

# Historiographic Essay Manual

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## Why do historians write historiographical essays?

Historians are "trained" to do original work. Therefore, we conduct historiographical analyses of our research topics to familiarize ourselves with all previous interpretations of the subject to discover whether or not questions remain unanswered or interpretations need to be revisited. We ascertain what research questions we will attempt to answer given the available, accessible primary sources. While we build a bibliography and read secondary sources, we simultaneously generate a list of available documentary collections that we plan to explore for our research. Whatever questions we explore, to do history according to the standards of the profession, we must always know the available documentation and the secondary sources.

## Can you actually make an original contribution in an undergraduate project? Haven't we learned all there is to know about the past?

History is interpretation of the historical evidence, not the reconstruction of the past. It will never provide a complete story. Edward Carr, a well-known British historian, reminds us, "History means interpretation." When historians select facts and interpret them, they are influenced by numerous factors including: the author's education and socio-economic background, personal values, the time period and environment in which s/he wrote, the existence and availability of sources, and such mundane restrictions as the demands of publishers. Because of the multitude of factors that shape the composition of historical accounts, authors offer a variety of interpretations on any given event or past era even if they are examining the same documentary evidence. As one scholar summarized, "where we stand determines what we see." Subsequently, originality is possible because our perspectives differ.

Consider the variety of historical interpretations about the origins of World War II in Europe. Most historians agree that German aggression against Poland in September 1939 sparked war, but they disagree upon the extent of German responsibility. Questions that continue to drive research: Did the Treaty of Versailles push the Germans into aggression? Did appeasement convince Hitler that he was invincible? How important is individual agency to interpreting the past? How important was Hitler in the

decision-making? What were his intentions? Did Neville Chamberlain's personality undermine the British government's ability to respond effectively? What role did the Soviets play in the origins of war in 1939? Did Soviet expansion in the winter 1939-1940 contribute to the German decision to attack in June 1941? To answer these questions, a professional historian, whose research may lead to publication, will not likely proceed immediately to the documentary record. First, s/he will examine what other scholars have argued about the evidence. In other fields this is called a **literature review**; historians call it **historiography**.

### What is the goal of a historiographic essay?

Quite simply, your goal is to determine and evaluate the patterns of interpretation around historical questions that you want to explore. Mary Lynn Rampolla, whose *Pocket Guide to Writing in History* has been published in several editions, wrote the goal of a historiographic essay is "to identify, compare, and evaluate the viewpoints of two or more historians writing on the same subject."<sup>1</sup> Notice that a historiographic essay requires evaluation, that is you must **judge** the effectiveness of historical interpretations, not just report on the patterns.

The types of patterns that you may encounter cannot be uniformly predicted. The two most common are a **"stand on my shoulders"** evolution or a **traditionalist--revisionist--neo-traditionalist--neo-revisionist** dialectic. Several factors shape these patterns, but the two most common are (1) the impact of political, social, economic, and intellectual developments on historians and (2) the discovery of new evidence. If differences of interpretation exist, these can be quite subtle or strikingly obvious. If the historical works that you read follow disciplinary convention, the authors will adopt an analytical writing style; they will give you cues in the text through word choice and organization of their argument (loosely referred to as rhetoric) and in their bibliography and footnotes. Ideally they will explain how developments in historical interpretation have influenced their research and writing agendas. However, for a variety of reasons, you cannot always rely upon convention being followed by historians. Perhaps the author is an "amateur" or poorly trained professional; the scholar rejects convention; or the publisher had the last word. In any case, you cannot always expect that a secondary source adheres to the convention of explaining to readers why they embarked on their study.

### How should I go about selecting a topic?

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 17. Historiographic Essay Manual, updated 31 July 2018

Start thinking: what large geographic areas interest you most. For example, do you enjoy American, European, Japanese, Middle Eastern, etc history? What time period do you prefer to study? Ancient, medieval, modern? A particular century, decade or year? Ponder what types of histories you enjoy: political, cultural, social, gender, economic, military, and so forth. Brainstorm and write ideas below.

### **1. Identify your geographic interests. What part of the globe interests you?**

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What are your geographic interests and why?

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### **2. Identify time periods that most interest you.**

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What era or eras within your geographic choices interest you and why?

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### **3. Identify types of history that interest you.**

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Do you prefer political, cultural, social, gender, economic, military histories? Why?

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### **4. Identify events, people, ideas that interest.**

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What events, people, or ideas interest you? Why?

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## 5. Brainstorm questions.

What questions do you have about the historical era/eras? What are you curious about? Just brainstorm, do not worry about phrasing.

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## 6. Refresh your memory on the history of the era/eras.

What are some of the important events, people, ideas etc of the era? Did you stumble across events, people, or ideas that you had forgotten or did not realize were part of this era/eras? Would any of these interest you?

