage. Grammar- and spell-check programs will help you avoid *some* mistakes, but they are no substitute for learning the rules. Also, a spell checker will not pick up words spelled correctly but used incorrectly or in the wrong context (for example, *Mink dynasty* instead of *Ming*). For advice on the basic rules of English grammar, you should buy, and use, a general writing guide. (See Appendix A for a list of guides.)

While you must follow grammatical rules, you *do* have some flexibility when it comes to style, or the way in which you write (simple vs. complex sentences, highly descriptive vs. stark wording). The way in which you express yourself and the words you choose are a reflection of your own style. Nevertheless, historians tend to follow certain conventions governing language, tense, and voice that you will want to keep in mind when you write and revise your history papers.

4g-1 Choosing appropriate language

Section 4b introduced you to some of the habits of mind that will help you think like a historian: you need to respect your subject, avoid generalization and anachronism, and be aware of your biases and assumptions. As you write and revise your paper, make sure that your writing demonstrates that you have adopted these good thinking practices.

Avoid value-laden words. Historians, as noted earlier in this chapter (see 4b), attempt to understand the people of the past in their own contexts rather than judge them by the norms of the present. If you use value-laden words such as *backward*, *primitive*, *uncivilized*, and *superstitious*, you are implying that your own period, culture, and perceptions are superior to those of the past. Passing judgment on the people of the past does not help us understand *what* they believed, *why* they believed it, or the social and cultural *context* in which they formed their beliefs.

Avoid biased language. Always take care to avoid words that are gender-biased or that have negative connotations for particular racial, ethnic, or religious groups. You

should never use expressions that are clearly derogatory. In addition, you should be aware that many words that were once acceptable are now deemed inappropriate. For example, the use of masculine words to refer to both men and women, once a common practice, is now viewed as sexist by many. Use *humankind* or *people* rather than *man-kind*, and do not use masculine pronouns when referring to people of both genders.

In an attempt to avoid sexist language, students sometimes make a grammatical error instead. For example, in trying to eliminate the masculine pronoun *his* in the sentence "Each individual reader should form *his* own opinion," a student may write, "Each individual reader should form *their* own opinion." The problem with this new version is that the pronoun *their* is plural, while the antecedent, *reader*, is singular. The first version of the sentence is undesirable because it sounds sexist, and the second is unacceptable because it is ungrammatical. A grammatically correct revision is "Individual readers should form their own opinions." In this sentence, the antecedent (*readers*) and the pronoun (*their*) are both plural.

Note that you cannot always rely on the books you are reading to alert you to biased language. In older publications, you may encounter previously common terms such as *Oriental* or *Negro* to refer to people, but these words are generally no longer used. Today, the preferred word for people of Asian heritage is *Asian*; people of African descent are generally called *black* or (for U.S. history) *African American*.

Note: You cannot correct the language of your sources. If you are quoting directly, you must use the exact wording of your source, including any racist or sexist language. If you are paraphrasing or summarizing a paragraph containing biased language, you might want to use unbiased language when it doesn't distort the sense of the source. Otherwise, put biased terms in quotation marks to indicate to your readers that the words are your source's and not yours.

Avoid conversational language, slang, and jargon. Because history papers are usually formal, you should use formal language rather than conversational language and slang. For example, although it is perfectly acceptable in conversational English to say that someone was a "major

player" in an event, this expression is too informal for a history paper. In addition, slang often sounds anachronistic: Historians do not usually describe diplomats who fail to negotiate a treaty as having "struck out." Similarly, historians describe ideas as archaic or outdated, not "so two minutes ago." Words with double meanings should be used only in their conventional sense; use *sweet* to refer to taste and *radical* to describe something extreme or on the political left. *Awesome* should generally be reserved for awe-inspiring things like the Taj Mahal. You should also avoid jargon, or specialized language, which can often obscure your meaning.

Finally, contractions (such as *wasn't* for "was not" and *won't* for "will not") are generally too informal for use in a history paper. Rather, you should use the expanded form.

Make your language as clear and simple as possible. If you hope to convince your reader that your thesis is valid, he or she has to be able to understand what you are trying to say. The following suggestions will help ensure that your writing doesn't include elements that obscure your meaning.

- **Don't overuse your thesaurus.** In an effort to sound sophisticated, students sometimes use a thesaurus to try to find impressive words. The danger of this approach is that a new word might not mean what you intended.
- **Avoid pretentious-sounding words and phrases.** Use the simplest word that makes your meaning clear. Do not use a four-syllable word when a single syllable will do. Do not use five words (such as *due to the fact that*) where you can use one (*because*).
- **Avoid generalities.** Labels such as *college graduates*, *the poor*, *the Maori*, and *Protestants* create the impression that all members of a group think and behave in *exactly* the same manner. In reality, groups are comprised of individuals, each of whom is different and acts independently. Be as precise as possible: don't say "women" agitated for the vote when you mean "English suffragettes."
- **Replace vague references with specifics.** The use of phrases such as *other factors*, *additional forces*, or *outside influences* leaves the reader without necessary information. What, exactly, are these

factors, forces, or influences? Vague references often disguise the writer's lack of information or clear thinking—a writer may use a phrase like *other factors* because he is not really sure what those factors are himself. Vague references not only obscure your meaning but can undermine your credibility.

