

HISTORY WRITING GUIDE**

GENERAL INFORMATION

This guide sets out to accelerate your learning by providing you with advance information about how you will be evaluated and how you can avoid the most common examples of poor writing.

It takes hard work to improve your writing. The effort is worthwhile for two reasons. First, in the short run, you will get a better grade for the course if you demonstrate consistent effort and improved writing. Second, in the long run, you will find that an ability to communicate on paper is a rare and valuable skill that will enhance your success in almost any career.

These are the criteria for grading:

1. Your demonstrated understanding of the information in relevant documents and scholarly texts.
2. Your presentation of a significant and clearly stated argument/interpretation on the first page.
3. The development of your argument in a persuasive manner through the body of your paper by gathering evidence.
4. Your command of grammar, spelling, and clarity of expression.
5. Your presentation in a concluding paragraph of a clear summation of your argument and of the supporting evidence. This does not mean simply repeating your introductory paragraph. The conclusion also demonstrates the broader relevance of your argument to either themes of the course or a given topic.

FORMAT

1. Type your paper in a normal-sized font (e.g. Times New Roman 12).
2. Double-space your text.
3. Do not skip lines between paragraphs, but do indent.
4. Set your margins at one inch all around (left and right, top and bottom).
5. Staple your paper.
6. Number your pages.
7. Citations must be in footnote form at the bottom of the page on which you refer to your source. See below for examples.
8. Include a bibliography on a separate page. Examples of this are in the **Citations** section.
9. On the first page include your name, course title, professor's name, and date. Single space this section. Skip one line followed by your centered title; skip another line and begin your introduction. E.g.:

Caitlin Kelly
Themes in Modern History
Professor White
November 28, 2009

The Lasting Significance of the Medieval Period

Though some historians claim that industrialization of the nineteenth century marked the transition to modern times, nearly all the monumental changes of the last two hundred years had roots in European developments of the medieval era.

Note: if a title page is required, center your title on the page one third of the way down followed by your name, course, professor's name, and date blocked two thirds of the way down the page on the right. Single space this section. Do not number the title page. Begin numbering on the first page of text.

PLAGIARISM

As stated in the student handbook, Marist College adopts the position of Modern Language Association Handbook, New York, 1977, par. 6:

“Plagiarism may take the form of repeating another’s sentences as your own, adopting a particularly apt phrase as your own, paraphrasing someone else’s line of thinking in the development of a thesis as though it were your own. In short, to plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have borrowed from another.” Violations could result in a penalty up to and including the grade of “F” and/or suspension or expulsion from the College. See the section on **Citations**, below, for specific examples of when and how to cite properly.

STYLE GUIDELINES

1. Your sentences should use specific subjects, preferably human beings, followed quickly with an active verb. Minimize your use of "to be" (is, was, were) in favor of action verbs (e.g. spoke, ran, attacked, denounced, insisted...). Especially avoid the passive voice. In passive sentences a form of "to be" precedes a past participle form of an action verb. For example:

"The cherry tree was cut down by George Washington."

Rather than the more active:

"George Washington cut down the cherry tree."

Passive sentences cripple the easy and clear flow of information. Passives often mask who was responsible for an action. For example:

"The letter was written in a dull style."

Far better to employ an active voice with a human subject:

"Thomas Jefferson wrote the letter in a dull style."

2. When writing about an event that occurred in the past, use the past tense. This seems simple, but many students never stray from the present tense. For example, they will write:

"Washington is one of the finest axmen in American history. He especially likes to chop down cherry trees."

When we read such sentences we assume that you refer to some living Washington, rather than the President who died in 1799.

3. Be consistent in your use of tense. Some students shift from past to present and back to past tense within the same paragraph (or even within the same sentence) while describing the same people and events set at the same moment in the past. For example:

"Washington has wooden teeth. He used them to eat with. Washington never gums his food. He avoided apples but loves cherries."