If you follow these steps, you can narrow down research topics and hopefully feel less overwhelmed, after all, in theory the entire history of the globe is a potential topic! So if you are struggling a bit, that's perfectly natural.



**Additional factors you should contemplate to select a topic:**

**First**, select a topic that will sustain your interest not only for the historiographic essay but also for Research and Writing (History 398). In Historiography and Historical Methods (History 298), you study the secondary sources; in Research and Writing, you craft an interpretation

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predominantly drawing upon primary sources. ***If you cannot locate or get access to primary sources on your topic for History 398 there is no point in doing it for History 298.***

In pondering topics, most students identify obvious, well-known events or eras (the Atomic Bomb, Hiroshima, the Civil War, the Holocaust, Civil Rights, etc), which creates challenges. First, so much has been written about these events, that you will find it difficult to be “original” (from a professional historian’s perspective if you take this topic into History 398)

**Second**, the vast number of secondary sources, professional and amateur, will overwhelm. Yet you still have options.

- **One option:** if you are interested in a topic that attracts vast amounts of attention, consider exploring how the event was perceived, responded to or shaped by a local community, region, or state. For example, a historical question to explore for Research and Writing: How did Philadelphia Public Schools respond to the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954)? Your Research and Writing paper might exploit local newspapers, local and national magazines, published edited collections about the Supreme Court decision, and you may be able to locate public records from Philadelphia. Your historiographical questions: How have historians interpreted the impact of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in the United States and specifically Pennsylvania? Your historiographic essay would be built around historical interpretations about the impact of the Supreme Court decision at the national level and any Pennsylvanian and Philadelphian histories that might address the topic entirely or partially.
- **A second option:** let’s say that you are interested in the origins of the Holocaust. This is a massive, over-whelming topic for an undergraduate student to study especially if you do not read the German language, but you could explore related topics. For example, would you be interested in exploring how the American public or American government officials perceived the persecution of European Jews? While this question is still too broad, it could be narrowed down. For your historiographic essay, you might explore how historians have written about German-American relations during the Nazi era; US immigration and refugee policies; the American press and radio in the 1930s-1940s; or the US State Department in the 1930s-1940s. In Research and Writing, you might explore public opinion as evident in newspaper and magazine publications, published laws and government policy statements, congressional investigations or debates, etc. . . .
- **A third option:** if you are interested in well-known topics, for example the military history of the Civil War or the tension between Martin Luther King’s non-violent tactics and Malcolm X’s Black Panther movement, a cultural or social history approach to the events allows for some originality. In historiography, you might encounter some

difficulty in narrowing down your reading list, but early consultations with history faculty will benefit you greatly.

- **A fourth option:** once you have narrowed down your interests to an era, event, location, consider building a focus by identifying newspapers, magazines, diaries, memoirs, and/or congressional investigations. Newspapers and magazines are often under-exploited primary sources. Diaries and memoirs generate numerous historical questions from a micro-history perspective. In addition, the ready accessibility of Congressional Records through Andrus Library makes them a rich source.

**Third**, certain topics attract an inordinate number of "popular or amateur" histories because of their titillating subject matter (e.g. Kennedy assassination conspiracies or identification of Jack the Ripper or Hitler's suicide or Freemason conspiracies); **stay away from these topics**. You are being asked to explore a historical problem as a professional historian would. Professional historians do not routinely attempt to solve a mystery or arrive at definitive interpretations of past events (even though secretly they might wish to; who does not like a good mystery?). What is more, the titillating topics with unsolvable mysteries will create challenges to building a bibliography. You will have to sort through a lot of amateur histories that frequently lack bibliographies, do not discuss available evidence, and rarely point out what other historians or scholars have written. Moreover, there is NO attempt to understand these events in larger context. The authors are trying to solve the historical puzzle with certainty; professional historians repudiate these approaches. You will not get approval for these kinds of topics. By the way, sometimes it is necessary to review the amateur histories depending upon how your project develops. Best advice, consult your professor.

**Fourth**, sometimes the event is too recent to have been analyzed by professional historians who have been trained to place events and people into historical context. Historians operate on the unwritten assumption that recent events cannot be treated "historically". What does this mean? Historians do not agree upon the notion of what "recent" is. Is it ten or twenty or thirty years? Or if the historian had lived through the time, then does that make it recent? Although historians will not agree upon the meaning of recent, we recognize that more practical limitations prevent us from writing "historically" on the recent past: the availability of evidence. The more recent the event, the greater the likelihood that document collections are not available because they have not been declassified by governments, private individuals have not made them available, or archivists have not collected them. Undoubtedly some sources will be available, e.g. newspaper accounts, magazine articles, electronic media, and perhaps memoirs, but professional historians often deem these sources as insufficient. Still, to some extent it depends upon the historical question that you are posing. Another challenge in undertaking "recent" historical events for a historiography project is that patterns have not had time to

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develop which might make building a bibliography for historiography more difficult. You will find that the earliest "histories" are written by journalists, political scientists, or sociologists, who were reporting on current events or exploring the event for its contemporary political or social implications and to shape public policy. These authors may have had only limited access to documentary evidence. Indeed, given the timing of their work, journalistic and sociological studies may actually be primary evidence.

