

## Guide to Writing in the Discipline, History 102W

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Half a century ago, the British historian E.H. Carr noted that “to write history is the only way of making it.”<sup>1</sup> What he meant was that history does not simply exist “out there” waiting to be discovered. The historian is not a treasure hunter searching through the vast sands of the past hoping to stumble across the trove of facts that will reveal “how things really were.”<sup>2</sup> If the past is a sandy beach, then the historian is the sort of beachcomber who understands that the truth about the beach does not lie in the mythical treasure chest, but in the effort to make sense of what he or she does find – the pebbles, the shells, the bits of seaweed, the cigarette butts, the crab legs, the seagulls, and the variety of grains of sands themselves. Historians, like beachcombers, cannot take everything into account when faced with the infinite volume and variety of potential evidence stretching out before them. They must make decisions, decisions about what evidence to keep and what to discard; about what to emphasize and what to downplay in their effort to present a convincing and enlightening account of the past. Writing history is based on making those decisions because without them, there is no history. There is only an incoherent mass of material relating to the past.

The job of the historian is to make sense of past events, lives, developments, and trends through the interpretation of evidence. But even the most seemingly straight-forward event has a potentially vast number of facts that could be considered relevant to understanding that event and a potentially limitless amount of evidence that could be brought to bear on the topic. Take, for example, the arrest of the British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst in 1908. The range of information potentially relevant to understanding this event is enormous. The historian might first want to learn everything about the arrest itself: When and where did it happen? Who arrested her? What was Pankhurst doing at the time? Where was she taken? What were the charges against her? What else was going on in London at the time? Or even, what was the weather like? He or she might consult contemporary newspapers (domestic and foreign), court records, police records, letters, and journals to find answers.

But such a detailed journalistic account of the event would only answer the question “*What* happened?” It offers no answer to the more significant problem of *Why*? To answer this question, the historian would want to understand the state of British law on suffrage in general and specifically the status of legislation on

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> This famous definition of history comes from the nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke.

women's suffrage. He or she would need to understand the history of public demonstrations in Britain and the history of women's participation in public demonstrations in particular; current and past understandings of women's political status, and the history of the British women's suffrage struggle. And what about the life of Emmeline Pankhurst? What biographical elements contributed to her becoming a leader in the suffrage movement? How did the politically active Pankhurst family shape her career? What role did class status play in shaping Emmeline's views of women's suffrage? And then there's the whole history of women's relationship to the criminal justice system and the history of changing ideas of acceptable feminine behavior. The list could go on and on, with each new question generating a new list of possible evidence.

Historians are ultimately all faced with the challenge of deciding which story or stories they want to tell from among the many possible stories about the past that they could tell. What we call "history" – the history that appears in articles, textbooks, scholarly monographs, and popular history books -- is the result of historians making choices about evidence, argument, narrative structure, and writing style. The quality of historical writing depends first and foremost on whether or not the historian-author can convince the reader that the choices he or she made are valid. Writing history is more than just amassing facts about the past; it is more than crafting grammatically correct and factually accurate sentences, and it is more than telling a plausible or entertaining tale about the past. Writing good history is making a convincing case for a particular interpretation of the past. In a very real sense, then, writing history is creating history.

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## **Types of Historical Writing**

### **Scholarly articles based on primary research:**

Articles based on primary research are in many ways the bread and butter of scholarly historical writing. Because full-length monographs can take many years to write and produce, academic historians often publish the results of their new research in article form long before they publish a book on the subject. Most academic historians aim to publish articles in scholarly journals such as the [American Historical Review](#), which features essays on all geographic regions and time periods, or in one of the innumerable more specialized journals. Articles are usually written for an audience of other professional historians and for students of history.

