

***Writing Graduate Papers in History:
Research Papers, Historiographies, and Book Reviews***

As a student of history, your ability to present a clearly written argument based on primary research and grounded in an understanding of existing scholarship is one of the most essential skills you will develop. This paper is intended to give you an overview of the essentials for three types of academic writing in history: the research paper, the historiography, and the book review. All history papers should be cited using the Chicago (sometimes called Turabian) Manual of Style and use footnotes.¹

Writing History Research Papers

What does a history paper do?

1. **It asks a question:** This is both the most obvious and most important part of approaching your research. An historical research paper does not merely recount “what happened,” but makes an argument about *why* something happened the way it did. A history paper should never be mere summary, but should present a claim and analyze it through the lens of larger social, political, and cultural trends. The question itself may not be presented in your final paper, but it should be the starting point for how you begin formulating your arguments.
2. **It makes an argument:** This is where you present your thesis statement, which is essentially your answer to the “why?” question asked above. Your thesis should not simply state a fact, but make a clear (and defensible) argument. Ideally, it presents a new approach to a topic and prompts original analysis. Here are a few examples of what a thesis statement should (and shouldn’t) look like:

Statement	Analysis
World War I was a global conflict with diverse and complex origins.	This is not a thesis statement. It merely states general and vague facts and does not present a defensible argument, as it cannot be disagreed with.
World War I was a global conflict whose origins were rooted in the rise of nationalism, growing imperialism, increased militarism, and changing economic interests.	This is a thesis statement, but it is not a particularly compelling one. It largely restates accepted generalities and doesn’t add anything new to existing scholarship.

¹https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/chicago_manual_of_style_17th_edition.html

World War I was a global conflict whose origins were shaped by a lack of efficient systems of communication combined with a decrease in effective diplomatic tactics. ²	This is a defensible thesis statement. It presents a new interpretation, can be supported by specific evidence, and makes a clear argument.
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While you will probably have a working thesis early in your research, it will likely change over the course of your writing as you continue to analyze the evidence. Don't get too attached to one thesis statement – always adapt your arguments to fit your evidence and not the other way around.

3. **It uses evidence:** History is a discipline of evidence. Most of this evidence is made up of primary sources, such as letters, manuscripts, newspaper articles, diaries, photographs, etc. Your claims should always be based in tangible evidence that substantiates your arguments. Even if you are writing a research paper largely based on secondary sources, you still need to present specific pieces of evidence from those sources to support and strengthen your own conclusions.
4. **It interacts with existing scholarship:** One word you will see repeatedly in the next few pages is “conversation.” An essential aspect of history scholarship is contributing to and engaging with the larger academic community. Your work should not exist in a vacuum, but be based on interactions with existing scholarship. See the next step and the next section on writing historiography for more on what this might look like in practice.
5. **It makes a new contribution to the historical conversation:** Whether you're writing a class research paper or a dissertation, your work should contribute something new to existing scholarship. This can feel like a daunting task, especially if you are writing about a topic that is relatively new to you. What's important to remember is that you don't have to be an expert in the field or be familiar with all existing scholarship about a given topic to make a contribution to the literature. While doing your research, think about questions like: What gaps do I see in the scholarship? What questions do I have that existing work doesn't answer? How might I have approached the topic differently than other scholars have previously done? You don't have to disagree with the conclusions made by existing scholarship to add to the conversation. You might agree with an argument but want to expand on it, or come to the same conclusions but using different evidence. There is really no “wrong” answer as long as you back up your conclusions with solid examples. History may be a discipline of facts and evidence, but it also thrives on creativity and originality.

More resources for writing history research papers:

A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper (Harvard) - probably the best brief all-around guide to writing history papers:

https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_history.pdf

² This argument is adapted from John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

Steps for Writing a History Paper (UCLA):

<https://history.ucla.edu/academics/undergraduate/history-writing-center/steps-for-writing-a-history-paper-2>

CARS Model – how to find your research niche:

https://mycampus.cgu.edu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=df4522b9-0d79-4e5e-a711-14ee8f7006fb&groupId=237180&filename=CARS%20Model%20Handout%20cop

Writing Historiography

An essential part of academic training in history is learning to write an effective historiography. Historiography is often referred to as the “history of history,” and at its core examines how historians have approached and interpreted a particular historical trend or event over time. Rather than examining the historical topic itself, historiography studies the academic conversation that has taken place around that topic. The study of historical schools of thought may extend from a global to a national to even an individual level, but an historiography paper is not simply a bibliography of works written on the same subject. Rather, it relates them to larger academic trends and analyzes why these trends may have developed the way they did.

