Writing and Research in History/Social Sciences

In History, Political Science and many other Social Science classes, assignments often incorporate research. Students must document the findings of such research via written reports or reviews in the same format and style as Social Science professionals. This Writing Guide suggests eight types of writing commonly used in History and other Social Sciences, followed by recommended evaluation criteria. It concludes with a “Do/Don’t” list of general tips for good Social Science writing. The eight suggestions follow:

1. **Precis/Summary**: Concisely recount an author’s thesis and support evidence
2. **Critical Review of Web-Based Sources**: Assess the strengths/weaknesses of online secondary sources
3. **Critical Book Review**: Assess the strengths/weaknesses of substantial, complex secondary sources in print
4. **Primary Source Analysis**: Determine the significance of a primary source, and analyze the intent and point of view or its author.
5. **Annotated Bibliography**: Identify, collect and evaluate potential sources of evidence pertaining to one particular subject
6. **Secondary Literature Review/Historiographical Essay**: Identify, compare and evaluate the interpretations of multiple scholars on a particular subject
7. **Comparative Essay**: Detect similarities and differences among two or more sources and evaluate the significance of those similarities/differences
8. **Interpretive Essay**: Develop, explain and support with evidence one’s own answer to a question of historic, political, economic or geographical importance

1. **Precis/Summary**

   Students must correctly identify and briefly recount an author’s thesis and supporting evidence.

   Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

   - The Summary should be approximately 250 words long
   - Student accurately identifies the author’s thesis/original contribution
   - Student identifies the author’s principle elements of supporting evidence
   - Student does not include editorial comment upon/reaction to the source
   - Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format
2. Critical Web Review

Students must assess the strengths and weaknesses of internet-based sources, including those contributed by both the source’s author and the site publisher. Students must recognize and account for the lack of peer review processes frequently encountered in the use of web-based sources.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- Web Review Essays should be approximately 500 words long
- Student selects a source of suitable length, appropriate to both the topic at hand and as evidentiary support for college-level work
- Student evaluates the author’s credentials and qualifications to address the topic
- Student identifies and evaluates the author’s thesis, use of sources of evidence/support, and intended audience
- Student identifies and evaluates the site’s publisher, publisher’s purpose and target audience
- Student assesses the relevance and utility of any audio/visual content or links included in the source and ease of navigation on the source site
- Student identifies the publication date of the source and whether or not it is peer-reviewed
- If peer reviews of the target work are available, student identifies and incorporates such reviews into their analysis
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format

3. Critical Book Review Essay

Students must assess the strengths and weaknesses of complex, peer-reviewed sources of significant length (150+ pages) other than textbooks. Such sources include both monographs and anthologies.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- Book Review Essays should be approximately 750 words long
- Student selects a source of suitable length, appropriate to both the topic at hand and as evidentiary support for college-level work
- Student evaluates the author’s credentials and qualifications to address the topic
- Student identifies and evaluates the author’s thesis, use of sources of evidence/support, and intended audience
- Student identifies and evaluates the work’s publisher, publisher’s purpose and target audience
- Student identifies and evaluates available peer-reviews of the target work, and incorporates such reviews into their analysis
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format
4. Primary Source Analysis

Students must determine the significance of a primary source, and analyze the intent and point of view or its author.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- A single-source analysis should be approximately 500 words long
- Student accurately distinguishes primary from secondary sources, to include written, aural/audio and visual/video sources
- Student accurately identifies the author of the source, the author’s background/place in society, and the author’s perspective
- Student supports a valid connection between the author's position in society/background and his/her perspective with evidence from the document
- Student accurately identifies the narrative type of the source (declarative, persuasive, etc) and the author’s intended audience
- Student supports a valid connection between the narrative type and the author's intended audience with evidence from the document
- Student accurately describes the historical context surrounding creation of the source
- Student assesses the historical significance of the source and supports that assessment with evidence from the source and its context
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format

