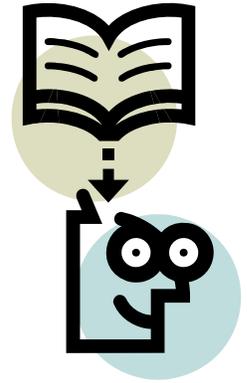


Upper-Division History Courses:
History of the Holocaust



Writing Conventions
For Historical Essays

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What will make your historical essay plausible and meet the standards of the historical profession?

- ❖ Do not arrive at conclusions until you have access to enough reliable information
- ❖ Aspire to be objective which means acknowledging to yourself that you have biases, preconceptions, and assumptions that may be influencing how you interpret the evidence and present your argument
- ❖ All conclusions must be drawn from the available evidence or be a reasonable, plausible inference when the evidence is lacking
- ❖ Your interpretation of history has to stand the test of plausibility, to be trustworthy and gain the reader's confidence.
- ❖ Do not say anything that is contradicted by the available evidence or else you will lose the reader's trust
- ❖ Interpret the past on its own terms, that is contextualize, to achieve greater plausibility.
- ❖ Write an articulate essay that advances a plausible, trustworthy interpretation abiding by the conventions in historical writing; do not simply throw data, facts, or evidence at the reader.

Before Starting to Write

- ❖ Read the essay question or assignment; be certain that you understand what is being asked or expected of you.
- ❖ Review and study relevant class or reading notes, document collections, historical essays, textbook, and so forth.
- ❖ Be sure that you understand the context of the event, person, idea for which you are writing.
- ❖ Take notes as you review and study to generate a list of ideas that you might incorporate into your essay.
- ❖ Use these notes to determine how you will organize your essay into paragraphs.
- ❖ Should you compose a thesis first? At most, write a tentative thesis if you believe that it helps you to focus. However, drafting an essay involves working through and thinking through the sources, so your thesis may have to be entirely revise or refined.

Steps From First Draft to the Final Draft: An Overview

Step 1: Start your essay at least a week before it is due. Do not make your first draft your final draft.

Step 2: First write the body paragraphs, not the introduction.

- This may sound counter-intuitive, but it is worth a try! How can you know what is relevant to introduce before you know what you will write.
- Write the body paragraphs without concerning yourself with word choice, word order, paragraph structure, etc.
- In the process of writing, you will also think through the material more and perhaps develop a more sophisticated understanding of your topic or revise your interpretation.

Step 3: After writing body paragraphs, set your paper aside in order to contemplate the content, structure, composition.

Step 4: Rewrite and edit the paragraphs of the body of your paper. Now you should begin revising paragraph topic sentences, sentence segues, word choice, proper grammar, punctuation, effective incorporation of quotations as evidence, and paragraph transition sentences.

Step 5: Write the conclusion of your essay restating the major points of your argument and some details on how you proved it.

Step 6: After you have revised the body of your essay and conclusion, write the introduction. Be sure to revisit any thesis that you may have composed to ensure that it continues to reflect the argument found in your essay.

Step 7: Proofread and edit to create a **professional** look; *you embarrass yourself and dishonor me by not taking time to proofread and edit your work even though you want me to take your work seriously.*

How to Write the Introductory Paragraph

- ❖ Avoid that feeling of "I don't know where to begin" by writing the introductory paragraph last. Writing involves working through material, so how can you know what should be stated in your introduction, let alone your thesis statement until you have written, that is worked through the material satisfactorily? If you feel discombobulated when you do not start at the introductory paragraph, then write your introduction but be certain you revise it, or even consider tossing it out and starting over. Be sure to revise your thesis so that it will tell the reader where you are going.
- ❖ The introductory paragraph must end with a thesis statement that is no more than two sentences in length (see below Top Ten Ways to Edit Your Paper).

A thesis statement provides a concise answer to the question posed or to the assignment; it should not simply explain the focus of the essay.

Ineffective thesis statement:

This paper will discuss whether or not the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution represented sharp breaks in historical periods.

Effective thesis statement:

The Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution were distinctive periods of history and represented sharp breaks from one another.