Articles based on primary research must have a claim to originality. That claim might arise from the discovery of a new source or sources (for example, a long lost diary written by a victim of the Holocaust or a heretofore unknown exchange of

letters between two diplomats) or the claim may arise from a new interpretation of sources that are already known. For example, an historian might write an original article about Napoleon's foreign policy based on published primary sources that have been used by other historians. In all cases, the historian aims to demonstrate that new sources or a new interpretation of old sources adds something important to our understanding of a subject or suggests new answers to old historical questions.

There are a number of steps involved in writing a scholarly article based on primary research. For professional historians and graduate students, some of these steps can take weeks or months to complete. In this class, the time frame will be greatly compressed and the depth of research will necessarily be shallower, but the process will be more or less the same.

**1. Choosing a topic:** Start by choosing a general subject that interests you – for example, women in the First World War. Find a book, article, or essay on the general topic (often the topic appears in one of the course books) and work to narrow the topic. Ask yourself, what in particular interests you about the subject? What would you like to learn more about? After reading, you might, for example, decide that you want to learn more about women's food protests during the war, or about women's factory work. Eventually, you will have to narrow the topic even further either by geography or by date. The precise topic you end up with will be based not only on your interest, but on the availability of relevant and accessible primary and secondary sources. Note that for some topics in European history, it will be difficult to find primary (or sometimes even secondary) sources in English. If you have foreign language skills, use them!

**2. Formulating research questions:** Once you have narrowed your topic, you need to formulate preliminary research questions. Research questions form the foundation for your thesis or argument. They also provide direction for your research. Bear in mind that your research questions will almost always evolve over the course of your research as you learn more about your subject and more about the kinds of questions that other historians have posed. Do not become overly attached to your initial questions. Your final research questions should reflect the knowledge you have gained during the research process and build on – rather than repeat—the work of other historians.

Let us suppose that you have decided to focus on women's factory work in Germany during the First World War. You have already read an article or two about the general subject. Some possible initial research questions might be: What types of industries hired women in large numbers and for what kinds of jobs were they hired? What social, political, cultural, and economic forces encouraged women to enter the factories? What forces dissuaded them? As you do more research, your questions will become more focussed. For example, you may end up asking – How can we explain the vast discrepancy in rates of women's factory work in different regions of Germany or at different points in the war? Or, how can we explain the Socialist Party's ambivalent response to women's entry into wartime industry?

It is a good idea to keep a written record of your changing research questions.

**3. Finding secondary sources:** This is an ongoing process throughout your research effort. Start with more general books and articles and work your way to more narrowly focused works. It is essential that you choose your secondary sources carefully, especially since in this class you will only be using a limited number of sources.

-- While encyclopedias (including Wikipedia), almanacs, directories and other general reference works can be useful in establishing basic facts about a topic (dates, population figures, etc.), they are not substitutes for original works of historical scholarship that present arguments and evidence.

---DO NOT simply Google a few key words and choose the first titles that pop up.

--- Find out who the most authoritative historians on the subject are. One way to do this is to look through the footnotes of relevant articles in historical journals. The most important scholars writing on the topic will appear and reappear in the footnotes. They will often be mentioned in the text as well.

---Choose articles from respected historical journals rather than popular magazines. You can get access to hundreds of scholarly journals through the Gelman Library website.

--- Essays published in collections can often be good sources. Unfortunately, volumes of collected essays are catalogued by title and editor's name, not by the name of the author of the individual essay.

--- Try to find works published within the last ten or fifteen years. This may not always be possible, and sometimes the most important secondary work on the subject is much older, but in general, more recent work will give you a better sense of what historians are thinking about your topic today.

--- As your thinking about your topic evolves, you will probably find that you need to find additional secondary sources. Don't constrain your thinking because of the secondary sources you have already picked. It's easy to find new ones.

