

# Writing a History Paper: The Basics

Imagine driving to a place you've never visited before, and forgetting to bring a road map. You have an idea of where you want to go, but you'll probably find it difficult to get there. Writing a history paper can be a similar experience. You may start out with nothing more than the assignment sheet that the professor handed out in class. That gives you an idea of where you need to go, but it may not seem easy to get there. But by following some simple guidelines, you can move steadily and effectively towards your destination.

## **The following example will guide you through the steps in writing a history paper:**

- 1. Identify the assignment's goals, or the professor's question.* For this example, the assignment is to write a 5-7 pp. paper in which you assess the effectiveness of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, using secondary sources supplemented with two primary documents (these general rules also apply to papers based wholly on primary sources). Before you begin your research, it can help to rephrase the assignment in the form of questions you will need to answer. These questions are: Was the New Deal a success? Why or why not? In order to answer these, you will also have to consider two additional questions: What was the New Deal? What problems was it supposed to solve?
- 2. Begin your research, keeping your questions in mind.* Reread the information on the New Deal in your textbook, and look for a list of suggested further readings at the end of the textbook chapter. If your instructor has assigned a primary source reader, recheck the material on the New Deal. Search the catalog at Swem Library and electronic databases. Read several different works to get a sense of how different historians have analyzed the New Deal's effectiveness. Take notes that will help you in formulating a thesis and creating an outline. Be sure to record the sources of your notes so that you can properly cite them later.
- 3. Formulate a thesis.* A thesis is the central argument of your paper, based on the evidence you have discovered in your research. After reading several works, weigh the evidence and decide whether or not you think the New Deal was effective. Your answer to that question will be the thesis of the paper. In this case, you've concluded that while the New Deal did not actually end the Great Depression, and that some of its programs were not successful, the bulk of the evidence demonstrates that the New Deal did help to restore public confidence, promoted a partial economic recovery, and created many beneficial programs. You state your thesis as follows: "Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it was a success in restoring public confidence and creating new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans." Write this down; you will have to state it in the first paragraph of your essay. Also, use the thesis as the starting point of your outline, writing it at the top of your outline page.
- 4. Find supporting evidence for your thesis.* You should have done most of the work in this area during your initial research. You may, however, wish to do further research to find additional information to strengthen your argument. Some examples might include statistics on the number of people employed in New Deal programs, and firsthand accounts of people who benefited from participation in those programs. When you find evidence

that contradicts your thesis, don't ignore it! As a historian, you should present contradictory evidence, but show that it is outweighed by the evidence that supports your views. In this case, you find the following evidence in support of your thesis, and list each as a separate point in your outline:

- A. The activity of Roosevelt's first "Hundred Days" in office helped restore public confidence by showing that the government was actively seeking to promote recovery.
- B. The "Bank Holiday" helped place the banking industry back on a sound footing.
- C. Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) put Americans back to work and accomplished important projects that benefited the public.
- D. The New Deal created Social Security, which helped millions of people at the time and has been crucial to many more millions of Americans since.

Although you may have found even more evidence to support your thesis, remember that you cannot include everything in a 5-7 page paper. Limit yourself to the points you believe best support your thesis, in this case the four strongest points.

5. *List contrary evidence.* In this case, you find two key pieces of evidence that partially contradicts your thesis. List them in your outline:

- A. The New Deal did not end the Depression.
- B. The Supreme Court declared some New Deal programs unconstitutional.

You will touch upon these points briefly in your paper, but you do not want to spend excessive time on them. Acknowledge and describe the evidence, but not in such depth that it undermines the evidence that supports your thesis.

You now have an excellent thesis and plenty of supporting information. But in order to make the journey from your inspired thesis to a well-written essay, you will need to make an outline.

6. *Complete your outline.* In its simplest form, an outline need consist of nothing more than your thesis and a list of the supporting evidence. To this you can add as much or as little detail as you need to remind yourself of the information you will include. Don't get bogged down creating an overly detailed outline. If you find yourself saying: "Now it's time to move on to Roman numeral IV, Point C, Section 7, Subsection (f)," it means you've spent too much time outlining.

