**A Guide to Writing Historical Research Essays**

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**SECTION I**

**Why Write a History Research Essay?**

Professors in the History department assign essays expecting their students to demonstrate definite cognitive skills in their written assignments. Such expectations include a demonstration of:

* “Superior grasp of the subject matter,”
* “Familiarity with the appropriate literature and techniques,”
* A demonstration of “critical,” “constructive,” and “high degree of creative and/or logical thinking,” and the ability to “organize” ideas, “analyze” issues, and “integrate ideas.”

These expectations are fully described in the Undergraduate Academic Calendar of the University of Guelph. The essay is a tool your professors use to build in you those cognitive skills that you are expected to acquire during your time as a student in the university. For instance, essay-writing demands that you understand (correctly interpret the requirements of) the essay topic read around the topic gather relevant information from the library take notes to use in writing your essay analyze and interpret your evidence outline your arguments, and arrange your evidence around such an outline in an effective order. You are asked at every turn to make important decisions and judgements and to make assessments and evaluation of orders of significance. On top of all of these is the skill of effectively communicating your ideas to others in a clear, concise, logical and convincing manner. Your professor can assess what skills you have, how well you have deployed them and what areas of weakness remain that need attention just by reading your essay.

On your part, it is reasonable to assert that you want to perform excellently, preferably turning out “A” papers during your course of studies in the university. The question then is how to ensure you achieve this goal? What steps could you take to write an excellent history research paper?

**Choosing Your Essay Topic**

You are either given a topic to write on or asked to choose one of your liking. If the latter is the case, you have a double-edged sword in your hands. On the one hand, it allows you room to research topics that particularly appeal to you and to which you can give full commitment. On the other hand, it demands that you ensure that your topic is viable. Essays are designed, in part, to test your appreciation of certain themes or issues in a course of studies. Hence, it would be logical to expect that themes, questions and controversies that come up during the course of the study would help you specify a viable limit for your topic. Discussing your chosen topic with your T. A. or professor to ensure its parameters are right will not hurt. Other factors that affect the viability of your topic include the page limit your professor set for the essay and its submission deadline. You can only deal with so much material within a given period and in so many pages. Choosing a topic that is too broad and general will not only prove unmanageable, but might well result in a flat and wide ranging narrative enclosing a large amount of detail but lacking in interpretation or analysis.

Consider the following two topics:

1. The Causes of War
2. The Origins of The First and Second World Wars

The first topic is *too broad* and will prove *unwieldy*. The second is much more *manageable* and *focused* and is obviously better. The latter topic easily allows room for analysis, comparison, contrast, and assessment; all tasks that go beyond the narrative.

**Thinking Through Your Topic:**

Whichever way you come by your topic, you need to think critically through it. You should

* Rephrase the topic in different ways
* Dissect its various components
* Approach each from different angles in your thought and attempt different possible interpretations of it.

If you have been provided with the topic, it is important to break down the sentence comprising the topic into its grammatical parts, identifying what exactly you are expected to do. Does it call you to:

* Identify?
* Describe?
* Explain?
* Analyze?
* Discuss?
* Compare?
* Contrast?
* Assess?
* Synthesize?
* Verify?

Do you understand what task each of these verbs demands of you? Can you identify a clear thesis to argue or analyze in the topic? Do you perceive in your topic a clear-cut objective around which you can structure a set of arguments? Can you in two or three sentences answer the question of where, for your essay topic, you are coming from and hope to end? A good topic allows you to conceive of a working thesis even before you start or do much research for the essay. Your understanding of the topic provides some guideposts for efficient library research. You would be able to zoom in on materials that are directly relevant to the thesis and to the argument your topic consists of without wasting time reading materials that are only marginally related to the major issues you hope to discuss or analyse.

**Historical Sources:**

In writing your essay, you want to test your argument or a particular point of view with the available evidence. The perspective you choose on your topic might involve you refuting a contending position. Whatever the case may be, you want to argue your position convincingly showing why you prefer it to another, being able to perceptively analyse the relationship between a set of positions. For all these, you need evidence and these you get from your historical sources. The two major sources you will encounter are primary and secondary sources.

Historical source evidence provides the building blocks for your composition. All the books you have ever read and the materials you will consult for your essay are themselves one or a combination of primary, secondary/tertiary evidence. When you write an article for a newspaper, publish your books, or perhaps when in the future, as a civil servant, you are called to head an investigation to produce a report or prepare a position paper for government or civil use, the materials with which you produce your write-up fall into one or a combination of these categories. Because the historian is forever looking for all possible perspectives on an issue or interplay of events, and as such, the nearest approximation to “truth”, what combination of source materials you employ, their quantity and quality, quite apart from your interpretation of them, would affect the originality, credibility and effectiveness of your essay. You therefore want to have appropriate and sufficient source materials to use for your essay.

**Primary Sources:**

These are first hand documentation of some historical events, for example, in diaries, journals, log books, private or official letters and memos, and video and audio tapes, etc. Others include songs, proverbs, sagas, myths, written record of an oral account by a first hand witness, and oral traditions passed from generation to generation, recorded or not, etc. Often times, primary sources would themselves have no further source beyond themselves (i.e., other than their firsthand observer or recorder). As you will have noted, primary sources might be centuries-old, as indeed, are some records of sagas and myths. However, some might well be as recent as last winter, for instance, where you incorporate into your essay an oral interview with your parents that relate their experience returning home from a journey in an unheated car when the last snowstorm hit Ontario.