**3. Analyzing secondary sources:** Secondary sources serve two main purposes in the research process. First, they provide factual information about your topic and historical context for your primary research. Second, they make arguments based on evidence, arguments that you must consider when formulating your own thesis. It is essential that when you read your secondary sources that you make note not just of the relevant factual information provided, but also of the argument or arguments that the writer is making. If, for example, an historian has written an

article about women munitions workers in Berlin, you need to take note not just of the facts presented (how many women, what they did, when they worked, etc.), but also of the broader point(s) the historian is making. Evaluate the argument presented in the article. Is it convincing? Why or why not? How does the author make use of primary sources? Secondary sources? How does the argument compare to other arguments you have encountered on the subject?

You should formulate your own argument or thesis bearing the arguments of other historians in mind. You do not have to agree with the arguments (in fact, many articles are premised on proving that someone else's thesis is wrong), but you should acknowledge that other arguments have been made and that you are not the first one to have investigated this topic.

**4. Finding primary sources:** The process of identifying and retrieving primary sources is both the most exciting and most time consuming part of the research process. It is in the hunt for primary materials that historians stumble across documents that they had never even known existed before, often while they were searching for something completely different. Historian and MacArthur Fellow Laurel Thatcher Ulrich accidentally came across the diary of an early 18<sup>th</sup> century Maine midwife named Martha Ballard in a local archive. Based on that source, she wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning book *A Midwife's Tale*.<sup>3</sup> Keep an open mind when you search for primary sources. If you find something really exciting, then adjust your topic so you can use it.

In the last couple of decades, the internet has given historians easy access to an enormous variety of primary sources. Many archives have digitalized some of their holdings and many libraries have put newspapers, books, pamphlets, and other materials on line. Through Gelman Library, you can get access to the Historical *New York Times* and *Washington Post* as well as the complete British Parliamentary Papers, among many other sources. Institutions such as the Holocaust Museum have put many important documents on-line. For those who read foreign languages, many European libraries have digitalized significant portions of their collections. There are also websites dedicated to providing students with access to primary documents. Modern History Sourcebook, from Fordham University, is one such site, but there are many others.

Although the internet can be extremely useful for locating primary sources, you may sometimes have better results going to Gelman and Consortium catalogues and finding published volumes of primary sources. In some cases, this will be the only way to find primary sources that have been translated into English from foreign languages (although some websites aimed at students, like Modern History

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<sup>3</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: Knopf, 1990).

Sourcebook, also provide translations). Don't overlook the vast resources at the Library of Congress or the National Library of Medicine or through interlibrary loan.

### **5. Analyzing primary sources:**

Because primary sources provide the main evidence for your argument, perceptive and detailed analysis of those sources is the key to writing a convincing essay or article. The process of analysis should include answers to as many of the following questions as possible, even if you do not ultimately include all of this material in your article.

First, you should establish the historical context of the source:

- Who is author of document/source? If the specific author is unknown, what group, organization produced the document?
- What do we know about the author/group/organization/agency, etc. that produced the document? What information might be relevant to understanding the source (e.g. political affiliation or orientation, ethnic, religious, or gender identity).
- Why did the author/group produce document?
- What broader historical circumstances help explain why the document was produced?

The heart of your analysis should be a close reading of the document content:

- In general, what is the author of the document attempting to do?
- What specific historical insights can we gain from a careful examination of the source? (Quote/cite specific examples from the source).
- What problems, ambiguities, uncertainties does the source present?
- Are there terms used that are potentially misleading?
- Are terms used that might have had a different meaning in their historical context? (For example, in earlier centuries "orphan" often referred to a child who had lost only one parent, usually the father.)

Finally, ask yourself what historical argument(s) might the document help support?

**6. Structuring your article:** History articles and essays can adopt different formats. Although all have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, the elements included in each can vary depending on what you decide is the best format for

presenting your argument and evidence in a convincing manner. Below are some possibilities. Look at a variety of different types of historical articles to get other ideas.

