A GUIDE TO WRITING IN HISTORY AND CLASSICS

Introduction

The medium of history and classics as intellectual disciplines is the written word. Successful students in these fields must be able not only to read but write well. That is, they must be able to receive and impart words with precise meaning. Sloppiness of expression is as detrimental to any historical study as faulty equations are to physics. This guide is designed to help you avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls of misstatement into which students often fall.

Remember that good writing is actually very simple. Essentially, it requires only two things: preparation (i.e. awareness of pertinent data and the construction of a viable argument) and the precise, direct expression of your thoughts. Thus, the advice below is broken into two parts, Style and Content.

Part 1: Style

While content is, of course, the heart and soul of the papers you'll write in this class—and in the long run content is what I'm looking for and assessing—all too often I can't grasp the content of your papers because of your writing style. If I can't understand what you're saying because it's stated unclearly, how can I see what you think and thus evaluate the quality of your thought and effort? That's why writing style is important in academic prose.

A. The General Tone of Your Writing

This section addresses the best attitude to adopt in writing papers for history and classics courses. Things like sarcasm, joking and abbreviations are best avoided. Instead, aim at clear, strong and sophisticated statements of fact.

1. **Informality**. Much as I may like you individually and as often as I may joke around because I'm enjoying the class, it's important to bear in mind that I'm your teacher and you are my students. We have an important duty to perform together—your education!—and we need to make *that* the highest priority in everything we do, especially writing.

Because I have to evaluate your writing for a grade, it's best if you are not too casual when you write, for the simple reason I need to know exactly what you have learned in order to assess your efforts fairly. Precision is, in fact, crucial in everything we do in this class—after all,

you're expecting me to give you correct dates, names, and places, aren't you?—and that extends to employing precise language, too. Since informal expressions are usually imprecise, they do us little good here, so it's best to keep them to a minimum.

What is "informal" language? Mostly, I mean slang, humor and sarcasm. If you say, "The pyramids are so rad!" or "Augustus was a total wimp, dude!," what exactly am I to make of that? While I appreciate your enthusiasm—please don't lose that!—I need to know, in this context especially, what you've learned. Common informalities seen in student papers include "a lot," "a (little) bit" and "get." All in all, it's important that your writing be precise, since I can't grade something when I don't understand what's being said.

And for much the same reason, your writing assignments in this class are not a very good arena for jokes or stand-up comedy either. In general, humor tends to fall flat on the pages of history. Please save the jokes for a different party, bro!

Sarcasm is even more of a problem, because it says the opposite of what the writer actually means. For instance, when I read, as I recently did, that "Greek women were not exactly looked up to, you know!," I find myself wondering exactly what this student *does* know. That is, how exactly were ancient Greek women looked to? Does this student mean, in fact, they were looked down on because they were all really short? Or, were they simply not worth looking at because they all had warts? Too often sarcasm ends up making a "non-statement" (see #4 below). That is, it just doesn't say anything meaningful.

The basic problem with humor, slang and sarcasm in this type of writing stems from the essential difference between spoken and written discourse. Since it is impossible, for instance, to reproduce through the written word the snarling tone in which the quote above about Greek women was probably meant to be delivered, the statement ends up adding little or nothing to what the writer's saying. That is, to assert Greek women were "not looked up to" is about as helpful to a history paper as claiming they did not live on Mars. It's meaningless.

Abbreviations and Numbers. Here are two other features commonly found in informal writing, things to avoid here:

A. *No abbreviations*: Do not use &, w/, #, ➔, or anything found under "Iconic Symbols" on the pull-down menu of your computer! And never under any condition use "etc." If there are more items in your list, then cite them; if not, put an "and" in front of the last one and leave the "etc." out. Also, avoid "and/or." All in all, abbreviations are fine in a shopping list, but not a history paper, because they imply haste. Do you want to give your reader, especially a teacher, the impression you rushed through the preparation of your paper and didn't have the time to cite all pertinent data?