So should you avoid "recent" events when contemplating a topic? Not necessarily. If the purpose of the historiography is to determine an agenda for a research and writing paper (History 398), and if you determine in advance that sufficient primary sources are available and accessible to meet the standards of the profession (and specifically your professor), then you might get approval. If this criteria is met, then you may have far more "amateur" histories and polemical works to study than students who select topics in which professional histories are more abundant. **Again, consult your professor. Communication is essential.**

**Fifth**, do you know who you plan to take Research and Writing from? If so, will that faculty member approve your topic? You should visit with him/her about your topic after consulting me.

Whatever topic you select in consultation with your professor, be prepared to narrow it down or expand it depending upon what you discover and what is practical to accomplish in a semester.

### **Reminder**

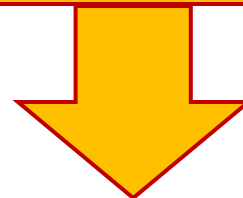
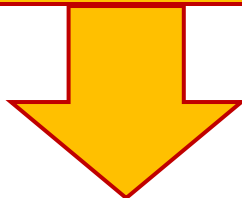
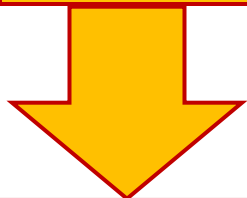
#### **Your goal in writing the historiographic essay:**

Identify patterns, account for why the patterns exist, and evaluate the plausibility of the interpretations in order to identify new directions in research or unanswered, valid historical questions.



## Where do you begin?

### Tackle the challenge in three ways simultaneously:



Learn the **facts** about the event, the person, or ideas that you want to study. Make timelines and fact data cards. The act of writing down essential facts facilitates retention for many people. As you read more and more secondary sources about your topic, you will realize that the factual details will often remain relatively constant. **Pay attention:** how historians “use” those facts will differ!

Begin looking for **primary sources**. Search the Web, Andrus Library databases, and “mining” secondary bibliographies for what other historians have researched. This is the goal of the Primary Source Collection Project.



Begin to build a **bibliography of secondary sources**. The Research Videos (YouTube) will help you tackle this challenge. In addition, “mine” secondary sources and reference materials for recommended readings.

As you tackle the challenge, expect to refine your topic but be sure to consult your professor. Common errors at this stage:

1. Your search terms are too broad and you become overwhelmed with the possibilities.
2. Your search terms are too narrow and you become convinced there is “nothing on your topic.”
3. If you have been fulfilling your responsibilities as a student and completing the Research Videos, be sure to seek out my help, other history faculty, and library faculty.

## Building a Working Bibliography

- Complete the Library Database Tutorials and develop your library research skills to locate secondary sources.  
Secondary sources are **monographs**, a learned, detailed study of a single subject or theme, and **journal articles**, scholarly, refereed essays or case studies that are published by



institutionally sponsored periodicals with editorial boards, who keep advertisements to a minimum to prevent advertisers from interfering with content.

- Search the following databases for monographs and journal articles:
  - BU Books and More (formerly BU Pilot)
  - WorldCat (BU's subscription WorldCat, not free public access version called worldcat.org)
  - America History and Life-Historical Abstracts (AHL-HA)
  - JStor
  - And "mine" bibliography/notes of relevant secondary sources.

□ **How many monographs and articles should you try to find?**

Truthfully, you should find ALL books or articles that appear relevant even though you won't likely study them all. (For your essay, you have to meet a gateway requirement: minimum of fifteen secondary sources with at least five titles being monographs dispersed over time.)

- Monograph titles and journal articles must originate from across the span of time since historians (preferably professional) began writing about the subject (some subjects such as ethnic histories, women's history, popular culture may have only gained attention from professional historians in the 1950s). Subsequently, your book titles and journal articles should originate from within ten or twenty years of the event through to the present.
- You should attempt to select scholarly works produced by professional scholars or historians, not amateurs (see next point).
- The earliest publications, during or immediately after an event, are often written by journalists or amateur historians who may not have sufficient access to a variety of sources or lack the skill set. Whether or not to include amateur histories in your historiography should be determined in consultation with your instructor.
- Your bibliography should largely be focused on your topic, but you should also familiarize yourself with patterns of interpretations about your topic in broader studies. In some cases, so little is published on your immediate topic, that you must explore how larger studies interpret or ignore your topic. For example, how civilians experienced the battle of Gettysburg is not written about extensively.
- It is better to have identified too many monographs or articles than not enough; you will not be expected to read everything that you identify.
- Identify and record potentially relevant secondary sources (no primary sources, no tertiary sources e.g. encyclopedia articles,

internet web sites, survey textbooks); eBooks and journal articles secured through the internet are acceptable.

