

Writing in History

History papers follow the same format as research papers in the humanities, such as English, Philosophy, and Political Science. History essays require an introduction, thesis statement, body of evidence, and conclusion. You are expected to have each paragraph lead logically into the next. The most effective way to create a sense of logic is by following this basic paragraph format:

Topic Sentence

(Introduces the sub-argument of your thesis the paragraph will address)

Evidence

(Supports the claim made in the topic sentence)

Transition Sentence

(Summarizes the point the paragraph is making and ‘sets up’ the next paragraph)

At the university level, History papers are invariably meant to be argumentative rather than descriptive **unless otherwise stated**. There is a tendency for the student to simply compile facts—probably to show the teacher how much they have read—when this is not the exercise. The instructor wants to see that you have “dialogued” with the material, which includes analyzing primary sources for the evidence they contain and forming your own opinion about the significance of their implications. Have you thought critically about the sources you are using? Have you asked yourself questions about the event or time that you are looking at? Approaching a topic with these elements in mind will likely lead to an original and cogent argument, which will not only impress your professor but provide you with a more fulfilling experience of historical study.

It is extremely easy to be overwhelmed by the complexities of a topic; history is multi-causal and multi-faceted, and you may feel that handling only a fraction of the causes is insufficient. However, the same rule applies as it does in other disciplines: If you can’t get the thesis statement narrowed down to one or two coherent sentences, then you are probably handling too broad an issue.

Narrowing a topic can be done once you have an overview of the issues. For example, under the general topic of Confederation you may wish to discuss why British Columbia in particular decided to join (i.e., promise of a railway, prominent pro-confederates, economic factors, etc.). Methods for this process will vary with each person (i.e., some will use mindmaps or brainstorming, others may like making lists, etc.).

Once your topic is sufficiently narrowed, it is much easier form an opinion and defend it using your skills of analysis. Writers of history papers are often unsure if what they are saying in their paper qualifies as an argument. A good rule of thumb is if there is an alternate explanation for the position you have taken towards the event or element you are dealing with, you have an argument. Take sides! Be brave!

History has two source classifications: **primary** and **secondary**. Both primary and secondary sources are used in undergraduate papers. Primary sources are those documents that were produced by someone who witnessed or represents an event or era: a diary, an autobiography, a newspaper account, a photograph, statistics, recordings, etc. A secondary source is something which is 'second-hand' knowledge: a history book, a biography, a textbook, a journal article, etc. These categories are not cast in stone, however. Each source you consult has been created by someone with certain values, opinions and objectives. It is widely accepted today that no one is capable of writing purely "objective" history. This observation does not make everything invalid, however. We must learn to assess each source we use for its validity, its objectives (who was the author writing to and why), and its value to our project. In higher-level papers (3rd and 4th year), it is often expected that a section of your paper will be dedicated to an analysis of existing scholarship and how you will utilize or refute the theoretical frameworks that have been applied to your topic.

Citations

The citation style used for History is usually Chicago Style. This style typically uses footnotes or endnotes and a bibliography. In general, your footnotes and bibliography should contain enough information that your reader can find the original sources that contain the information you are referring to.

The Academic Success Centre has specific handouts that go into detail on the formatting requirements for Chicago.