B. *Numbers*: Write out simple numbers (four, two hundred, one thousand, eighteenth, sixty-first). If, however, more than two words are required in writing a number, then use a numeral (124; 2,453,799; 11:24; 407th). EXCEPTION: *Never* write out dates (1 A.D., 31 BCE,

476 CE) or the numbers used in citing references to literature (*Iliad* 12.367; *Hippolytus* 256-289); always express both as numbers.

C. *You and Me*. Formal language works best when it appears to be impersonal, driven not by opinion but fact. That entails creating distance between the reader and the writer, in that such a posture makes a statement seem more objective.

> 1. Among other things, objectivity precludes the use of personal pronouns like "you" and "yours" which bring reader and writer into direct contact. This also includes imperative (command) forms which imply "you." Examples of such imperative forms are "*Remember* how important it is . . .," "*Bear in mind* that this is true . . .," "*Take* for example . . ." and "*Note* the ways in which Sophocles uses character . . ."
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> 2. For the same reason, "I/me/my" and "we/us/our" should also be avoided as much as possible.

In sum, there's a great disadvantage to writing informally in a history or classics class, since it makes you look both casual and rushed, neither of which will help your grade. Conversely, there's a great advantage to writing formally, especially here, since formality forces you into a posture where you appear to create some distance between your own feelings and the cause you're arguing for. That's good in this case, because it puts you in a more objective stance right from the start. Objectivity—or even the mere appearance of being objective—is good in academic writing.

Moreover, it's my experience that, if I write formally, I think formally too. Where sound critical judgment is at a premium, we should do everything we can to form the sanest, soberest opinions possible, even if they only *look* that way. It's all part of learning to speak and listen to each other with respect.

2. **Definitive Statements**. In general, it's best to make statements as positive and definitive as possible. Rather than saying, for instance, "The Romans *might seem to be possibly* the greatest success story in Western Civilization," make a bolder assertion instead, something like "The Romans *are* the greatest success story . . ." Wishy-washy statements, undercut by waffling like "might seem to be possibly," are usually the product of incomplete thinking. It suggests the writer hasn't yet made up his mind about the Romans' achievements and isn't ready to commit them to paper.

Indeed, the force with which you drive home your ideas is a good measure of how well you've done your homework. If you've tackled a problem head on and really wrestled with it, you will have strong opinions about the subject. In that case, the words you use to express those opinions will naturally be forthright and clear.

Let me put it clearly. Keep away from "may," "might," "could," "would," and "seem." Their adverbial counterparts, "possibly" and "probably," also weaken an argument. Instead, do everything you can to avoid writing a paper laced with uncertainties. Study the facts and then trust yourself to declare your opinion in clear and definitive terms.

3. **Overstatements**. "The Romans *always* loved their state." "*All* Greeks hated outsiders." "In teaching his philosophy to others, Socrates never gave answers but *only* questioned people." Overstatements such as these can undercut an argument. Technically, the sentences above are wrong, not so much because their authors don't understand the nature of the past but because they went too far in the right direction.

If, for example, you say "*All* Romans loved their state *always*!" and if I can think of a single exception, some Roman who only liked but didn't love his state —Nero, perhaps?—then your statement is, strictly speaking, incorrect. And was there not one single ancient Greek who preferred barbarians to his own kind? How about Alexander the Great? So then did Socrates *never* give a simple lecture without questioning people? What about at his trial, as recorded in Plato's *Apology*, where the court officials expressly forbade any philosophical cross examination on his part?

The moral here is "Don't overstate your case." Back off a little. Say, instead, "*Most* Romans felt a strong commitment to their state." "*On the whole* the ancient Greeks hated outsiders." "Socrates *preferred* to guide others to an understanding of his philosophy by questioning them rather than telling them explicitly what he thought." The point remains the same, but the statement is now technically correct. And whatever exceptions exist are just that, exceptions. So, as a general rule avoid "all," "always," "completely," "never," "only" and any word that backs you into a corner with no way out.