**□ Record the bibliographic details:**

- Dedicate one 3x5 (or 4x6) card to each secondary source (discuss electronic record keeping with me).
- The following essential information must be recorded:

Essential information for book titles:	Essential information for each article:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ author's/authors' full name(s)</li> <li>✓ complete title of book</li> <li>✓ city of publication</li> <li>✓ name of publisher</li> <li>✓ date of publication</li> <li>✓ edition if not the first</li> <li>✓ how you located the source (see Working Bibliography for directions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ author's/authors' full name(s)</li> <li>✓ title of article</li> <li>✓ title of journal</li> <li>✓ volume and issue number</li> <li>✓ month (or season) of publication</li> <li>✓ year of publication</li> <li>✓ extant page numbers of article</li> <li>✓ how you located the source (see Working Bibliography for directions)</li> </ul>

- Format to follow for each bibliography card: Record the bibliographic cards accurately according to Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (8<sup>th</sup> edition) chapters 15.1-16.4.2 and 17.1-17.2 (pp. 135-161 & 166-185).

**Sample bibliography card:**

Kelley, Donald R. Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003.

Pilot; Subject Search: historiography

BU +  
D  
16  
K26  
2003

Or Inter Library Loan (ILL)

Notice that I typed this. If handwritten, underline title; if typed, use italicize command.

Indicate what database, type of search (e.g. subject, keyword), and term or phrase by which you searched.

Use back of card to record short notes about relevance of source to project.