- ❖ An introductory paragraph provides background that is relevant to the ideas explained in the body of the paper.
- ❖ To begin writing your introduction, review the body paragraphs of your essay take notes on what needs to be introduced to the reader in the first paragraph. You will find cues in the paragraph topic sentences.
- ❖ If the essay is in response to an assigned question, do not assume the reader knows the question or the sources assigned; assume your audience has a college education with a general knowledge of history. Conversely, understand that when I read your paper as the instructor, I will know exactly the range of sources, primary and secondary, that you could have exploited to write your essay.
- ❖ Avoid starting your introduction with global statements such as "Throughout history ..." (By the way, you are more likely to make global statements or gross generalizations if you write your introduction first and then fail to revisit it when you have completed full drafts of your paper.)

How to Write the Body of your Paper

- ❖ Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence that links the reader to your thesis; these are sometimes difficult to write in early drafts of your paper, because you are still working and thinking through the material, so do not get anxious about writing the perfect topic sentence. Be prepared to revise it!
- ❖ In historical essays, your interpretations of the question must be supported by an analysis of evidence and factual details that convinces the reader.
- ❖ If you want to convince the reader by quoting a primary or secondary source, you need to incorporate the quotation effectively and judiciously.
 - Only use quotations as evidence to advance an argument or because the original source is uniquely phrased or memorable
 - Incorporating quotations within your essay allows readers to judge your ability to assess evidence.
 - Do not string together a series of quotations (as a general rule, a paragraph should not contain more than 1-2 quotations; the overall paper should be $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{5}$ your own words).
 - Do not quote if you are only providing factual information or common knowledge (i.e. stated the same way in 2 or more sources).
- ❖ If you are quoting a source, give attribution to the source within the paragraph (see example below on framing quotations effectively).
- ❖ If quoting verbatim, use quotation marks and cite with a footnote.
 - Unique word choices, phrases (three words or more), and sentences taken verbatim from a primary or secondary source must be encased in quotation marks " " with punctuation located inside quotation marks and footnote number outside.
 - Failure to use quotation marks to separate your words from a primary or secondary source constitutes **plagiarism** (see example below and section on how to footnote)

- ❖ Cite the source if you are paraphrasing, summarizing ideas not your own; failure to do so amounts to **plagiarism** (see example below and section on how to footnote).
- ❖ Footnotes lend credibility to your work by encouraging the reader to check your sources and thereby gain the reader's trust.
- ❖ Historians prefer footnotes or endnotes over parenthetical citations because they are neater in appearance and allow your reader to focus on your words, not the citation.

How to Frame Quotations

Excerpt from a sample essay that **ineffectively frames** the quotation:

Wollstonecraft represented the Enlightenment. "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers -- in a word, better citizens." She also criticizes Rousseau.

Excerpt from a sample essay that **effectively frames** the quotation:

Mary Wollstonecraft was shaped by and reflected the Enlightenment (an eighteenth-century movement) goals of social justice when she wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. In addition, Wollstonecraft epitomized the Enlightenment through a writing style that appealed to her readers' ability to reason. For example, she wrote, "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us . . . better citizens."¹ In short, Wollstonecraft argued that if men treated women as equals they would benefit as well. Her choice of words indicates a desire to appeal to rational thought by suggesting that slavishness undermines citizenship. Wollstonecraft was particularly critical of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who is frequently associated with the Enlightenment as well.

Features of Ineffective Framing and Quoting

- the writer just jumped into the quotation without making it clear that these are Wollstonecraft's words
- note that the first time Wollstonecraft's name is mentioned that the writer left out her first name
- after the quotation, the writer immediately starts a new thought regarding Wollstonecraft's views of Rousseau
- the writer provides no hints as to the author's background

Features of Effective Framing and Quoting

- the writer uses the pronoun she, which has a clear antecedent so that the reader knows these are Wollstonecraft's words
- the first time the writer mentions Wollstonecraft, s/he uses her first name as well
- after the quotation, the writer tells the reader what the evidence proves; a restatement of the quotation
- the writer sufficiently hints at the author's background by referring to the title of

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in *Aspects*, 87.

- the writer mentions the Enlightenment but offers no time frame
- the quotation is not followed by a footnote
- Wollstonecraft's book and the year of publication
- assuming that this was the first time the term Enlightenment was used, the writer has assisted the reader by briefly indicating the time frame of the movement in parentheses
- the quotation is followed outside the punctuation marks with a footnote

**Computer Tip:
How to Insert a Footnote on Microsoft Word 2003**

Position cursor at point of inserting footnote

Under the **Insert** menu option

Scroll down to **Reference**

Select **Footnote**

Location: bottom of page

Number Format:

1, 2, 3, . . .