5. Annotated Bibliography

Students must identify, collect and evaluate potential sources of evidence pertaining to one particular subject.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- Student lists sources alphabetically by author, in accordance with the appropriate style manual for the course
- Student concisely describes each author’s thesis and evidence
- Student assesses each author’s position as valid or invalid
- Student briefly describes the value of each source relative to the subject
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format
6. Secondary Literature Review/Historiographical Essay

Students must identify, compare and evaluate the interpretations of multiple scholars on a particular subject.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- Student accurately identifies specific interpretations by authors or groups of authors on a subject
- Student identifies similarities and differences in those interpretations
- Student asserts valid connections between the author’s/group’s interpretation and the author’s/group’s background and perspective
- Student clearly enunciates a thesis describing the relationship(s) among the interpretations under study and supports that thesis with evidence
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format

7. Comparative Essay

Student must detect similarities and differences among two or more sources and evaluate the significance of those similarities/differences.

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- Student accurately identifies similarities and differences in multiple sources
- Student accurately evaluates the significance of those similarities and differences
- Student clearly enunciates a thesis describing the significance of similarities and differences among the sources under study and supports that thesis with evidence
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format
8. Interpretive Essay/Research Paper

Student must develop, explain and support with evidence a unique/personal answer to a question of historic, political, economic or geographical importance

Work will be evaluated on the following elements, from which instructors can create a grading rubric:

- The Essay/Paper should be of significant length, with a minimum of approximately 1500 words
- Student clearly enunciates a thesis that directly answers the question under study and lays out for the reader how the essay will support that answer
- Student incorporates clear topic sentences for each section of the essay
- Student includes appropriate supporting evidence for each section of the essay
- Student includes clear and logical transitions between sections of the essay
- Student reasserts the thesis and concisely summarizes evidence in the conclusion
- Student logically analyzes the question under study, supporting that analysis with thorough and valid evidence in appropriate depth from both primary and secondary sources
- Student appropriately documents evidentiary support in the correct format per the assigned style manual
- Student employs appropriate grammar, spelling and format
“DO’S AND DON’TS” IN SOCIAL SCIENCE WRITING

Every semester, students lose points on writing assignments and term papers for the same mistakes. This handout highlights many of those issues, in the general categories of “Writing Style,” “Sources and Citations” and “Grammar”. It is not intended as a “comprehensive” guide, but following these rules will produce better grades!

WRITING STYLE

Read the Question! Many students who earn poor grades on writing assignments do so because their essays do not address the question posed. Your thesis, and every topic sentence in the paper, should link the material to your answer to that question.

Learn/Use the style manual your teacher assigns (MLA, CMS, APA, and so on). The best way to be sure to get the format right is to CHECK THE MANUAL.

Format/Appearance of Papers: Don’t try to “stretch” insufficient. That means no fun with fonts, fudging margins, or adding extra spaces between paragraphs.

Don’t assert as fact that which you need to prove: Don’t make unsupported assertions. Example: “Communism was clearly evil and was therefore eventually doomed to failure.” This might be an interesting statement, which you might attempt to prove by gathering evidence—for example, using the breakup of the Soviet Union to support the notion of “failure.” But you should not assert this as fact!

Narration: Don’t include explicit statements of intent, such as “This paper will…”. If you’ve got a good thesis statement, the intent of your essay will be clear.

Avoid broad, general statements as part of your introduction. Statements such as “For centuries, men have wondered about…” or “The question is often asked…” or “As history progressed…” These don’t add to your thesis. They simply take up space. You can’t prove/disprove them. Leave them out.

Keep your language simple. Don’t substitute big words or “purple” prose when everyday language will do. Examples: “utilized = “used”, “perused = “read” Strive for concise prose. Examples: “due to the fact that” = “because”, “in order to = to.

Transitions: Clear connections between sentences and paragraphs are vital to effective writing.