**Tip:** Record BU Call number & additional useful notes such as whether or not you have made an inter-loan request.

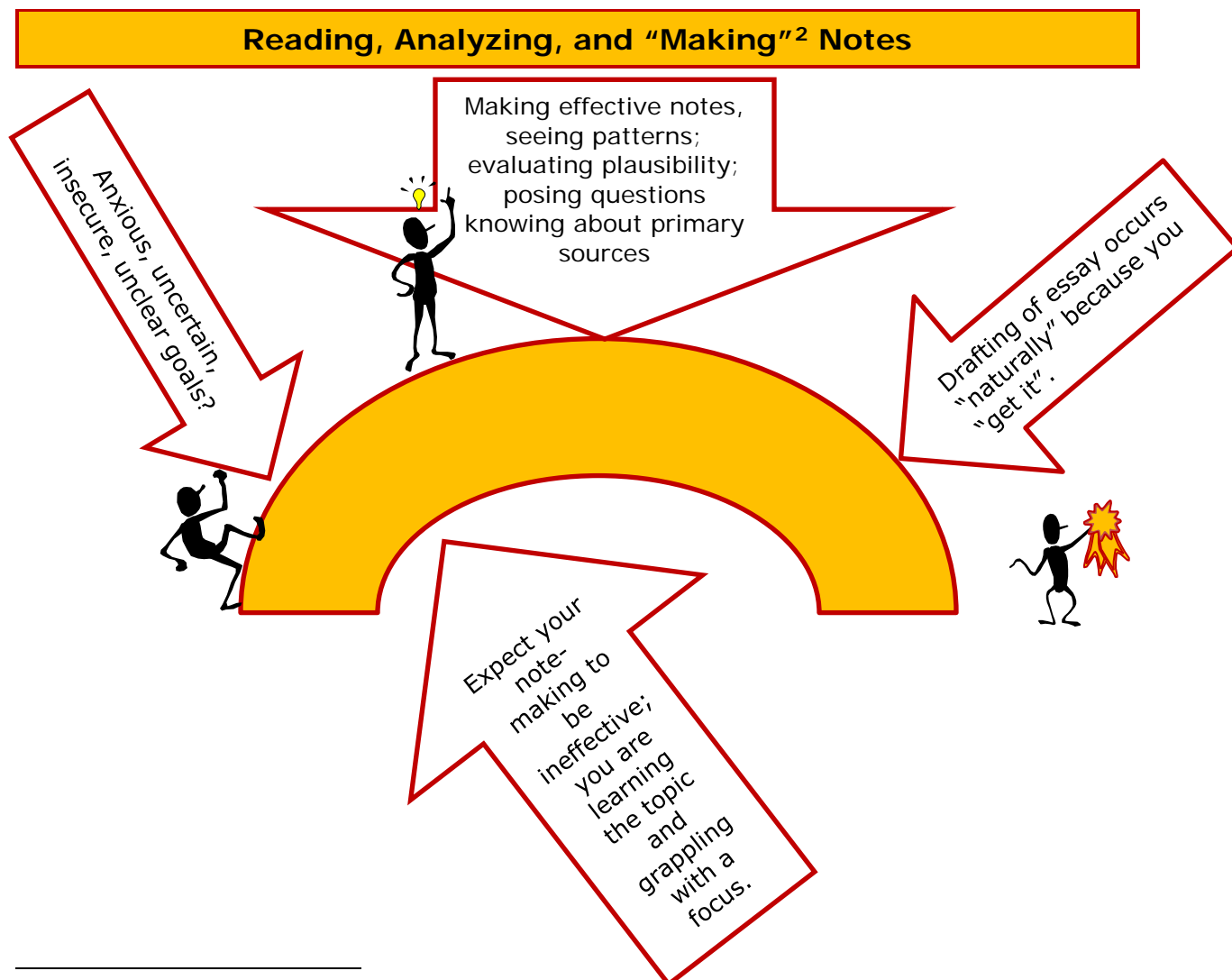


**When seeking the advice of a professor in the Department of History**, schedule an appointment in a timely manner and go prepared with the bibliography that you have already identified. You may be afraid that they will tell you about more books and articles to read, but they may

also steer you away from some reading as well. Be sure to take notes during the meeting and be prepared to ask questions.

If books or journals are not available at Bloomsburg University's Andruss Library, then pursue an **Inter-Library Loan request** through Andruss Library → Services. Your request can take two or three weeks, and if it is a book, you frequently have to return it within two to three weeks. Inter-library loans are usually free, and journal articles are routinely made available to you electronically at no cost.

- Narrow down the working bibliography for reading by inferring from titles, Library of Congress subject headings, and abstracts to determine your priorities in reading. Priorities must also be determined by selecting a representative sampling of publications over time. Priorities can also be determined by consulting professors who research or teach on your subject.



<sup>2</sup> Phrased inspired by Robert Leamson, "Learning (your First Job)," 2002.

[http://orgs.bloomu.edu/tale/documents/Leamson\\_Learning\\_StudentsFirstJob.pdf](http://orgs.bloomu.edu/tale/documents/Leamson_Learning_StudentsFirstJob.pdf)

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All learning occurs on a curve, and your historiography project is no different. Students worry that they write too many or too few notes. I always make more notes than I “use” to write a historical essay.

Making notes that are **authentic paraphrases or accurate summaries** of (1) the author’s theses or major points and (2) how s/he supports the thesis forces you to think through the readings and improve your recall. What is more, making notes helps you keep the varieties of interpretation organized. So the key is to have a clear purpose when reading and making notes.

**Always remember the following:** “... knowing how to read something results almost automatically from knowing why we are reading, and without some purpose, reading is an aimless activity.”<sup>3</sup>



You will encounter two predominant types of writing style in monographs and journal articles: narrative and analytical or a combination of the two.

**Narrative Style:** The narrative style relies upon describing what happened; the facts speak for themselves so that they can tell a story. Narratives may appear value neutral, but are not. The authors' intent, motives, working assumptions or potential biases are sometimes evident in the following ways: word choice that hint at tone or judgment, selection, omission, and arrangement of facts, prefatory or introductory passages, a conclusion that elaborates on the importance of the work, author’s explanation for why the s/he believes the topic should be discussed, and the sources consulted. Paragraph structures in the narrative style are worded and organized to tell a story in a logical progression from beginning, middle, and end.

Novice readers have difficulty recognizing the difference between fact and interpretation in a narrative style for three reasons. First, they get drawn into the story telling without thinking critically. Second, they need to acquire more knowledge about the topic to realize that even facts can be manipulated to advance interpretations that may or may not be plausible. Third, they assume that a story does not have a thesis. However, if they realize that a story is a pattern that was shaped from the facts and evidence, the pattern is the thesis; the thesis may be simplistic, but it exists. The thesis could be as simple as Franklin Roosevelt was the greatest president of the twentieth century, and that the author unveils the reasons why by simply describing the president’s accomplishments. Although we

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, *Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in all Disciplines* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003), 124.  
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tend to associate narrative styles with amateurs, professional historians will also write in this style.

**Analytical Style:** The analytical style will include narrative, but the author explicitly puts forth an argument. The author's intent, motives, working assumptions, potential biases can be manifest in the same way as in the narrative style. Their theses are more easily recognizable: located in prefaces, introductions, conclusions of their articles, chapters within the monographs, or the monograph itself. They are more likely to mention alternative interpretations within the text of their work, in a preface or introduction, or in explanatory footnotes. In fact, paragraph structures are worded and organized to advance the arguments, not tell a story *per se*. The analytical style is more frequently found in works produced by university-trained historians who are expected to meet the standards of the profession. During the course of the twentieth century, narrative accounts became less popular in academia.

Authors are not required to put forth their theses in an introduction whether writing in either the narrative or analytical style, but it makes the readers' task easier if they do. Knowing that theses can be hidden in concluding paragraphs or individual chapters, you might jump ahead to these portions if you struggle with locating a thesis.