Beneath the thesis statement, note that you will start with your introduction, and what the introduction will include. Then note that you will follow with a paragraph of background information on the Great Depression; remember that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal, you need to identify what problems the New Deal was intended to solve.

Next, under each item of supporting evidence, list the points you wish to cover. Do the same for the contrary evidence. If you think it will help, note where you will place statistics or quotations. Choose the quotations that best support your thesis. Quote directly when the quotation clearly and succinctly states the point you wish to make, or illustrates a point you have made. When the quotation is wordy or provides only basic facts, you will want to paraphrase the material. You should also paraphrase to avoid overuse of quotations: your paper should not be a series of quotations linked by an occasional transition sentence (of course, you must cite paraphrases just as you would a quotation). Finally, indicate where you will conclude your essay.

## Your completed outline might look like this:

Thesis: Although the New Deal did not end the Depression, it was a success in restoring public confidence and creating new programs that brought relief to millions of Americans.

### I. Introduction

- A. Introduce the topic in a way that will catch the reader's attention. [See the HWRC handout on "[Interesting Intros](#)" available on our web site or in the History Writing Resources Center.]
- B. State your thesis. In many cases, the thesis is the last sentence of the introductory paragraph, but you may place it anywhere in the paragraph for reasons of style or in accordance with your professor's instructions.
- C. Review the main points of evidence you will cover later in the paper to support your thesis.

### II. Background

- A. Problems of the Depression that the New Deal tried to solve
  - 1. Sense of despair
  - 2. Collapse of financial system
  - 3. High unemployment
  - 4. Shrinking economy

### III. Supporting Evidence

- A. Restored Public Confidence
  - 1. Sense of Roosevelt's personal concern for people (quotation from woman on FDR's first radio address)
  - 2. Flurry of government activity in "Hundred Days"
- B. Improved America's Financial Health
  - 1. Bank Holiday
  - 2. Created government agencies such as FDIC to protect people's savings
- C. Reduced Unemployment
  - 1. CCC put people to work at productive tasks such as building park facilities (quotation from CCC worker)
  - 2. WPA put people to work and performed needed construction tasks (number of people employed through WPA)
- D. Created Social Security
  - 1. Provided immediate benefits to the elderly (amount of assistance provided in first five years)
  - 2. Has become a cornerstone of financial security for senior citizens

### IV. Contrary Evidence

- A. Did Not End the Depression
  - 1. World War II did, but New Deal reduced the Depression's worst effects
  - 2. Some New Deal Programs such as Agricultural Adjustment Act were declared unconstitutional, but at least Roosevelt was trying to find solutions

### V. Conclusion

Your conclusion should not be a rephrasing of your introductory paragraph. Although you should briefly summarize how the evidence supports your thesis and how it outweighs the contradictory evidence, you should also use the conclusion to consider the larger implications of your topic. For example, in this sample assignment, you might consider any or all of the following points: the legacy of the New Deal, the impact of World War II on the American economy, and the continued growth of social programs in postwar America.

This is all you need for an effective outline. It requires very little time to create, and can save you a great deal of time and plenty of aggravation when you write your paper.

## Important Tips for Writing History Papers

You are now ready to begin writing. As you write, keep in mind the following list of writing tips that can improve your paper. Remember, though, that your professor is always the best person to ask if you have any questions or concerns.

### 1. *Write in the simple past tense.*

By definition, history is concerned with the past, and since you're writing about the past, you need to write in the past tense.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: Roosevelt ordered the banks closed until auditors verified that they were solvent.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: Roosevelt orders the banks closed until auditors verify that they are solvent.

### 2. *Avoid excessive use of the passive voice.*

The passive voice often fails to identify who or what is performing the actions you are describing. Also, the passive voice tends to result in excessive use of various forms of the verb "to be," which leads to wordiness. Phrasing sentences in the active voice allows you to use active verbs that are more descriptive and that enliven your writing.