4. Short, relevant quotes can be invaluable to illustrating your points but you should avoid the excessive use of quotation. Some students write papers where most of the words are not their own but quotations from their reading. Avoid long quotations; a short, pithy quote is always more effective. Only use quotes which vividly and precisely illustrate your point. Be careful to introduce each quotation by identifying who is speaking and integrate it into the context of your topic, argument, or surrounding analysis. Do not end a paragraph with a quote.
5. As a rule, express only one idea per sentence. Use a sequence of sentences to develop the subtleties and ramifications of your idea - instead of stuffing the whole lot into one overburdened sentence. When proofreading, if you encounter a long, overly complex sentence, devise a way to break it into two or three shorter statements.
6. Your paper ought to have a clear progression. A stream of consciousness will not suffice. Start with an introduction: this describes the problem you will address and describes your argument in brief. Then proceed into the body of the paper where you present your readers with evidence intended to convince them that your argument is correct. End with a conclusion where you sum up your evidence and make clear its connection to your argument. This is not the same thing as repeating verbatim what you said in the introduction.

7. Every paragraph should have a dominant idea expressed in a single "topic sentence" that controls the remaining sentences in that paragraph. Ordinarily that topic sentence should be the first one in the paragraph. It conveys to the reader what the paragraph is about. The rest of the sentences should clarify, amplify, or demonstrate that core idea.
8. Be careful about the sequence of your paragraphs. If you pulled out all the other sentences in your paragraphs, leaving only the topic sentences, they should make a natural and coherent chain of ideas that could serve as a synopsis of your entire paper. If they do not, you need to reorder your paragraphs and/or improve the clarity and cogency of your theme sentences.
9. No one can accomplish the preceding guidelines in a first draft. After writing a rough draft, you need to revise it to polish your prose, analysis, and citations.

CITATIONS

You must provide a citation (reference note) every time you do one of the following three things:

1. Use a direct quotation.
2. Paraphrase the words or ideas of another person.
3. Assert as fact any information that is not widely known.

Most students realize that they must cite direct quotations, but some do not know that they must also cite paraphrases. Anything you derive from the ideas of an author must be cited. You must also use common sense to cite information that is not widely known.

Failure to cite constitutes plagiarism, a grave academic offence as noted above and in the student handbook. It is extremely important that you document your work, both to give proper credit to authors and to provide a map for your reader to re-trace your research.

A. Quotations

A direct quotation is set in double quotation marks ("Close the door!") unless it is longer than four lines. If the quote ends a sentence, the period should be enclosed within the quotation marks. In the case of more than four lines of quotation, single space and indent the entire quotation and do not use quotation marks. Single quotation marks are only used for quotes within quotes (Joe claimed, "According to John, Jane yelled 'close the door!'").

B. Citation Style for FOOTNOTES

Book – One Author

¹ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 67.

Information to include in the basic format:

¹ Author(s), *Full Title* (Place of Publication: Publisher, year of publication), page.

Book – Two Authors

¹ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 128.

Document in a Collection

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” in Michael P. Johnson, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 263.

¹ Author, “Document Name,” in Editor(s) Name, *Title of Book* (Place of Publication: Publisher, year of publication), page.

Article in a Journal

¹ Russell F. Weigley, “The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell,” *Journal of Military History* 57 (October 1993): 27.

¹ Author, “Title of the Article,” *Name of Journal* and volume number (date of issue): page.

Essay or Article in a Book

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, “Patriotism, Sacrifice, and Self Interest,” in Michael Perman, ed., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Second Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 265-276.

¹ Author, “Essay or Article Title,” in Editor(s) Name, *Title of Book* (Place of Publication: Publisher, year of publication), page.

Online Item

¹ Gregory Palast, “Florida’s Flawed ‘Voter-Cleansing Program,’” *Salon.com*, accessed December 4, 2000, http://salon.com/politics/feature/2000/12/04/voter_file/index.html.

¹ Author, “Title of Piece,” *Name of the Site*, [if different from the URL], date piece accessed, URL.

Consecutive References to the Same Source

If a citation is exactly the same as the one immediately preceding it (except for the page number), it may be shortened to “Ibid.” For example, if you made three consecutive references to Eric Foner’s book, two from page 14 and one from page 20, they would appear like this:

¹ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

If you return to cite Foner again after referring to one or more different sources, use a shortened form:

⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 77.

C. Citation Style for BIBLIOGRAPHY

You include the same basic information in a bibliography as you do in your first citation of a source in your footnotes. However, the second line should be indented (called “hanging line” format) and use periods instead of commas to separate some of the elements. Note: unlike footnotes, bibliographical entries are arranged in alphabetical order. Therefore, you list the first author of an entry “last name, first.” You also include in your bibliography all the sources that you used for the paper, not just the ones that you cited in your footnotes (frequently, however, when you cite in the footnotes all the sources that you used, the lists will match up exactly).