**WARNING:** some students use the index to find their topic and read only those sentences, paragraphs, and pages referenced. In doing so, whether the writing is narrative or analytical, you risk losing the context in which the topic appears, and you will fail to pick up on working assumptions (or frameworks) shaping the author. You acquire knowledge about the event, but you are unable to evaluate the plausibility of the historian's interpretation because all you see are facts.

### General Tips



Know what your reading goals are.

"... knowing how to read something results almost automatically from knowing why we are reading, and without some purpose, reading is an aimless activity."



Before reading a book, study the front matter (i.e. preface, introduction, even acknowledgements), introductory and concluding chapter. If written according to the standards of the profession, the author will explain his/her thesis, what is original about his/her scholarship, and compare themselves to other historical interpretations in one or all of these portions of the book. Look for biographical information and publication record that provides insight on the author's expertise, working assumptions, perspective, etc.



Be prepared to read one or two of the most significant books in their entirety and revisit the most essential parts as your reading proceeds. Also as you learn your topic, be willing to “gut” the book: after you have become familiar with the historical facts of your topic, take time to study the front matter to determine the author’s perspective, then target your reading to the essential parts relevant to your topic. In doing so, be sure that you do not take the author’s ideas or interpretations out of context.



Be forewarned about a common rhetorical technique that will confuse novices in analytical interpretations. Some historians painstakingly explain alternative interpretations which they then argue against. Be alert so that you do not misinterpret or misrepresent the author.



If you are reading a journal article, read the abstract that frequently accompanies the citation or comes at the beginning of the article. If the author has written the article according to the standards of the profession, then s/he will explain his/her thesis in the first section or paragraph of the essay. Historiographical notes are sometimes buried in footnotes. Look for biographical information and publication record that provides insight on the author’s expertise, working assumptions, perspective, etc.



When reading books and articles, you must have a **note-Making system**. Either you **must** take notes on 5 x 8 index cards or you **must** create files on your computer that have a logical organization like the 5 x8 card. You are required to turn in **all** your research notes with the final paper.

### Sample of a 5 x 8 note card

Most likely my notes would be handwritten.

These notes are a summary of the chapter and I note the chapter thesis.

Subject slug and subordinate subject; may become more exact and sophisticated as you learn more. On 3 separate notecards, I examined her evidence for each of the three professors. So I had a subject slug: Shaping Nazi Conscience: The Professors: Heidegger, etc

Author, abbreviated book title, year of publication (written on each note card).

Shaping Nazi Conscience: The Professors

Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (2003)

Koonz devotes a chapter explaining how three professors, Martin Heidegger, a philosopher, Carl Schmitt, political theorist, and Gerhard Kittel, theologian, came to support Nazism (pp. 46-68) She claims that they “stepped in to translate the Nazis’ crude slogans and repellent images into intellectually respectable justification not only for dictatorship but also for anti-Semitism” (p. 68) [Her use of the word “stepped” suggests that they served in this role willingly].

Quotation marks around verbatim passages.

She convincingly portrays how these men converted to Nazism by interpreting their writings and how individuals remembered them. She chose these men because of their “paper trail”. She also gives some biographical information on each man that suggests a certain type of academic found the Nazis attractive. (pp. 46-49)

Page ranges of summarized content

She does not believe that each man was attracted to Hitler or Nazism for the same reason. Heidegger – “Hitler was authenticity personified”; Schmitt – Hitler was a “decisive leader”; Kittel – Hitler was a “Christian soldier” (p. 48).

Page number of verbatim word choice; do the same for quotations.

[Koonz really helps me understand how these three men converted to Nazism, but not as effective in proving their impact. How did they make Nazism respectable? Their publications????? How many people read these works. In another context, she spoke of ideas floating like miasma, so I need to review her introduction where she explained that. How does Koonz compare to John Weiss’ work?]

I put notes to myself in brackets so I can later distinguish between summaries or paraphrases and my observations or thoughts.

Brief note about Koonz’s methodology; why she chose these three professors

**Full disclosure:** This note card example comes from my own work. Given the depth of my knowledge about the topic, it is easy for me to summarize an entire chapter. If the information is new to me, I tend to record more passages verbatim, and I will have more than one card devoted to the same subject slug and author. I just staple them together. As I learn more and my topic narrows, I begin re-reading all my note cards, especially the early ones, I place some aside and paraphrase the original notes if they are still potentially relevant.