Start at 1

Document: continuous

Click on INSERT (cursor will move to the bottom of the page, where you type your citation; if these settings are correct, thereafter, you should only have to click on insert)

**Computer Tip:
How to Insert a Footnote on Microsoft Word 2007 & 2010**

Position cursor at point of inserting footnote

Locate the **References** tab, in the **Footnotes** group, click **Insert Footnotes**



Cursor will move to the bottom of the page, where you type your citation.

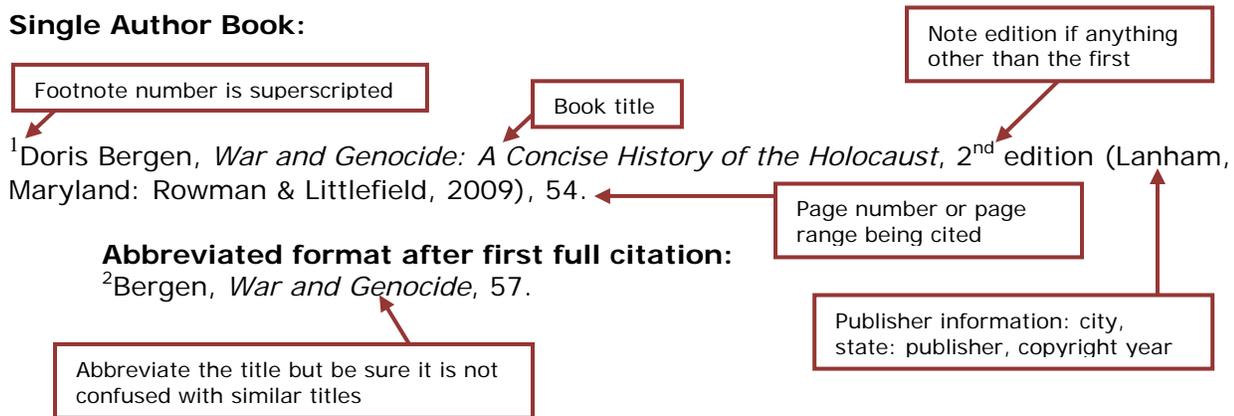
What Information to Include in the Footnote?

Why should I footnote when the professor knows what I had to read to complete an essay?

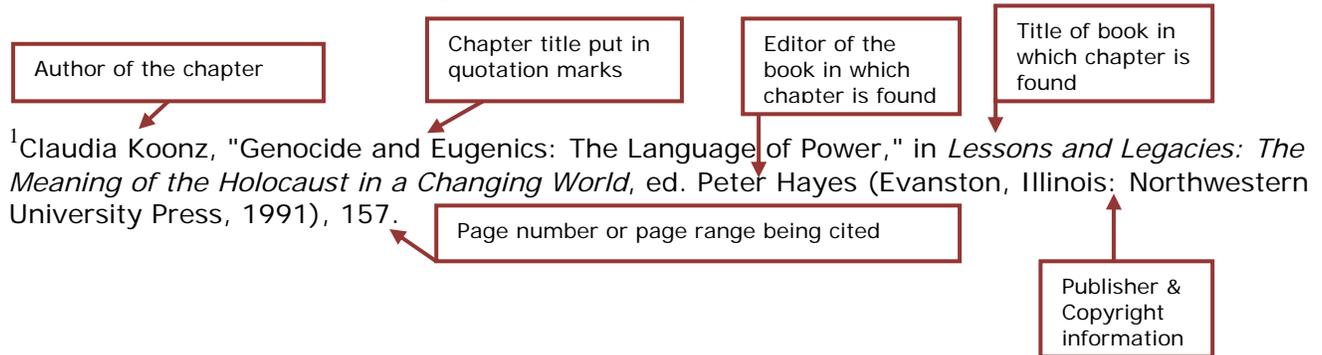
While you may simply think of your essay as an assignment, you must approach your work from a professional historians perspective. Historical essay writing is an exercise in rhetoric and footnotes allow readers to retrace our steps. It gives our work credibility.