- **Avoid unnecessarily wordy sentences.** Your writing will be more interesting if you use sentences of varying length; however, you should avoid overly long sentences with several dependent clauses. Your reader should not become so entangled in the sentence that she can no longer remember what the subject was by the time she reaches the verb! Try reading your sentences out loud; it is sometimes easier to hear sentences that are too long or confusing than to recognize them in print.

4g-2 Choosing the appropriate tense

The events that historians write about took place in the past; therefore, you should use the past tense when writing a history paper. Students are sometimes tempted to use the historical present tense for dramatic effect, as in this example from a student paper:

INEFFECTIVE

The battle rages all around him, but the squire is brave and acquires himself well. He defends his lord fearlessly and kills two of the enemy. As the fighting ends, he kneels before his lord on the battlefield, the bodies of the dead and dying all around him. His lord draws his sword and taps it against the squire's shoulders. The squire has proven his worth, and this is his reward; he is now a knight.

This use of the present tense may be an effective device if you are writing fiction, but it is awkward in a history paper. First, readers might become confused about whether the events under discussion happened in the past or in the present, especially if the paper includes modern assessments of the issue. Second, use of the present makes it easy for the writer to fall prey to anachronism (see 4b). Perhaps more important, writing in the present sounds artificial; in normal conversation, we talk about events that happened in the past in the past tense. The same approach is also best for writing.

Do use the present tense, however, when discussing the contents of documents, artifacts, or works of art because these still exist. Note, for example, the appropriate use of past and present tenses in the following description:

EFFECTIVE

Columbus sailed across an "ocean sea" far greater than he initially imagined. The admiral's *Journal* tells us what Columbus thought he would find: a shorter expanse of water, peppered with hundreds of hospitable islands.

The events of the past are referred to in the past tense (*sailed, imagined, thought*), and the contents of the *Journal* are referred to in the present (*tells*).

Historians also use the present tense when they are referring to the work of other scholars. Note, for example, this sentence from the annotated bibliography entry in Chapter 3: "Fletcher . . . argues that . . . Christians and Muslims did not achieve any real measure of mutual understanding in the period under discussion."

4g-3 Using active voice

In the *active voice*, the subject of the sentence is the actor. In the *passive voice*, the subject of the sentence is the object of the action; a passive sentence avoids naming an actor. In addition to making writing sound dull and unnecessarily wordy, the passive voice can lead to writing that is confusing, vague, and unassertive—characteristics that you will want to avoid in your history papers.

Prefer the active voice. As noted in Chapter 1, historians are like detectives; they try to answer questions like *Who? What? Where? and When?* Using the passive voice can obscure this information. Consider the following excerpt from a student essay:

PASSIVE VOICE

In 1521, Tenochtitlan was invaded and the Aztecs were defeated.

Because he uses the passive voice here, the writer omits a vital piece of information: *who* invaded Tenochtitlan and defeated the Aztecs?

In addition, the passive voice sometimes hides fuzzy thinking and allows writers to be vague about the

connections between people, events, and ideas. Note what happens, for instance, when the writer of the previous example uses the active voice:

ACTIVE VOICE

In 1521, the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his army, supported by native allies like the Tlaxcalans, lay siege to the city of Tenochtitlan. Three months later, the hardships of the siege and the devastation caused by a smallpox epidemic forced the Aztec ruler, Cuauhtemoc, to surrender.

Because he is using the active voice here, the writer must identify the actors (Cortés, his army, and his native allies). Moreover, using the active voice also forces him to consider the complexity of the historical reality: The “invasion” of Tenochtitlan was really a three-month siege, and the defeat of the Aztecs was the result of the combined efforts of Cortés’s army and native allies, the devastating effects of a long siege, and the impact of a new and virulent disease. Using the active voice thus requires the writer to provide more—and more specific—information.

In addition, the passive voice makes the writer sound hesitant. For example, the expression “it can be argued that” suggests that the writer is unwilling to take responsibility for his or her arguments. If your evidence leads you to a certain conclusion, state it clearly. Similarly, the expression “it has been argued that” can confuse readers: Who has made this argument? How many people and in what context? Readers must have this information to evaluate the argument. Moreover, use of the passive voice can result in plagiarism. If one or more persons have argued a particular point, you should identify them in the text and provide a citation.

Use the passive voice in special situations. While historians almost always prefer the active voice, there are some special circumstances in which the passive voice is useful. Consider the following description of the Holocaust (verbs in the passive voice have been italicized):

Hitler engaged in the ruthless oppression and systematic murder of the Jewish people. In 1933, Jews *were forbidden* to hold public office; by 1935, they *were deprived* of citizenship. In all, over six million Jews *were killed* as part of Hitler’s “final solution.”

In this passage, the writer wants to draw the reader’s attention to the recipients of the action—the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. The persons acted on are more important than the actor. The passive voice, which focuses attention on the victims, is therefore appropriate. The passive voice, then, can be effective, but it should be used only occasionally and for a specific reason.

4g-4 Knowing when to use the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *you*

Although you may occasionally see the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *you* in history books and journal articles, most professional historians use these pronouns sparingly, or not at all, and most history instructors prefer students to avoid them whenever possible. However, a number of professors find their use not only acceptable but actually preferable to more labored constructions like “this evidence leads one to conclude that.” Since the conventions governing the use of personal pronouns are in flux, it is best to consult your instructor about his or her preference. In any case, it is important to be consistent; if you use personal pronouns in the first paragraph (“My argument is based on the evidence of several primary sources”), don’t switch to an impersonal construction in the second (“On the basis of the evidence, one might argue that . . .”).