PASSIVE VOICE: Many programs were created to put Americans back to work.

ACTIVE VOICE: The government created many programs to put Americans back to work.

In the passive voice example, the reader does not learn who created the programs. Was it government, private corporations, or some other organization? The active voice clearly indicates where the programs originated.

### 3. *Avoid the use of the pronoun "I."*

Unless your professor instructs you otherwise, you should avoid the use of "I" in college writing, as it is too informal. Structure your essay so that your ideas come across clearly without having to state that they are your ideas.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: I think that the WPA was one of the most successful New Deal programs.

### 4. *Avoid the use of qualifying terms.*

Terms such as "possibly," "probably," "seems," "may," and "might" indicate weaknesses in your argument. In some cases where evidence is almost completely lacking, such words can be used, but when the preponderance of evidence points in one direction, do not use qualifiers.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The "Bank Holiday" restored public confidence in the financial system.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: The "Bank Holiday" probably restored public confidence in the financial system.

### 5. *Vary sentence structure.*

Blend brief, direct statements with longer, more complex sentences. This improves the flow of your paper and makes it more readable. Too many short sentences make your paper choppy and difficult to read. An endless string of long sentences confuses the reader.

6. *Be sure pronouns agree with their antecedent.*

If a pronoun replaces a plural noun, you should use a plural pronoun. When replacing a singular noun, use a singular pronoun. If you name several people in a previous sentence, be careful not to use a pronoun that could apply to any one of them; the reader won't know to whom you're referring.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: After consulting his advisors, Franklin Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping to end the Depression. He immediately presented these programs to Congress.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: After consulting his advisors, Franklin Roosevelt selected several programs he thought would be effective in helping to end the Depression. They immediately presented these programs to Congress.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: Two women, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, played crucial roles in the New Deal. Perkins served as FDR's secretary of labor.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: Two women, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, played crucial roles in the New Deal. She served as FDR's secretary of labor.

7. *Avoid slang.*

Unless you are using a direct quotation that employs slang, do not use it. Slang will ruin the tone of your paper.

8. *Omit needless words.*

State your ideas as directly as possible. Excessive use of adverbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases can clutter a sentence, obscuring rather than amplifying your points. Many students load their papers with "filler" words in order to meet a minimum length requirement. This is obvious to the reader, and does more harm than good. It's better to use additional evidence rather than additional words.

CORRECT EXAMPLE: The CCC employed thousands of workers to construct hiking trails in national parks.

INCORRECT EXAMPLE: The CCC kept many thousands of workers busily employed in constructing long hiking trails through America's beautiful national parks.

9. *Know your audience.*

Identifying your audience helps you determine what information and how much of it you will include in your essay. Your audience for a history paper is usually the professor or the teaching assistant who will grade it. This leads many students to assume that their audience is already familiar with most of the material. As a result, student writers often take shortcuts by failing to place information within its context, or by neglecting to define terms. Writing this way puts you at risk of providing insufficient information; when grading the essay the instructor is likely to assume that you are not familiar with the context or terms. One way to overcome this problem is to write your paper so that a general reader unfamiliar with the topic would be able to read and understand the essay. You might ask a friend who fits this description to act as your "ideal reader" and point out areas in your paper that are not clear or have other problems. If you have any questions, ask your professors about their expectations in this area.

10. *Read your draft aloud.* Hearing your own words, or having someone else listen to them, can help you identify run-on sentences, awkward phrasing, and other problems that might otherwise escape your attention. This is one of the most effective ways to proofread your work before turning it in.

11. *Cite sources properly.* For when and how to cite sources, consult your professor, reference works such as Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, or the HWRC handouts "[Documentation Rules](#)," "[Documenting Books](#)," "[Documenting Electronic Sources](#)," and "[Documenting Periodicals and Miscellaneous Sources](#)." All of these handouts are available in the History Writing Resources Center or on our web site.