Book – One Author

Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

Book – Two Authors

Elkins, Stanley and Eric McKittrick. *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Document in a Collection

Lincoln, Abraham “The Gettysburg Address.” In *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Michael P. Johnson, 263. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001.

Article in a Journal

Weigley, Russell F. "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell." *Journal of Military History* 57 (October 1993): 27-58.

Essay or Article in a Book

Faust, Drew Gilpin. "Patriotism, Sacrifice, and Self Interest." In *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Second Edition, ed. Michael Perman, 265-276. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.

Online Item

Palast, Gregory. "Florida's Flawed 'Voter-Cleansing Program.'" *Salon.com*. Accessed December 4, 2000. http://salon.com/politics/feature/2000/12/04/voter_file/index.html.

D. Complicated Citations

It is likely that at some point you will have to cite material that does not fit one of the above examples. You can consult *The Chicago Manual of Style* (15th edition) or Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers* (6th edition) to find examples of complicated citations. Even then, you may sometimes find that your source seems not to fit any correct format. In these cases, just remember to 1) credit your source, 2) give your reader a way to retrace your steps, and 3) be as consistent as possible.

E. Example of a Paragraph with Proper Citation Format

Douglas MacArthur was confident that his defensive plans for the Philippines were sound. Some modern observers agree. As Military Advisor to the Commonwealth Government, MacArthur spoke with a surety that comes only with arrogance. MacArthur declared that "no government in the world, if they pay any attention at all to the opinions of the experienced military and naval staffs, would ever dare to attack the Philippines and incite a response from the United States."¹ Time and again, MacArthur boasted about his defense plans and provided

¹ Quoted in Michael Feldspar, *The Philippines in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953), 11.

President Roosevelt and his administration with reason to believe that the Philippines could be defended. In a question and answer session with American and Philippine news reporters in the fall of 1939, MacArthur described his plan:

The national defense plan includes coastal defenses of the highest order, constant naval patrols, and a concentration of highly mobile and well-trained troops with a capacity to strike as quickly as an asp. If it is earnestly and thoroughly carried out an enemy could never marshal the necessary forces at any vital Philippine area. His chances at victory would, therefore, be nil.²

Historians Potter and Peterson are sympathetic to this point of view. They suggest that if MacArthur's recommendations had been followed to the letter, the islands would never have fallen to the enemy.³

F. *Example of a Bibliography*

Feldspar, Michael. *The Philippines in World War II*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953.

MacArthur, Douglas. "Conversation with the Press." In *Documents in American History*, Juanita Jones ed., 144-6. Boston: Textbook Press, 2008.

Peterson, Melissa. "Protecting the World: United States Policy on the Eve of World War II." *Journal of Military Successes* 57 (2004): 112-130.

Potter, Harry. *MacArthur and his World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

² Douglas MacArthur, "Conversation with the Press," in Juanita Jones, ed., *Documents in American History* (Boston: Textbook Press, 2008), 145.

³ Harry Potter, *MacArthur and his World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47-9; Melissa Peterson, "Protecting the World: United States Policy on the Eve of World War II," *Journal of Military Successes* 57 (2004): 119.

5 BASIC THINGS TO REMEMBER WHILE WRITING YOUR ESSAY

****USE THIS AS A CHECKLIST BEFORE SUBMITTING THE PAPER****

1. State your argument in your introductory paragraph.
2. Develop your argument in a step-by-step and logical fashion in the body of your essay.
 - * devote each paragraph to one specific idea.
 - * begin each paragraph in the body of your essay with a topic sentence that makes the focus of the paragraph crystal clear.
3. Support your assertions.
 - * use evidence from the course readings to make your case. Do **NOT** use material from other sources unless otherwise specified.
4. Be clear, concise, and precise in your writing.
 - * revise your sentences so that they express your ideas clearly.
 - * make your sentences short and to the point.
 - * do not repeat yourself unnecessarily.
 - * do not exaggerate
 - * say what you mean and mean what you say. USE APPROPRIATE WORDS.
5. Write a sophisticated essay.
 - * a **sophisticated essay** takes into consideration all important contrary viewpoints and countervailing evidence and shows why the writer's argument still prevails.
 - * an **unsophisticated essay** simplifies, ignores, or misunderstands contrary viewpoints and countervailing evidence.

**Some portions of this guide have been adopted from the following:

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Alan Taylor's writing guide

Monmouth University History Department Writing Guide

Anonymous contributors