

The Ten Essentials of Good History Writing

Are you taking your first history class at Northwestern and struggling to write that 4-6 page argumentative essay that your professor just assigned you? Or maybe you are a seasoned history major and just need a refresher on how to write an extended research paper? Don't fret—anyone can learn the essentials of good history writing. I've collected the wisdom of four Northwestern history professors (Ed Muir, Brodwyn Fischer, Amy Stanley, and Daniel Immerwahr) and a history PhD student (Joel Penning).¹ I've synthesized their wisdom into the following ten essentials of good history writing.

The Big Picture Stuff:

- 1) **Argument!** Though essential to most academic writing, good history writing always contains a strong argument. According to professor Muir, history writing isn't about coming up with an opinion; instead, "what matters is proving a provable thesis." An argument isn't an argument unless you can disagree with it. Professor Fischer adds, "In the best papers, the argument will also be creative, and make me think about the material in a new way." Oftentimes students try to be overly comprehensive in their response to a prompt. Their argument may be a list of historically true things, but a "list is not an argument," says professor Stanley. A prompt may ask you to discuss why the colonists rebelled against Britain in the 1770s. You should not say, "The colonists rebelled against Britain in the 1770s because they favored republican government, did not like Britain's taxation policies, and were outraged at oppressive events like the Boston Massacre." While most historians consider these three items true, this statement is not a sufficient historical argument because it does not explain how these three items relate to one another. Joel Penning, a grad student in history, says, "don't be afraid to go out on a limb." It's better to say something with which many people will disagree than something that does not really capture anyone's attention.
- 2) **Counter-arguments.** A good argumentative history paper must address counter-arguments. According to professor Immerwahr, "The claim that *X happened* is rarely interesting. By contrast, *X happened, when we might have expected Y to happen*, is rarely not interesting."
- 3) **Evidence.** Because good history writing makes an argument, you must have relevant evidence to back up your argument. Penning puts it well in saying that "every paragraph must contain both assertions and evidence which supports them. A paragraph with only assertions is bad scholarship. A paragraph with only evidence is boring." Referencing good evidence does not mean that you should write about every fact relating to your topic; instead, only use the evidence that supports your argument. Immerwahr goes even further and says that the evidence must provide an "intellectual pathway that the reader must follow to be convinced of the thesis." Thus, the formula is not *argument+supporting evidence=good history writing*. Each piece of evidence should ideally relate to what comes before and what comes next.

¹ The following quotations from email messages from these scholars; December 11, 2012.

- 4) Avoid generalizations. Penning puts it well: “For the most part, historians don't care about whether dictatorship always leads to corruption, or if government intervention helps or hinders the economy. So students writing papers for historians shouldn't care either. Comparison is becoming an increasingly important part of the discipline, but generally historians are interested in specific cases. Do talk about whether Mussolini's dictatorship led to corruption, or how much the New Deal helped or hurt Depression-era America. For almost anything you write at Northwestern, you won't have the evidence to say anything broader than that, whether it's true or not. If you want to talk about universal rules of dictatorship, you'd probably like political science or sociology better.”
- 5) Conclude well. In a history paper, your last paragraph should just restate your argument and your evidence, albeit in a different way, right? Wrong. Writing a solid conclusion may be the most overlooked aspect of good history writing. Professor Stanley suggests, “use your conclusion to make one final, elegant point, or point out an irony, or direct the reader to look at the implications of your argument for the next historical period, or suggest some additional avenues for exploration.” Summary isn't bad, of course, but provide your reader with something interesting to leave him or her feeling good about your paper!

The More Nitty-gritty Stuff:

- 6) No passive voice! Along with having a good argument, any history professor will tell you not to use the passive voice in your history writing. Using the active voice is a good practice in general in your writing, but history seeks to be precise with agency—that is, it seeks to discover what happened and who did it. The passive voice often overlooks this precision. Take, for example, the following sentence written in passive voice: “President Bob was killed on Tuesday.” This sentence says nothing about who killed Bob, which may be essential to your historical argument. The following sentence in active voice reveals more information: “Senator Joe killed President Bob on Tuesday.” In editing your history paper, keep a close look out for passive verbs.
- 7) Avoid excessive use of “to be” verbs. Do you find yourself using “was” and “were” too much in your history paper? There's nothing grammatically wrong with using these past tense forms of “to be,” but your writing may be weak if you do. Instead, use stronger verbs that more descriptively capture what you are trying to say. You could say, “In Boston in 1776, the colonists were angry with British taxation policy.” It's better to say, “In Boston in 1776, the colonists revolted against British taxation policy.” “Revolted” is stronger and describes more accurately what happened than “were angry.”
- 8) Past tense. This should be self-explanatory. In your history paper, your task is to talk about something that happened in the past, so talk about it as if it happened in the past.
- 9) Wordiness. Have you ever struggled to reach those 6 pages and make up for it by repeating some phrases and adding unnecessary words to make your sentences a little bit longer? History professors know the temptation, and you won't fool them. Professor Stanley warns, “If you find yourself adding words because you're worried about making the minimum, that's a bad sign. You need a new idea to add to your analysis; you don't

need wordier or repetitive sentences.” Instead of saying, “At the end of the eighteenth century, the people who identified themselves as colonists sought to rebel against the British rule of government in 1776,” say, “The colonists rebelled against the British in 1776.”

