

3. PAPERS IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Review essays are often based on your responses to assigned readings or films from the course syllabus.

However, a **research paper** in history requires extensive reading and research.

Primary sources are produced in the time-period under study, e.g. original historical documents (newspaper articles, letters, diaries, legislative bills, memoirs or eyewitness accounts).

Secondary sources are commentaries on primary sources, produced after the time-period under study. (Note that many sources can serve as either primary or secondary sources, depending on your topic and particular frame of reference.)

An essay on history (let alone a thesis paper) **MUST contain the analysis/discussion of** at least one **primary source**. Be alert for signs of bias, especially when reading modern history.

MA papers in history/culture **MUST** contain original argumentation/approach. Some suggestions:

- explain the significance of a research topic and offer a provisional interpretation of a new material despite scholarly neglect, or
- highlight gaps and deficiencies in the literature that exists on the topic and examine new or different evidence to correct these shortcomings, or
- call for a reassessment of the existing literature based on recent findings, new methodologies, or original questions.

THE THESIS

An effective thesis:

- cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”
- is not a topic;
- nor is it a fact;
- nor is it an opinion.

“Reasons for the fall of communism” is a topic. “Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe” is a fact known by educated people. “The fall of communism is the best thing that ever happened in Europe” is an opinion.

An effective thesis:

- **should never** be a **question**. Readers of academic essays expect to have questions discussed, explored, or even answered. A question (“Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?”) is not an argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.
- **should never** be a **list**. “For political, economic, social and cultural reasons, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe” does a good job of “telegraphing” the reader what to expect in the essay: a section about political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a section about cultural reasons. However,

political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much the only possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and does not advance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

- **should never be vague, combative or confrontational.** (“Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil.” This is hard to argue (evil from whose perspective? what does evil mean?) and it is likely to mark you as moralistic and judgmental rather than rational and thorough. It also may spark a defensive reaction from readers sympathetic to communism. If readers strongly disagree with you right off the bat, they may stop reading.

An effective thesis:

- **has a definable, arguable claim.** “While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline” is an effective thesis sentence that “telegraphs,” so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, “Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim.”
- **should be as clear and specific as possible.** Avoid overused, general terms and abstractions. For example, “Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite’s inability to address the economic concerns of the people” is more powerful than “Communism collapsed due to societal discontent.”
- **has two parts.** It should tell **what** you plan to argue, and it should “telegraph” **how** you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

Steps of constructing a powerful thesis:

1. **Analyze your primary sources.** Look for tension, interest, ambiguity, controversy, and/or complication. Does the author contradict himself or herself? Is a point made and later reversed? What are the deeper implications of the author’s argument? Figuring out the why to one or more of these questions, or to related questions, will put you on the path to developing a working thesis.
2. **Once you have a working thesis, write it down.** There is nothing as frustrating as hitting on a great idea for a thesis, then forgetting it when you lose concentration. And by writing down your thesis you will be forced to formulate it clearly, logically, and concisely.
3. **Keep your thesis prominent in your introduction.** A good, standard place for your thesis statement is at the end of an introductory paragraph, especially in shorter (5-15 page) essays. Readers are used to finding theses there, so they automatically pay more attention when they read the last sentence of your introduction.
4. **Anticipate the counterarguments.** Once you have a working thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of the arguments that you will need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counterargument. If yours does not, then it is not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HISTORY/CULTURE PAPERS

Write in **the past tense** and avoid enlivening your prose by writing in the “literary present” tense. Since all historical events (including the composition of primary and secondary sources) took place at some point in the past, write about them in the past tense.

Avoid vague generalizations. (“People always say that...”)

Avoid anachronisms: resist the temptation to relate all historical arguments or concerns back to the present. Rather, investigate the past on its own terms taking care not to jumble the chronological order of events. Aim to understand, rather than judge, the past.

Paraphrase if you can, quote only if you must. When you do quote, introduce the source and context of every remark for the benefit of an unfamiliar reader. Do not quote facts and summaries of events. Quote an original idea of an author, an original expression or memorable line of an orator or the personal experience of a diarist.

Provide necessary context. You are responsible for interrogating sources, interpreting evidence, and reporting your findings about the interplay of text and context. Proofread several times.

Numbers: When using numbers, it is important to decide whether to write the number out in full (two hundred thousand four hundred and six) or to use numerals (200,406). There are some rules to follow to make sure you use numbers in the right way:

One should spell out

- whole numbers from one to one hundred (remember that some words require a hyphen: twenty-six, thirty-nine),
- round numbers, and round numbers combined with the whole numbers from one to one hundred (e.g. two hundred, twenty-two million),
- any number beginning a sentence (“One hundred and seventeen protests were lodged with the ombudsman.”). You should avoid beginning a sentence with a number that is not written out. If a sentence begins with a year, write ‘The year’ before writing out the year in numbers. (“The year 1849 saw the great gold rush in California.”)

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE FOR HISTORY/CULTURE-RELATED PAPERS

The Use of Footnotes

Footnotes are the acceptable method of acknowledging material which is not your own when you use it in an essay. Basically, footnoted material is of three types:

- Direct quotations from another author’s work. (These must be placed in quotation marks).
- Paraphrase from another author’s work.
- Material of an explanatory nature which does not fit into the flow of the body of the text.

In the text of an essay, material to be footnoted should be marked with a raised number immediately following the words or ideas that are being cited. The footnotes should be numbered in sequence throughout the entire essay.

Use two formats to reference a source: one when the source is cited for the first time (Notes), one for subsequent citation (Shortened notes).

Bibliography

The bibliography should be on a separate page. (Do not press the “Enter” key several times to start a new page, but use the “page break” function.) It should list the relevant sources quoted in the paper. This list should be arranged alphabetically by the surname of the author. (Unlike the footnote reference, the surname is shown first, set off from the rest of the information.)

Use a hanging indent for the entries of the bibliography (the first line begins on the margin, all the following lines are indented).

Check out the Chicago guide at:

Chicago Guide

https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html