

THE FOUR BASIC STEPS OF WRITING PAPERS

1. **Get to know your sources.** Historians use their sources to lead them to their thesis. Start with asking some basic questions, and use source materials to answer them. Read your sources carefully. Take extensive notes. Read primary texts critically, identifying authorship, audience and context. Determine your unanswered questions, and what evidence you need to gather to answer them.

2. **Formulate your thesis.** A thesis (or main argument) in a history paper can address a specific debate or a specific question. It should not be a restatement of general fact (like, “the Great Depression was the greatest American economic crisis of the twentieth century”) but should engage an issue that is more pointed and subject to debate (such as, “although Herbert Hoover was voted out of office for appearing to do little to alleviate the Great Depression, the policies he put in motion deserve a good deal of credit for lessening the national economic crisis”). A thesis should be specific, compelling, and original.

3. **Organize.** Write up an outline of the essay. Determine how your evidence will support your thesis. Use the outlining process to refine your topic, if necessary. Often, we may start out with a thesis that is too broad or too difficult to prove. Outlining and organizing can help you home in on a sharper, more original argument.

4. **Draft and redraft.** The hardest part of writing papers can be putting words on a blank page (or computer screen). Sit down with your notes and your outline, and start writing. Recognize that this is a first draft. As you write, determine what works, and what doesn't. Don't be afraid to cut things out (you can save them elsewhere, just in case). Solicit feedback from others, if you have time. Redraft and submit. The finished paper should follow the basic structure of: 1) several introductory paragraphs that state your thesis and its significance, 2) a body that uses examples from the source materials to illustrate support for your argument, and 3) a concluding paragraph that summarizes the thesis and its broader relevance.

STYLE AND GRAMMAR

Your thesis can be strong, your argument solid, but grammatical and style errors can detract from the effectiveness of your paper. Always give yourself enough time to proofread your papers carefully. Better yet, ask someone else to read it over for you. A second set of eyes can catch mistakes that you might miss. Some things to keep in mind:

Get to the point. It can be tempting to use sweeping, vague statements, especially in the opening and closing paragraphs of your paper. “The United States experienced huge cultural, economic, and political changes from 1877 to the present” states the obvious, and doesn't tell readers what the paper will be about. State your thesis early, clearly, and precisely.

Avoid “twenty-dollar words.” Write something that you'd enjoy reading, and don't put a word in a paper that you would never say in normal conversation. Make sure you understand the meaning of any

word you are using in a paper. Use online versions of major dictionaries, like <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. Read a paper out loud to see whether sentences are complete, whether they run on too long, or whether better terminology can be used to express what you mean.

No additives, no fillers. When it comes to papers, quantity does not always mean quality; I would rather see a paper come slightly under the page limit rather than have to read an extra half-page where little of substance is said. That being said, page counts are there for a reason; they indicate the length I consider necessary to properly explore the topic at hand. Spell check, grammar check, and then do both again. Don't rely entirely on Microsoft Word to do your copy editing.

DOCUMENTATION/CITATION

Any direct quote or paraphrase from a source must be cited. Footnotes, endnotes, parenthetical documentation should adhere to one of the widely accepted styles of citation (Chicago and MLA are the most appropriate for a history paper). The UW Library has a short Chicago style guide available online at <http://www.lib.washington.edu/help/guides/45chicago.pdf>. Consult style guides for specific guidance and answers to citation questions. I strongly recommend that you purchase a style manual for use in all your paper-writing; many copies are in the library, but it is good to have your own on hand and used copies are widely available. Some basic rules:

- If you are writing a paper that relies mostly on class readings, you may use parenthetical documentation, for example:
 - “Despite the systematic disenfranchisement of black voters after Reconstruction in the South, there remained some evidence of ‘the persisting vitality of black grassroots electoral activity’ (Hahn 410).”
 - “The Cold War military-industrial complex helped determine where the modern high-tech industry grew in the United States (O’Mara).”
- If you are writing a research paper that brings in primary and secondary sources from within and outside of the course reading list, use numbered footnotes (no Roman numerals, please):
 - “As Lisa McGirr has shown, the housewives of Orange County became key players in the growing conservative movement as they rallied around Barry Goldwater’s candidacy for president.”¹
 - “‘More fundamental correctives are needed to curb financiers’ appetite for walking a tightrope,’ the *New York Times* editorial page wrote, as the credit crisis of 2008 deepened.”²
- Always put a citation after the end of a direct quote or a statement about a particular author’s opinion or analysis. Otherwise, keep citations to the end of a paragraph. Avoid multiple uses of “*ibid.*” if possible; when citing one source repeatedly in a paragraph, place citation at the end.

CAPITALIZATION

¹ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Rise of the American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

² “Socialized Compensation,” editorial, *New York Times*, 21 March 2008, p A28.

- Capitalize when you are referring to a specific person or organization, or ethnic group
 - Democratic Party, Republican Party, Reform Party, Green Party
 - Japanese American, Asian American, African American, Native American
 - President Harry S Truman, President George W. Bush
 - Congress, Senate
 - Great Depression
- Don't capitalize when you are referring to a general occupation or office, a class of people, or a political modifier that does not refer to a particular party
 - running for president
 - women and men
 - democratic government (not government led by a Democrat, but a government run as a democracy)
 - military-industrial complex
 - civil rights struggle; civil rights leader
 - suburbanite
 - the working class, working-class voter
 - recession

ABBREVIATION

- On first mention, write out the entire name of an entity, followed by its common abbreviation in parentheses: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); University of Washington (UW). Further mentions can just use the acronym: HHS, UW.
- Don't refer to presidents by their initials, even if that is common colloquial usage. Franklin Roosevelt, or Roosevelt, not FDR. John Kennedy, or Kennedy, not JFK.

WHAT MAKES A "GOOD" PAPER?

Before you submit this paper, consider how well it meets the following criteria, which are the factors on which we will base your grade.

1. **Substantive heft:** The paper has a clear and precise thesis. Its claims are valid and are substantiated through careful use of evidence from reliable and relevant sources. Its opinions are supported by facts and by *specific* examples.
2. **Strength of analysis:** The paper tells the reader not only the "what" but the "so what." It contains more than a descriptive recap but it explains the significance of the facts presented, and it considers their broader relevance to the time and place under study.
3. **Clarity of organization:** The paper follows the basic structure outlined above (thesis-elaboration of thesis-restatement of thesis and broader significance). There is a clearly understandable progression from one point to another in the body of the paper.

4. **Quality of style:** The paper is clearly written, without run-on sentences or sentence fragments. It is free of grammatical errors and is properly cited. It reads smoothly and uses its prose to clearly and vividly convey the main arguments. It conveys the writer's excitement about the subject and convinces the reader of the subject's significance.