The Most Common Citations:

Single Author Book:



Essays in Edited Volumes (E.g. Koonz, Fleming, etc):

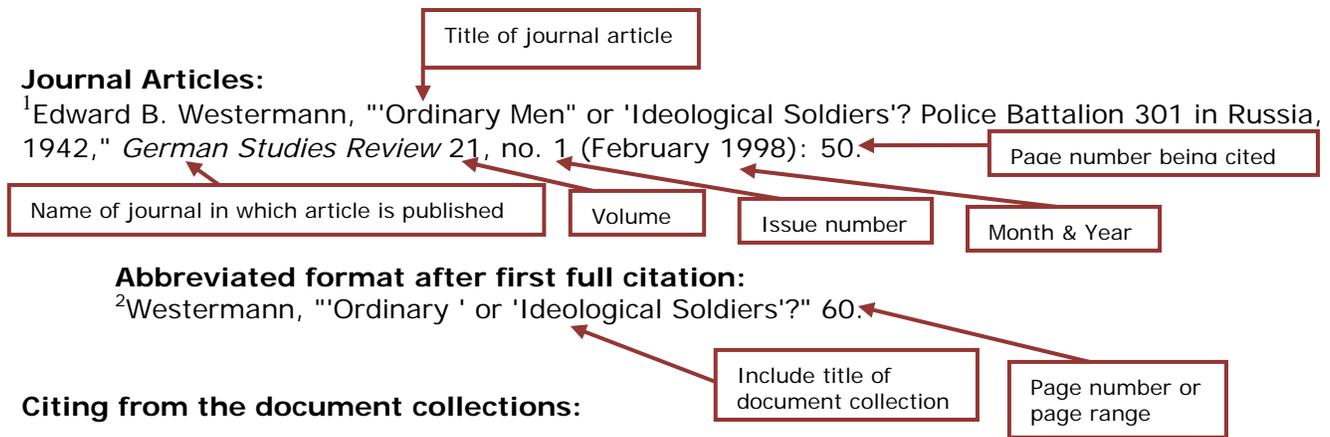


¹David S. Wyman, "The Abandonment of the Jews," in *The Holocaust*, ed. Donald Niewyk, 1st ed., 218.

Abbreviated format after first full citation:

²Wyman, "Abandonment," 217.

I use excerpts from several different editions of the essay collection, *The Holocaust*, so you should indicate edition number when I make it available on the reading.



- In other words, cite the document number, author, title of the document, title of the handout, page number.
- The above examples only represent the most common; countless variations exist. Most important, be consistent, thorough, and make your work retraceable.
- If you know the correct use of "**Ibid.**" as a shortened form of citation, then please do so.

How to Write the Conclusion

- ❖ Because reading involves using your short term memory, an essay conclusion should restate the main points of your interpretation. You should briefly remind the reader how you proved it by making specific references to the most notable evidence or examples that you offered in the body of your paper.
- ❖ Re-read your essay, taking notes on the main ideas in each paragraph and how you proved them, then simply rephrase these to write your conclusion.
- ❖ A conclusion should not introduce new information; it should be a restatement of how you proved your thesis.

Stylistic Conventions in Writing History Papers

- ❖ Most historians prefer papers to be written in the simple past tense, i.e. write about the past in the past tense.
- ❖ Most historians prefer a writing style that is simple and direct (e.g. prefer "because" over "due to the fact that"); we abhor wordiness.

Ineffective: We have done a study of the documents, and we have reached the conclusion that they are invaluable.

Effective: We studied the documents and concluded they are invaluable.

- ❖ You should write in the active voice, not the passive voice (unless you intentionally want to create doubt), i.e. make the subject and verb easy for a reader to identify.

Ineffective: The Nazis were marching.

Effective: The Nazis marched.

Ineffective: The lamppost was hit by the car.

Effective: The car hit the lamppost.

Ineffective: The pamphlets were distributed by the Allies.

Effective: The Allies distributed the pamphlet.

Ineffective: There are many reasons for the outbreak of World War I.

Effective: Many reasons exist for the outbreak of World War I.