NOTE on "would." It's common in student essays to see the English modal verb "would"—sometimes called a "helping word"—used in the sense "typically happened in the past." For example, "The Assyrians *would* invade an area and *would* move everyone out to a new homeland." Used this way, "would" constitutes a form of overstatement, and thus it's unacceptable in formal historical writing because the presumption underlying "would" here is that the Assyrians *always* did it, which is not strictly correct. True, they did it often but not always, and the statement needs to reflect that: "The Assyrians *often* invaded an area and *as a matter of practice* moved everyone out to a new homeland." Otherwise, you *would* appear to be overstating the case.

4. **Meaningless Words and Non-Statements**. "The Romans were *incredible*." "Democracies are just the *greatest*." "Julius Caesar *fit* the society he lived in." What do these statements mean? The words I have put in italics here are basically meaningless in the context

given. Most of them—adjectives more often than not[1]—have technical definitions that do not suit the statement at all. For instance, according to the dictionary "incredible" means "unbelievable, hard to see as real or true, unlikely." Does that sense work in the statement above? Were the Romans really "unlikely"?

Instead, use clear and precise vocabulary with specific meaning. Shy away from gross generalities in your thinking which invite statements like "democracies are the greatest." The greatest *what*? Pain in the neck? And how exactly did Julius Caesar "fit" his society? If the writer believes that Caesar presents a good example of corrupt, late-Republican power politics in action, the writer should say that, and then provide examples from Caesar's career which support the case.

In short, words like "incredible," "greatest" and "fit," when used imprecisely, leave a reader puzzled about what the writer means. And, if I'm unable to follow your paper because I don't know what you mean, how can I evaluate the quality of your thinking or assess your efforts? That's why it's so important to use words in strict and exact ways, the more specific the better.

5. **Choppy Sentences**.

> Small sentences are boring to read. Many of them strung together look bad. They appear simple. Your thoughts look simple, too. It's like you can't sustain an idea for more than a few words. You can think in only trivial, simplistic ways. Small thoughts seem to come from small minds. You will leave your reader with the impression of simplemindedness. Is that what you want?

Many short sentences in succession make it appear that a writer is incapable of sustaining a complex thought. Rather than small, choppy sentences, construct ones that have some weight and depth. That doesn't always mean length, but formal academic writing tends to avoid, for instance, more than three sentences in a row with fewer than ten words in them. While an occasional short sentence is good because it delivers a strong "punch"—it does indeed!—to have that punch, the short sentence must be set off by longer ones so its brevity stands out.

If you find that you readily write in choppy sentences, it's a very easy problem to solve. Add some "and's," "or's" and "but's." In other words, push some of the sentences together and make compound sentences linked by conjunctions.[2] Or, even better, throw in some

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[1] Adjectives are "words that modify nouns." That is, they specify or describe a thing, such as, a *tall* building, a *believable* argument, a *hard* worker.

[2] Conjunctions, such as "and," "but," "or," "however," and "therefore," link nouns, clauses and sentences.

subordination, that is, clauses. Clauses are sentences units introduced by words called subordinating conjunctions, like "When . . .," "Since . . .," "Although . . .," and "Even if . . ."[3]

The lesson here is to turn your choppy sentences into longer, more complex ones by making them compound sentences with several subjects and verbs. The reason for doing that in formal writing is simple. When your writing is more intricate, it makes your thinking look that way, too.

It's a very easy thing to do really, as a revision of the choppy sentences at the opening of this section shows. By adding subordination and creating compound sentences, I can quickly and easily improve the presentation of these same thoughts.

> Small sentences are boring to read *and, in fact,* many of them strung together look bad *because* they appear simple. *If* your thoughts look simple, *it will seem* like you can't sustain an idea for more than a few words *and* can think in only trivial, simplistic ways. *Since* small thoughts seem to come from small minds, you will leave your reader with the impression of simplemindedness. Is that what you want?

B. Words and Word Choices

The words chosen are central in the success of any writing. This section looks at how to employ the types of words that make your writing appear more professional and your opinions more compelling.