- 10) Write out what century you referring to. This last history essential may seem small, but not incorporating it into your writing won't make a good impression on your professor or TA. Always write out the century. Don't say “the 18th century.” Instead say, “the eighteenth century.” Moreover use the following grammatical convention when you want to talk about the early, mid, or late part of a century: “the mid-eighteenth century” or “the late-eighteenth century.”

With practice, you can incorporate these ten essentials of good history writing into your own writing. In the meantime, review the following writing excerpt and see if you can diagnose the mistakes it is making:

Sample Excerpt: Suburban Development

Suburbs were established extensively in the United States in the 20th century. Suburban expansion was result of rich people wanting to move away from inner cities for new work opportunities, the development of rail lines, the automobile, and new jobs away from inner cities. Suburbs now make up a large part of metropolitan areas.

In the early 1900s, rich people who previously lived in inner cities sought out to move to the suburbs because they thought through the ramifications of potentially losing their jobs if they stayed in the inner cities. Paul Johnson said, “I think it's really fascinating that in 1925 people moved from downtown Chicago to new suburbs like Naperville and Wilmette.”² In addition, “the automobile clearly helped people who had previously lived in inner cities commute to work everyday from their suburban homes.”³ Cars were manufactured and driven very often from suburbs to the cities. One can assume from all of this that economic decisions and transportation opportunities helped people move to the suburbs.

In conclusion, the suburb was the development of several factors. There were rich people wanting to move away from the city, new railroads were constructed that extended into the outer periphery of the city in places that we now can suburbs, automobile production was

*Note: This text and its corrected version are not meant to convey historically true information.

² www.goodhistorysources.com.

³ Francis Williams, *The Rise of the Suburb: 1870-1910*, (New York: History Publishing, Inc., 2008), 6.

greatly expanded, and new jobs rose up in cities for these rich people. It is clear that suburbs have led to the democratization of the United States.

Excerpt with Commentary (in Green)

Suburbs were established extensively in the United States in the 20th century. (Passive voice. “Were established” is passive. Hypothetically, this sentence could say, “Business and government leaders established...” In addition, “20th century” should be twentieth century.) Suburban expansion was result of rich people wanting to move away from inner cities for new work opportunities, the development of rail lines, the automobile, and new jobs away from inner cities. (Argumentation. This sentence, intended to be the thesis statement, merely lists a variety of factors that led to the rise of suburbs; it does not contain a coherent argument. A revised thesis statement could be the following: “New economic opportunities in city peripheries, coupled with new transportation developments, sparked the growth of suburbs.”) Suburbs now make up a large part of metropolitan areas. (Argumentation. This sentence is slightly out of place; if it were intended to be the argument, it would not suffice as you can’t really argue with it.)

In the early 1900s, rich people who previously lived in inner cities sought out to move to the suburbs because they thought through the ramifications of potentially losing their jobs if they stayed in the inner cities. (Wordiness. This sentence is too wordy; here is a more condensed version: “In the early 1900s, wealthy people moved to suburbs because they feared losing their jobs in the inner cities.”) Paul Johnson said, “I think it’s really fascinating that in 1925 people moved from downtown Chicago to new suburbs like Naperville and Wilmette.” (Evidence. Who is Paul Johnson, and how does this quote relate to the overall point?) In addition, “the automobile clearly helped people who had previously lived in inner cities commute to work everyday from their suburban homes.” (Evidence. This quote seems to introduce a new idea—one about automobiles—that seems out of place; also, it’s not clear if this quote comes from a different source.) Cars were manufactured and driven very often from suburbs to the cities. (Passive Voice. Here’s a corrected version: “Companies such as Ford and Oldsmobile manufactured cars, and suburban dwellers drove these cars very often.”) One can assume from all of this that economic decisions and transportation opportunities help people move to the suburbs. (Past tense. This sentences breaks out of the past tense.)

In conclusion, the rise of the suburb was the development of several factors. (Past tense of “to be.” Pick a stronger verb than “was” that is more descriptive.) There were rich people wanting to move away from the city, new railroads were constructed that extended into the outer periphery of the city in places that we now can suburbs, automobile production was greatly expanded, and new jobs rose up in cities for these rich people. (Conclusion. This conclusion merely restates the introduction paragraph; in addition, the passive voice appears several times.) It is clear that suburbs have led to the democratization of the United States. (Generalization.) (Counter-argument: In general, this excerpt did not address any counter-arguments, thus weakening its already weak argument.)