**Introduction:** Open by catching your reader's attention. Some writers choose to describe, in brief, a dramatic anecdote related to the topic. For example, for an article on conflict during the industrial revolution: "On July 16, 1852, Pierre Rameau was found dead, slumped over his weaving loom in Nancy, France." Others strive for a bold or surprising statement that raises the reader's eyebrows. For example, for an article proposing a revision to common interpretations of the French Revolution: "The French Revolution was not a revolution at all." Avoid banal or obvious openings such as "Women played an important role in the industrial revolution." This will pique no one's interest.

Describe the historical problem or questions that demand answers. This discussion should be based on your research questions.

State your thesis/argument that answers your question. Outline how you will demonstrate the thesis. Alternatively, you might end your introduction with your problem and/or questions, allowing the thesis to emerge in the ensuing pages. You can then state your thesis (triumphantly!) after you have presented your evidence.'

Your introduction can be more than a paragraph long.

**Body of essay:** After the introduction, many articles launch into an overview of important arguments that have been made by other historians on the subject (see analysis of secondary sources above). In some cases, other historians may have already proposed answers to the same research questions that you are posing. You should describe those arguments in your paper. Obviously, for a class assignment for which you have a short research clock, you may not be able to find all such relevant secondary works. Nonetheless, it is important to know and articulate what the lay of the historical land look like. If the point of your essay is that it challenges other historians' arguments or that other accounts of the subject have been inadequate in some way, then this section may be several pages long. If your emphasis is on your analysis of primary sources that reinforces or at least does not challenge other arguments, then this section may be briefer.

Present the insights you have gained from the primary sources. This can be a separate section of your essay or it can be integrated into the discussion of secondary sources discussed in the paragraph above.

Every paragraph of the body of the essay should be clearly linked to your thesis. Remember, you are presenting evidence to make a convincing case for your interpretation of the past.

**Conclusion:** Your conclusion should state clearly how your evidence proves your thesis. Avoid the tedious constructions: In this essay I have shown that.... I have used my sources to prove that.... Find a more graceful way to drive home the point that your interpretation is right. Some historians save their argument for the conclusion, building their case throughout the essay in much the same way that a mystery writer builds toward a final dramatic solution to the crime. Most historical problems, however, don't lend themselves easily to this novelistic structure. Still, strive to make your conclusion intriguing or provocative in and of itself and not just a rehash of what you have just rewritten. You might, for example, note the broader implications of your thesis or pose further questions that your essay suggests or other avenues of research that might be pursued to cast more light on the problem you have discussed.

### **Scholarly articles based on secondary sources:**

Articles based on secondary sources offer new arguments about a topic using the work of other scholars. New arguments may be based on synthesizing the research of others in a way that poses new research questions or that offers new answers to old research questions. One common approach is to draw a new, general conclusion from a number of detailed local studies. Other arguments may center on a critique of the works of others, pointing out how new research undermines broadly accepted understandings of a subject. For example, several decades ago, a debate raged among historians about whether the standard of living among English workers rose or fell as a result of industrialization. Many articles appeared that used other historians' primary source based studies to try to prove one side of the argument or the other.

Occasionally historians write articles that use secondary sources to propose new theoretical frameworks for understanding historical developments. For example, Joan Scott's 1986 article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," makes a complex and original argument about the multiple ways that gender functions in history, while critiquing the works of other historians who have written about gender.<sup>4</sup> The article is based exclusively on secondary sources yet is considered a seminal theoretical essay in the subfield of gender history.

**Choosing your sources:** When writing an article based on secondary sources, your choice of sources becomes especially important because your argument will center on your interpretation and critique of other historians' arguments. It would be meaningless to write an essay assessing or critiquing arguments that are no longer accepted in the field or that have had no impact on contemporary understandings of the topic. Read over the section above on "Finding Secondary Sources."

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<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," The American Historical Review 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986), pp. 1053-1075.

**Making an argument:** As noted above, in this type of article, your argument will center on new insights that you have gained from other historians' research or on critiques and revisions of other historians' arguments. Obviously, you cannot come up with an argument until you have read a significant number of secondary sources.