Awkward: Unable to launch a direct attack against Britain due to his navy’s defeat at Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon attempted to institute a continental blockade aimed at stifling Britain’s trade. Napoleon became embroiled in a costly guerrilla campaign in Spain. Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812.
There are no transitions between these sentences. Here’s one way you could rewrite this:

Better: Unable to launch a direct attack against Britain due to his navy’s defeat at Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon attempted to institute a continental blockade aimed at stifling Britain’s trade. In enforcing this blockade, Napoleon became embroiled in a costly guerrilla campaign in Spain. Even more costly was Napoleon’s decision in 1812 to invade Russia to punish the Tsar for his failure to uphold the blockade.

Conclusions: Your conclusion should be a concise reiteration of your point; re-emphasizing your thesis and summarizing your support. In other words, it should give your reader a lasting “sound bite” of your paper. You should NEVER introduce new material—things that your paper didn’t address—in the conclusion.

Incorporate Feedback! If your instructor has made input to preceding assignments (thesis statements and outlines, for example), be sure to use that feedback. It’s very frustrating for an instructor to spend time offering advice and corrections on a writing assignment, and then to find that the student ignored/disregarded that feedback.

Proofread your papers! Nothing is more frustrating to your instructor than correcting numerous, avoidable spelling and grammatical errors. At the very least, run spell check and grammar check, make sure your formatting (margins, spacing and so forth) are correct. Have others read your paper, and read it aloud to yourself.

SOURCES AND CITATIONS

Be critical of sources. Whether you use printed or electronic sources, you must do some checking as to the credibility of the source. This is especially true of online sources. Sometimes, it’s not clear who created the site, and for what purpose. Be cautious! Know who wrote the material that you are using!

Choose sources at the appropriate level: Using a dictionary or an encyclopedia to define terms or get a basic sense of a topic is certainly valid. Using a dictionary or encyclopedia as the source of supporting evidence and detail for a college-level paper is not! Generally, encyclopedia articles lack the specificity and precision needed to validate the level of support details your paper should include. Likewise, don’t use web pages designed for school-age children (they often include “k-12” or some other indicator in the URL). These sources are useful for gaining general knowledge of a topic, but should not serve as the sources of your support information. Wikipedia suffers the dual liability of being an encyclopedia and offering articles whose authorship is not always clear.

Don’t lean too heavily on one or two sources. By using several sources, you’ll gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of the issue that you’re addressing. You’ll learn
more, and you’ll probably earn a higher grade. Also, when you rely too heavily on one or two sources, the chances of plagiarism rise significantly.

**Avoid excessive quoting:** Don’t quote obvious facts (“On 7 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.”) Only quote sparingly from secondary sources. Limit secondary source quotations to unique interpretations or especially brilliant prose or telling comments. In other words, use direct quotes when the author’s very words add to the impact of the quotation. Otherwise, you should paraphrase (and cite your source). Most of your direct quotes should come from primary sources. Even with those, be selective in your use of quotations. Reserve block [long] quotations for passages of exceptional brilliance or relevance.

**Time to Beat the Dead Horse:** It is never, ever acceptable to cut and paste material from a web based source into a paper.

**Paraphrasing and plagiarism:** To paraphrase is to put another writer’s ideas into your own words. When you paraphrase, you need a citation to indicate that you’re using another writer’s ideas. However, if in paraphrasing you follow an author’s style, structure, or content too closely, only changing occasional words, this may be plagiarism, even if you include a footnote/citation.

**Example:** George Mowry writes in *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, p.161:

“The Senate’s obvious antagonism to the President’s independent course in developing novel foreign policy greatly contributed to the treaty’s defeat. And Roosevelt’s later action in implementing his Dominican policy by executive agreement without benefit of consent was scarcely designed to assuage senatorial anger.”

**This paraphrase could be plagiarism, even if it included a footnote/citation:** The Senate’s *patent* antagonism to Roosevelt’s *independent* action in developing a different foreign policy contributed greatly to the defeat of the treaty. And the President’s *later* action of putting the Dominican policy *into effect* by executive agreement without benefit of consent was *hardly calculated* to *decrease* senatorial *ire*. (All the student did here was to substitute synonyms for nine of Mowry’s words. The style and meaning are clearly Mowry’s.)