- ❖ Avoid the use of clichés, street vernacular, and slang. Why? Their meanings can be too easily misconstrued out of context because of generational and experiential gaps.
- ❖ Avoid the use of first person (I, me, we). Why? It sounds more professional, authoritative, and objective.
- ❖ Avoid the use of personal pronouns (you, us). Why? It is vague, lazy, and implies that your or we were in the past.
 - Ineffective: Browning implies that even if you shot the Jews, you may not have personally hated them.
 - Effective: Browning implies that even if German soldiers shot the Jews, the perpetrators (or they) did not personally hate their victims.
- ❖ Avoid phrases "In my opinion," or "I believe that". Why? Unless you are citing another source, historians assume that what you wrote is your opinion (note I said opinion not sentiment).
- ❖ Avoid using contractions in your paper such as can't, won't, don't. Why? Use of contractions can undermine the impact of the phrase; cannot, will not, do not that all sound more emphatic.
- ❖ The first time you mention an individual in your paper, use his/her first and last name, thereafter refer to the individual by his/her last name.
- ❖ Consider putting essential dates or time periods in parentheses to remind the reader of the time frame. For example, you could write: During the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850) or During the Enlightenment (Eighteenth Century).
- ❖ A country is an "it" not a "they" (Germany = it; Germans = they).
- ❖ During class discussions, we generically refer to our primary sources as documents, but in your written essays, you should be more specific and accurate. For example, do not write, "In Adam Smith's document, . . ." rather you should write, "In Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, . . ."
- ❖ Book titles are always italicized or underlined.

- ❖ Always allow yourself time to proofread and edit your work; ideally give yourself time to set aside your paper for a day so that you may re-read it with a fresh perspective.

Top Ten Tips to Edit Your Paper²

10. **It is polite to point!**

If your paper does not have a workable thesis, it is likely to drift. A good thesis does two things: it states (in affirmative terms) what you intend to prove in your paper (its main point), and it lays out a plan for accomplishing this. For example: World War I resulted from a series of tensions that developed among European nations at the turn of the century. Among these were imperialism, militarism, and an unstable alliance system.

9. **Sometimes it pays to be narrow minded.**

Students get into trouble when they try to do too much. You cannot possibly write about everything there is to say about a subject. Notice how the sample thesis above limits the paper to just three aspects of origins World War I: imperialism, militarism, and alliances.

8. **Sink rocks, don't skip stones.**

Pursue a few things in detail. No one wants to read a paper that merely mentions things; **discuss them**. The usual rule of thumb is that it is better to say a lot about a few things than a very little about many things. Think of it as the difference between skipping a stone across a pond versus tossing a rock to the bottom. Be a rock when you write.

7. **Oh yeah, says who?**

Do not even bother to quote unless it is clear in the text itself who it is you are quoting. You cannot accomplish this with a footnote; you must identify the speaker in the text. Example: According to historian Mary Beth Norton, "The prosperity of the late Gilded Age largely ignored industrial workers."

6. **So what?**

There is a difference between historical evidence and trivia. If the material does not relate to your thesis, it might be interesting but it is not relevant. It is also your job to analyze the material you present. Unless you tell your reader why something is important, your information is simply random material.

5. **Finish your veggies . . . and your thoughts!**

Do not forget to tell the entire story and to tell your reader why you have included what you chose. Your motives may be clear in your mind, but your audience reads what is on the paper, not what is on your mind.

4. **One good example is worth a thousand colorful adjectives.**

Be specific. Every time you make a point, have at least one example to illustrate it. Any hack can use a thesaurus and string together vague adjectives, but a good writer can make her/his work live through examples that make vague points tangible and real. Do not tell me something was "really bad;" explain what made it bad.

² Rob Weir, "Fixing Writing Problems," *The Teaching Professor* (June/July 1998): 7.

3. **Who the hell are "the people?"**

Avoid general categories that are so vague they are meaningless. Be concrete and specific. For example: "The Indians" is a vague phrase: "Cherokees in southwest Georgia in the 1820s" is specific. And the "American or French or Japanese . . . people" as a whole never agreed on a single thing, so do not tell me they did! Tell me which people you mean [such as German government officials or French intellectuals].

2. **Do not put socks in your underwear drawer.**

The vast majority of "organizational problems" come when the writer fails to keep related material in the same place. Thoroughly discuss a topic, then move on to another point. For example, if you are discussing Natives and slaves in a paper, discuss each separately. Do not begin to discuss Natives, switch to slaves, and then jump back to Natives. Your paper should be like an orderly chest of drawers, with each distinct item in its own place.

1. **Proofread and edit.**

This is number one because so few actually do it. Careless errors, clunky phrases, spelling mistakes, and deplorable grammar abound simply because too many writers think they are done once they put the final period onto the page. Not so, Moe. Read your work [out loud and with meaning]. If what you have written sounds wrong to you, it is not going to sound any better to me. Remember: it is no sin to not know how to spell something. It is a sin not to look it up.