**Proving your argument:** The evidence for your argument will be drawn from the research of others. Your challenge is to turn a critical eye on those studies to determine which are convincing and which are flawed. The best historical writing engages not just with studies that confirm the historian's own argument but also deals carefully and fairly with those studies that contradict or challenge the historian's thesis. Articles that ignore or dismiss opposing viewpoints risk being judged uninformed or tendentious and therefore less trustworthy. Perhaps ironically, they are usually less convincing than more judicious and even-handed essays.

**Historical monographs:** An historical monograph is an in-depth study grounded in primary research on a specific topic. Monographs usually take years to research and write. Their intended audience depends on the appeal of the topic and the style of writing. Some books are aimed at a tiny group of specialists while others strive for a broad, popular audience. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*, (mentioned above) has sold many tens of thousands of copies. Most academic historians base their first monograph on their Ph.D. dissertation. Obviously, you will not be writing a monograph in this class, but some day you might!

**Books of historical synthesis:** Books of historical synthesis usually make no claim to originality. Instead, they aim to bring together the insights of various historians (including, sometimes, their own insights from earlier research) and weave them together into a compelling narrative. Some of the most engaging works of popular history are synthetic in nature. Such books can be highly informative and erudite and can serve as a very useful introduction to or overview of a subject.

**Book Reviews:** Depending on where they are published, book reviews are intended for an audience of academic historians or for members of the non-academic public interested in history. Readers of book reviews usually want to know whether the reviewer – often an expert on the subject – likes the book and whether it is worth their time to read the entire work. Reviews can be as short as a single page or as long as four or five printed pages. Shorter reviews offer a succinct overview of the contents of the book, a summary of the main argument, and an assessment of the quality, significance, and originality of the volume. Longer reviews often include a broader discussion of the book's subject while shorter reviews stay close to the actual contents of the book.

**Review Essays:** Like book reviews, review essays center around the summary and assessment of several recently or relatively recently published books. They appear in scholarly journals as well as popular venues like The New York Review of

Books, The New Republic, and Harper's Magazine. Review essays are not, however, simply multiple short reviews strung together. Summaries and assessments of the various books under consideration are usually worked into a more broadly conceived essay on the state of the field. Unlike straight-forward books reviews, review essays are not geared primarily toward providing the reader with an assessment of the quality of any particular volume. Instead, the essay writer aims to give the reader a sense of the state of scholarly thought on a broad topic such as, for example, the Crusades, the American Civil War, or the Late Medieval Church. Some review essays discuss as few as two or three books on the same general subject, while others discuss a dozen or more. Authors of review essays usually articulate a clear position on what they see as the more and less promising developments and trends in the field. In this sense, review essays are related to articles based on secondary sources discussed above.

## **Appendix: Technical Aspects of Historical Writing**

### **Citing historical sources, or How to footnote**

Historians almost always use footnotes and endnotes following standard formats such as the Chicago Manual of Style or the MLA. Specific page numbers or page ranges are required unless the reference is strictly bibliographic. For example, in some instances it may be appropriate to include a footnote/endnote that reads: For more on women and the Catholic Church in nineteenth century France, see.....(full bibliographic information about several titles without specific page numbers.) References to particular arguments, however, should give specific page numbers. (e.g. "Natalie Zemon Davis makes a similar argument in The Return of Martin Guerre, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 21-34. )

Unlike social scientists, historians almost never use in-text citations. The one exception might be a book review which refers only to a single volume, the full bibliographic information for which is noted at the beginning of the review. In this instance, some writers will simply provide page numbers in parentheses for quotations from that book.

On-line sources should be cited according to standard formats. If the citation refers to an article accessed on-line, then the footnote/endnote must include the full standard periodical citation as well as the website information. For example: Jane Doe, "Women Weavers in Eighteenth Century Devonshire," British Historical Studies 17 (Dec. 1996): 12-13, [www.projectmuse.com/BHS](http://www.projectmuse.com/BHS). etc. , accessed May 15, 2010.