**Secondary Sources:**

These include books, journal articles and articles in collections of essays in which authors or researchers have made use of selected evidence from primary sources to produce their reports, analyses, interpretations and conclusions. Thus, assuming you publish all the letters you have ever written to your friends, they would constitute a primary source. However, if I use them to write a biography about you, the biography becomes a secondary source. While the biography may contain copious quotations from your letters and, perhaps, pictures of you from when you were a toddler, it is nonetheless a secondary source. It is *second hand* observation or interpretation of materials derived from your *first hand* letters.

History professors often require that you utilize much primary source evidence in your essay. It is obvious that secondary sources already come with established positions, views and possible biases. You have better chances of producing original works that can go beyond pre-set arguments and positions in secondary sources when you go to the very sources secondary sources have used—primary sources. This allows you to decide for yourself what evidence to select and what logical and reasonable interpretation and analysis the evidence could bear. You could then judge whether the position maintained in the secondary source could be sustained or challenged. Since secondary sources are based on primary sources, it is obvious that they contain primary source materials that you could use, should you not have access to the original primary materials. Thus, a student who has no access to the compilation of your published original letters could nonetheless make use of extracts from those I had used in writing your biography.

**Note Taking:**

Having decided on what sources to use, you go over your sources carefully, gathering your evidence, guided by your topic and the arguments about it and the analysis that you want to test out. You can take good notes placing your evidence under appropriate heads, if you choose. Each of the note-taking options that you might employ, viz., summarising, paraphrasing or quoting demands that you meticulously place the full citation for each piece of evidence you gather beside the respective note.

*Important*: Any information or evidence, however relevant to your topic, whose source you forgot to write down in your note is useless. As such, it might be best to start with writing down in your notebook the full citation for each source as you consult it.

**Writing an Essay:**

**Using An Outline**

Before you start on the draft of your essay, you might need a formal outline. Alternatively you might work only with a mental map of the various sections and subsections into which you wish to structure your essay. At any rate, you have done enough research that the basic outline of your argument or thesis is fairly clear in your mind. The relationship of the line of argument you wish to pursue to alternative ones and to available evidence is getting clearly set at the back of your mind and you are ready with your evidence with which to engage them. Once you work these in your notebook or computer into a structure of sectional and sub-sectional heads in a logical order, your writing experience could proceed smoothly and methodically. This affords a clear preview of the essay that you will write; the relationship between each section, subsection, and points or ideas in it; and how logically they connect

**Working With a Critical Attitude**

You should start writing your essay, maintaining a critical attitude all along. An essay that is structured to argue for a point of view or contend for or against a position would most likely stimulate an engagement in critical evaluative thinking. You would sift your information, ideas, and viewpoints, and evaluate and assign orders of significance to them. As you set arguments against arguments, using fact and information that are organized in order of significance, you stand more chances of discovering different or new perspectives and insights that would make your essay stimulating, original and incisive.

**Structuring Your Essay**

Students are taught from high school that an essay consists of the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. A fourth section is the reference list or bibliography.

**Introduction**

The point about introducing anything is to make it familiar to the audience. You want to advertise your essay in such a way that the reader gives it due attention. You can do this by starting off your essay highlighting a bigger background issue within which your topic or thesis finds a particularly relevant context. Supposing your essay is about the origins of the First and the Second World War. You might start off by drawing attention to the September 11 tragedy, the American war in Afghanistan, the late Gulf war, or the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict; how devastating they have been to human kind; how these wars pale in devastation compared to World War I & II, and how the world could not afford World War III. Seeking to understand why these wars broke out implies a desire to be able to prevent future re-occurrence. You then state that your essay seeks to do just that! You go ahead to impress on the reader what your thesis is and what focus you bring to bear on it. You can include in this section a general description of the structure of the essay, mentioning the major sections and how they are connected to each other.

**Main Body**

Here you lay out your main arguments, the components and sub-components to them and you elaborate on them one after the other, meanwhile connecting them with one another logically and cohesively. Remember to tackle your points one at a time, making sure you have a point per paragraph, explaining each and relating them to your central thesis or larger argument.

**Conclusion**

Until you have exhausted all the points in the body of the essay that you want to make in support of your position, you cannot write a conclusion. Put another way, the conclusion is not the last point in the argument that makes up your thesis. Your conclusion could sum up the main points in your essay, constantly aware that the reader is not interested in rereading the paper all over. If you were writing the essay on World Wars I and II, you may conclude by picking up on the point in the introduction about the need to understand why wars break out in general by stating the implication of your arguments for the grand and noble desire to prevent World War III.

**Writing Well**

An excellent essay consumes resources. You will have to work hard researching your topic and sweat it out writing on it. This, however, is hardly the end of the matter. Failure in your essay to communicate your views and ideas clearly, concisely, and effectively to your professor could ruin an otherwise excellent effort. You must make all effort to ensure that you express your views in correct grammar, paying attention to your spelling, punctuations, and sentence structures. You must follow conventions on citation of evidence, and generally ensure that your essay is word-processed and looks professional.

**Proofreading**

It has often been emphasised how difficult it is to catch one’s own mistakes. Nonetheless, do your best to proofread your essay as many times a possible. Also, get friends to proofread for you—you can proofread theirs too. This could help rid your essay of debilitating typographical, grammatical and spelling errors.