Historiography may comprise a stand-alone paper or be part of a larger research project. It is, for example, a major component of a Ph.D. dissertation or M.A. thesis in history. For dissertations or theses, the historiography will usually comprise its own section of the paper, but should also be integrated throughout by relating historiographic trends to your own analysis of a given academic topic.

Steps for Writing an Historiography:

1. **Choose a topic:** Your focus should be relatively specific to a particular historical event or thematic topic, and will usually center on a particular set of historians. An overly broad topic will be very difficult to analyze effectively, particularly in shorter papers. Here are a few examples of possible approaches:

Possible topic	Analysis
The Russian Revolution	It would nearly impossible to write a single historiography on a topic with such an immense amount of historical literature.
Soviet historians writing about the Russian Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s	While potentially still extensive, this is a much more manageable topic, as it focuses on a specific set of historians writing at a particular time, and allows for much more in-depth analysis of the literature.
The role of women in the Russian Revolution	This is another viable approach, as instead of focusing on a specific set of historians it looks at a narrower and possibly more widely thematic topic.

2. **Finding your sources:** Historiography differs from most historical research papers in that it relies almost exclusively on secondary literature, rather than primary research. The most important factor is choosing which authors and major works are most representative of a certain school of historical thought. Book reviews can be an excellent way to orient yourself in a large amount of scholarship without having to read thousands of pages. Your historiography should identify the most significant trends and major works on a certain topic. While your research may reveal lesser known academic contributors, it is important that they have had some notable influence, or at least factor into a broader picture of academic research.
3. **Structuring your paper:** Many historiographies are arranged either chronologically, by tracking the development of historical scholarship over a period of time, or comparatively, by contrasting major schools of thought on a given topic, often during a more defined period. Which approach you choose will usually depend on how specific your focus is, and whether you are tracing the broad development of a field or emphasizing a specific debate/disagreement/break in academic scholarship on a given topic.
4. **Finding the “hows”:** Some of the questions your historiography should answer include: How does each author approach the topic? How is this approach representative of a larger academic school of thought? How does it differ from other scholars’ approaches? How have external factors (political/cultural/social) effected these choices? It is essential to understand each scholars’ work both on its own terms and in the context of a larger conversation to effectively present an historiographic thesis.
5. **Arguing the “whys”:** Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that your historiography, like any history paper, should not merely recount facts but make an argument. This is the importance of the “why” question: why have certain historians approached a particular topic in a certain way? What larger national/political/cultural/academic trends may have influenced them? Why has this led to different approaches and conclusions? This is your opportunity to not just recount an historical conversation, but contribute to it.

Some useful guides to historiographic writing:

Historiographic Essays (CUNY):

<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/assignments/historiographic.html>

Historiography (University of Kansas): <https://guides.lib.ku.edu/historiography>

Writing Historiography (University of Richmond):

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/history/historiography.html>

Writing a Book Review

Another common type of historical scholarship is the book review. An academic book review does not merely summarize a book’s contents. It is often a more involved process that highlights how the author’s work fits into the larger historical conversation. In this way, a book review is not unlike a mini-historiography. Book reviews written for class assignments are usually designed to evaluate how well you are able to analyze a work of history both on its own and in interaction with other works in a relatively concise way. You may be asked to review a single work, or put several works in conversation with each other.

Essentials of writing a book review in history:

1. **The author:** Before you begin, familiarize yourself with the author's other works and area of expertise. Have they written on the same topic before? How does this book differ from or expand upon their previous works? Are there any biases or other relevant background information that might influence the author's approach to the topic?
2. **The summary:** Summarize the main points of the book, beginning with the author's thesis and working through issues like the structure of chapters, the kind of evidence used, and the conclusions reached. Generally, the best approach is to give the broad strokes of the argument supported by some specific examples/compelling use of evidence, etc.
3. **The analysis:** This is where you get to offer your own critique of the book. How successfully does the author prove their thesis? How effective is their use of evidence? What elements of the book did you find most compelling/problematic/unsupported/etc.? Would you recommend the book to other researchers working in the field? What does the book contribute that other works on the topic have not?
4. **The conversation:** If you are comparing multiple works, you would briefly do the above steps for each of them, and then use another section to put them into conversation with each other. Did the authors reach similar or opposing conclusions? How did their use of evidence effect these conclusions? Would you recommend one approach over another, and why? Even if you are only reviewing one book, this is a good place to give at least a brief historiographical overview of how the book fits into the larger picture of historical scholarship on the topic.

Some examples of academic book reviews in history:

H-Net Reviews: <https://networks.h-net.org/reviews>

U.K. Historical Association: <https://www.history.org.uk/historian/categories/book-reviews>

American Historical Review: <https://academic.oup.com/ahr>