## Making notes when reading monographs and articles:

### Determine each Author's Point of View (or perspective):

- Who is the author (education, expertise, gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, when s/he lived, where s/he lived)? What else has the author published? What type of history does the author prefer (e.g. intellectual, political, social, etc)? Does the author make use of prominent historical theories (e.g. Marxist, progressive, etc)? What are the author's working assumptions, methodologies, potential biases, expertise?
- What larger events were occurring around the time the author published his/her work?
- Biographical information can be located by "googling" the author, consulting *Biography Index* and *Current Biography* in Andross Library, reading dust jackets or biographical sketches found at the beginning or end of a publication, and so forth.
- Sometimes the timing of a publication is intended to commemorate an event or is a response to events occurring at the time of publication; sometimes a thesis may not appear original because it has become conventional by the time that you learn about the publication, then you may fail to appreciate why it might have been original at the time it was published.

### Determine Goals and Thesis (plural: Theses):

- What are the authors' stated goals, questions, problems, topics, that s/he plans to address?
- A thesis can mean many different things but in the field of history, the thesis is the answer(s) to the historical question(s) raised by the author. What is the author's answers to his/her historical question(s)? In short, what are his/her interpretations?
- Is the author's thesis convincing?
- If the author has largely written a narrative history, i.e. telling a story, you may struggle with locating the thesis anticipating that it should appear in the form of an argument. Even when writing narrative histories, the historian's selection and arrangement of detail involves choices, judgment and reveals goals and theses.
- Your notes should primarily focus on the parts of the journal article or monograph that are most relevant to your topic.

### Analyze Evidence:

- What type of evidence or examples did the author provide to support his/her thesis? Is this evidence convincing or plausible?
- Note what kinds of primary or secondary sources the author cites in footnotes or in the text of the work. If examples are used to



illustrate the argument or facts are offered, summarize the information in your own words. Note what does or does not convince you and why.

- Sometimes an author is convincing for reasons that go beyond evidence or examples. Rhetorical skills and clarity of argument can be equally persuasive. For example, historians who show that they understand counter arguments are using a rhetorical device to gain the readers trust.
- As a novice reader of monographs, you might gain confidence in judging historical works if you read book reviews to determine how professionals assessed the work. Consult Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, J-Stor, *Book Review Digest*, and [www.h-net.msu.edu](http://www.h-net.msu.edu) (h-net is selective and useful for books published in the last twenty years). By the way, not every historical publication is reviewed.

### □ Comparison, Evaluation

- As your study progresses, note similarities and differences between the monographs and articles. Are the same primary and secondary sources being exploited by more than one author? What can you infer from these observations?
- Because the ultimate goal of this historiography paper is to identify some possible research questions or issues that have not been satisfactorily answered, or to identify primary source collections that can be exploited, be sure to devote notes simply to this purpose.
- Take notes from your notes as your knowledge of the historical writings becomes more sophisticated.

### □ Avoiding Unintentional Plagiarism when Making Notes

- Read a paragraph, section, or chapter, then attempt to summarize what you just read in your own words. Then revisit the paragraph, section, or chapter to verify the accuracy of what you have summarized.
- You should also try to paraphrase, but if the author's passage is not easy to paraphrase write the words verbatim on your note card and encase them with quotation marks. This way you avoid accidentally plagiarizing when you revisit your note cards at the writing stage.
- ALWAYS RECORD PAGE NUMBERS whether you are paraphrasing, summarizing, or quoting directly. Clearly record the page number after the relevant notes or quotation.
- ALWAYS RECORD AUTHOR, ABBREVIATED TITLE, AND DATE OF PUBLICATION on upper right hand corner of index card. In the rush of drafting your essay, you do not want to lose time trying to recall this sort of information. If you fail to record information



accurately, you will be more inclined to invent it when time is running out.

## Pre-Writing



Note-making can be a form of pre-writing.



Composing thoughtful progress reports that follow the assignment guidelines amounts to pre-writing.



Reviewing and summarizing your notes is pre-writing. In doing so, confirm that your subject is manageable (not too narrow or too broad). It is always easier to narrow your focus, rather than to be told that your research is insufficient with only a week left before the assignment is due.



Conduct preliminary writing exercises, listing questions, listing main ideas, listing evidence/examples to support major ideas, take notes, jot ideas, write paragraphs but do not concern yourself with paragraph topic sentences, word choice, etc. – Just get ideas onto paper.



Break down your writing tasks into manageable discrete portions. As patterns emerge, make notes. If you find a pattern of competing schools of thought, then divide your notes into those schools of thought. If you find generational differences in the patterns of interpretation, divide your notes accordingly and pre-write. If the major pattern is defined by different methodologies, then organize your notes that way and pre-write.



Do not start with the introductory paragraph. Have you ever sat at the computer with the blank monitor glaring at you? It is so difficult to know where to begin. In addition, as you write, you will think through the material and your thesis usually becomes more articulate and well-defined as you compose the body paragraphs. So, draft the body paragraphs first.



When you are ready to move from the pre-writing stage to the writing or drafting stage, start writing the body paragraphs. Do not initially concern yourself with effective paragraph topic sentences. Make sure the paragraphs are coherent, then refine topic sentences, sentence segues, word choice, etc.