**Here’s a valid paraphrase:**
Roosevelt failed to consult the Senate in his pursuit of a foreign policy with the Dominican Republic. Resentment in the Senate contributed to the defeat of Roosevelt’s treaty with the Dominican Republic. Undaunted, Roosevelt pursued his Dominican policy by executive fiat, which only exacerbated Senatorial resentment and resistance (Mowry, 161).
GRAMMAR

Spelling and grammar DO matter. Nothing will detract from your credibility more quickly than poor spelling and grammar. How you say it is as important as what you say! Spell-check is a first step, but you should also personally proof-read your paper (best done out loud to pets, small children, and other “captive” audiences). Have someone else look over your final draft as well. Spell/grammar check can’t always tell when you have the wrong word, but spell it correctly. Common Examples: led vs lead, dominant vs dominate, populous vs populace and woman vs women. Not to mention the classics: its vs it’s, than vs then, affect vs effect, they’re, there and their; where and were; who’s and whose; and so on. Some students fail to proofread carefully enough to catch these mistakes. Some really don’t know the difference. Don’t leave your instructor to guess which applies to you.

Third Person: Unless directed otherwise, write in the third person (no “I’s”, “we’s,” “you’s”). It’s your paper. Comments such as “I believe” or “I will…” are redundant.

Avoid passive voice. Use direct, active verbs. Passive expressions such as “It was decided that…” or “It came to be seen that…” make for vague writing. The first thought the reader has when reading this is “By whom?” Active versions of these same expressions, such as “The Senate decided that…” or “Newton discovered…” will keep your writing clear, direct and to the point.

Agreement between subject and pronoun, and subject and verb. Review your work and check for agreement. Avoid errors such as: “Napoleon led the attack and achieved all their aims” or “Both the Russians and the Austrians was routed at Austerlitz.”

Gender pronouns: Gender pronouns are easily avoided. For example, don’t write “A leader must be strong; he must be brave and forthright.” This suggests that a leader must be male. Instead, write “Leaders must be strong; they must be brave and forthright.” By using the plural, you also avoid awkward constructions like he/she.

Use of foreign words or expressions: Unless they are common, you should italicize foreign words, and define them when you first use them.

Avoid excessive use of adverbs (words usually ending in “-ly”). If you use them too often, they lose their impact. Example: Stalin was extremely brutal and remarkably ruthless in his purges of the Soviet officer corps. Better: In his purges of the Soviet officer corps, Stalin was brutal and ruthless.

Avoid split infinitives: For the sake of clarity, there are times when you can’t avoid splitting an infinitive. But in most cases you should avoid them.
Awkward: “to boldly go where no man has gone before” [Captain Kirk-speak]
Better: “boldly to go where no one has gone before” [note the gender-neutral pronoun used by Capt Picard]

**Tenses:** Be consistent in use of verb tense. The past tense is generally the simplest to use effectively. Present and progressive tenses often lead to confusion or complications. Never change tense within paragraphs!

Wrong: Isaac Newton developed his law of gravity in 1665. He later publishes this law in 1687 in the *Principia*, which will become a classic book in the history of science.
Better: Isaac Newton developed his law of gravity in 1665, which he published in 1687 in the *Principia*. His book quickly became a classic in the history of science.

**Avoid contractions:** In a scholarly paper, you should typically avoid contractions. Spell it out! Don’t = Do not, Won’t = Will not, and so on.

**Acronyms:** Acronyms are useful in their place, but don’t overuse them. Always define them at first use. If you use an acronym only once, you don’t need it.

**Avoid abbreviations** ETC. = “AND SO ON”. I.E. = “THAT IS.” E.G. = “FOR EXAMPLE.” In most cases, use “and so on,” “for example” or “that is.”

**That and who:** Don’t use “that” to refer to people. Use who or whom. Incorrect: Students that follow these hints will improve their writing. Correct: Students who follow these hints will improve their writing.

**Avoid jargon and slang.** Examples include “the bottom line,” “a real bummer,” and similar expressions. Strive to write intelligent and polished prose.