### **Common Writing Issues for Historians**

**Tenses:** When writing about the past, use the past tense. However, when referring to arguments or points made by modern historians writing about the past, use the present tense. For example: "Laura Frader *points out* that increasing numbers of

women garment laborers *worked* at home.” Frader is a historian writing in the 1990s, and thus should be referred to in the present tense. The garment laborers worked a century ago. They require the past tense.

The question of tenses becomes trickier when the historical subject under discussion occurred very recently or the historian’s interpretation was written a long time ago. In most cases, even recent historical events can be treated in the past tense. In the case of historians who wrote more than a couple of decades ago, the decision about what tense to use depends on how you are using that historian’s work. For example, when I quoted E.H. Carr at the beginning of this handbook I used the past tense, both because he made the relevant comment half a century ago and, more importantly, because the fact that he made the comment in the relatively distant past is part of the reason I used the quotation (which is why I mention it in the sentence). There may, however, occasionally be instances when it makes more sense to use the present tense when discussing a historian who wrote in the past. This is largely a judgment call. Just be sure that you are consistent throughout your writing.

**Quoting:** Historians tend to use a lot of quotations. Don’t overuse them. It is rarely necessary or appropriate to quote secondary sources unless the specific wording that the author uses is significant to making your point. Even in these cases, quotations should be limited to a sentence or less. The one exception to this may be book reviews or review essays where you may want to comment on the author’s writing style or word choice. In most cases, however, it is far better to summarize the author’s point and footnote the source.

You may find it necessary to quote primary sources at greater length when the precise wording is important to your point. Note that in the following selection, the precise vocabulary used in the quoted text is critical to the point that the historian is trying to make.

In some ways, the late-nineteenth-century discussion demonstrates the persistence of an earlier view that femininity, commerce, and corruption were inextricably linked, and that the consumer was by nature a coquette, by turns weak and manipulative. “For women,” Pierre Giffard declared, “the matter of money may be summed up by several synonyms: flirtation, the desire to please, to dominate, to seduce, the desire to display themselves and to be admired.” Critics thus saw the department store as a work of such diabolical genius precisely because it speculated on “the coquetry of women” and “invested in their vanity.” For many, indifference to the domestic sphere and a predilection for public display were particularly Parisian characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

If you do quote, be sure that you quote precisely. You cannot alter the wording or punctuation of the quotation in any way without alerting the reader to your

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<sup>5</sup> Lisa Teirsten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siecle France*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 34.

changes. Omitted words must be signaled with ellipses (three dots). Added words must be placed in brackets [...], not parentheses (...).

Be sure that the quoted passage works grammatically within your own sentence. If it doesn't, then you must alter your own part of the sentence or crop the quotation so that it does work with your sentence. For example, do *not* write: The former slave Polly Shine described how slaves were forced to prepare for auctions: "made us wash and clean up real good." Instead, you could write: The former slave Polly Shine described how the master "made us wash and clean up real good" in preparation for a slave auction.<sup>6</sup>

Use appropriate and varied verbs to introduce quotations. Avoid "said" unless the quoted passage was actually spoken, as in, "In his 1963 speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. said...." Even in cases like this, there is usually a more vivid verb that can be used such as "declared" or "announced" or, in the case of King, "thundered." The verb "stated" often works for written quotations, though it isn't very exciting. Try more dynamic verbs like "argued," "maintained," "asserted," "insisted," "objected," or even "lamented," or "complained." NEVER use "quoted" as in: Polly Shine quoted: "made us wash and clean up real good."

Avoid ending a paragraph with a quotation and never let a quotation serve as your topic sentence.

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<sup>6</sup> Polly Shine, "WPA Interview (1938)" in Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Duménil, Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents, Second Edition, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), p. 230.