Write your concluding paragraphs even before you write your introduction. At this point in the drafting, you will now recognize what is

relevant to say in your introduction and your thesis will be more fully developed.



You are required to turn in all these random writings, rough drafts, etc when you turn in your final paper or demonstrate in the week leading up to the deadline that you have notes, etc....

### Write and Re-Write or Draft and Re-Draft



Unfortunately, most students write their first draft as their last draft though they might proofread for superficial errors (grammar, syntax, spelling). Or you may identify with this Cornell University student: "It's exactly like building a wall. You can't take anything out once you've put it in. I think that each sentence is something I really wanted to express, and just to take it out is like ... like breaking the wall down."<sup>4</sup> If you can relate, you will most likely not submit your best effort if you submit your first draft. Writing is a process of drafting and re-drafting.



#### Common content difficulties:

- Over-generalizing (e.g. you say many historians, but only offer one or two examples);
- Writing history, not historiography (the reader finishes knowing much more about the topic than about the patterns of interpretation);
- Failing to analyze historical works in context in which they were written;
- Reporting interpretations, but not analyzing them;
- Absent thesis;
- Ineffective paragraph topic sentences;
- Incoherent paragraph structure;
- Failing to explain future direction(s) for research;
- Failing to meet "gateway" requirements.



Through writing, you allow yourself more time to think about the subject matter. So allow plenty of time to write and re-write.



Give yourself time to set aside your paper and create emotional and intellectual distance. Writing a rough draft or final paper the night before it is due is a disservice to yourself and a waste of my time.

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<sup>4</sup> Gottschalk and Hjortshoj, *Elements of Teaching Writing*, 65.  
Historiographic Essay Manual, updated 31 July 2018



I am available for "free reads" of partial or complete drafts, however, I will only be reading for content, not grammar, spelling, and so forth. In other words, I am not proofreading your paper. "Free reads" will be suspended 12 hours before the paper is due.



Be sure to review History Writing Tutorials & Mini-Lectures and consult me for help with particular writing challenges.



Make use of the Writing Center on campus though be prepared to schedule an appointment.

## Overview of Structural Content Requirements

### Introductory Paragraph

- Provide essential background on the subject that defines the topic.
- State your thesis in the last sentence of the introductory paragraph.

#### **Sample thesis statement for a historiography essay:**

Historians have held dramatically different views about the importance of European colonial rule in Africa: Marxist historians, along with others who focus on economic issues, have tended to see the colonial period as an important turning point, while cultural historians have maintained that the impact of the West on ancient cultural traditions of Africa was superficial.<sup>5</sup>

### Body of Paper

- Each paragraph must begin with a topic sentence that clearly states the main goal of the paragraph and is linked to your thesis.
- The paragraph topic sentence will be derived from the main points that you want to make.
- Use transitional words, phrases, and sentences to make clear connections between ideas.
- Do not wander off the subject.
- The body paragraphs should contribute to your historiographic thesis.
- Frame quotations effectively and efficiently.
- Provide and discuss convincing examples/evidence of the patterns of interpretation in each body paragraph.
- Explanatory footnotes can guide the reader to additional evidence of the patterns.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 18. Historiographic Essay Manual, updated 31 July 2018

## Two Concluding Paragraphs

- First** concluding paragraph restates your thesis and reminds readers of how each paragraph proved the historiographical patterns.
- Second** concluding paragraph identifies questions/issues that have not been effectively addressed and what specific kinds of available evidence you plan to explore. You should specifically mention what primary sources you plan to explore given your questions. Consult your Primary Source Collection Creator project and additional primary sources you may have uncovered during the research.

## Details for Submitting Final Draft

### Specific requirements (consult Turabian, especially chapter 25)

- New York Times, 12 point font or Verdana 10 point font
- One-inch standard margins
- Double-spaced
- Page numbers in upper-right hand corner (except first page)
- Title page with name, date, and paper title
- Footnotes correctly cited according to Turabian, chapters 15-16 ("N" entries in chapter 16 refers to footnotes; "B" entries refers to how they appear in the Bibliography)
- Works Consulted Bibliography, alphabetically arranged by authors' last names, correctly cited according to Turabian, chapters 16-17 (pay particular attention to "B" entries in 17.1-17.2)
- Approximately seven-ten pages in length (not including footnotes); not a magic number.
- Grammar, word choice, syntax, and clarity of expression affect your grade (see Turabian, chapters 20-24)



### Submission

- A rubric will be provided in advance that will make expectations more clear.
- You are required to turn in all these random writings, rough drafts, etc when you turn in your final paper or demonstrate in the week leading up to the essay deadline that you have notes, etc.... Failure to do so means an automatic deduction of ten points.
- Submitted through **BOLT's Assignment Folder** and in **hardcopy** to instructor including all notes and earlier drafts or demonstrate in the week leading up to the due date that you have notes, etc.....