6. **Phrasing**. Because written language can be read and re-read carefully, it must be more precise than spoken language which isn't normally designed to be "played back." This calls for a different set of values in written versus spoken expression. One of those differences is that the phrasing, or choice of words, used in written language must be very precise, much more so than that used in oral communication. Consider the following:

A. *Dialects.* Spoken language is regional by nature. All across the English-speaking world it's divided into dialects in which there are various expressions and in which different words mean different things. For instance, in British English "to knock up a girl" means "to knock on the door of her house," whereas "to be stuffed" over there is not "to eat too much" but means the same thing as "to be knocked up" in American English. Thus, dialectal expressions like these, if put in written form, can cause some confusion about what the author means when they're read outside their native culture.

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[3]Though clauses have their own subjects and verbs, they cannot stand alone because the subordinate conjunction introducing them delivers a thought which is basically unfinished, such as "*When it rains hard, . . .*" This is a clause which cannot stand by itself as a thought, because it does not make sense all alone. It needs another subject and verb to give it sense, e.g. "When it rains hard, *I sometimes think I ought to build an ark.*" Now the clause is part of a full sentence, and the thought is complete.

As a result, writers who aim at a readership beyond their immediate locale must employ a more standardized language than they use in common parlance. In writing, you should take special care to avoid regionalisms, such as:

1) *just barely* happened (say "recently");
2) *findings*, as in "archaeological findings" (say "finds" or "discoveries");
3) tell *of*, know *of*, speak *of* (say "about");
4) *oftentimes* (just say "often");
5) to *suffer downfalls* (say "suffer setbacks" or "experience a decline");
6) goes *clear* back to (just say "goes back to").

B. *Prepositions*. Watch how you use prepositions.[4] For instance, things are different *from* (not "than") other things, or connected *to* and *with* other things (not "between" or "into"). In general, common sense should tell you which preposition is right for which circumstance. Just visualize for a moment what you're saying, and the right preposition will be readily apparent.

C. *Technical Jargon*. Don't write with "big words" or technical jargon if you aren't sure about their correct usage. This usually leads to comical misstatements, the likes of which teachers love to collect and circulate. The classic example is: "Magellan *circumcised* the world, with a one-hundred foot clipper." If you don't know the difference between circumcising and circumnavigating, just say "sailed around."

All in all, it's impossible to list here all non-standard phrases that make your writing unclear to general readers of English. As with spelling (see #12 below), try to identify the specific problems which phrasing presents for you as you come across them.

7. **Repetition of Words**. "Military *success* is what made the Romans *successful* in most of their *successes*." *Success*, I get it! Repeated words are more than monotonous. They underscore a writer's failure to see all the facets of an argument because, if you have really thought about your topic and looked at it from several different perspectives, various aspects of the theme will have occurred to you.

Different aspects of a thesis require *different* expressions, that is, a *different* word reflecting a *different* perspective on your paper's theme as it relates to *different* circumstances. *Different*, get it? No? Then I'll show you by varying the words in what I just said, and see if the point isn't clearer. "*Different* aspects of a thesis require *their own* expressions, that is, a *certain* word chosen to reflect *each individual* perspective on the theme as it relates to *particular* circumstances." Well, even if the second sentence isn't clearer to you, at least it sounds more intelligent.

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[4]Prepositions are "little words," such as *at, of, by, toward, without, around, under, along* and so *on*.

Especially deadly and monotonous is the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive sentences: "*The Romans* conquered Gaul. *The Romans* spread their culture all over Europe. *The Romans* ate loads of bread." Avoid this sort of repetition, in particular. It lends a tone of speaking down to your reader, as if you were addressing a child, an attitude which will not go over well in academic discourse.

Remember, too, that not repeating words is one way to show how well you've done your homework, because by employing a diverse and subtle variety of expressions you show how hard you've wrestled with the issues before you. That is, the depth and range of your word choice hints at the thoroughness of your preparation. When your writing is richly textured, it's easier to believe your thinking is too.

8. **Noun Clusters**. Avoid clusters of nouns where one acts as an adjective for another: "bloodline succession," "succession line," "land and property matters." Instead, use prepositions to link the nouns: "succession *through* a bloodline," "a line *of* succession," "matters *concerning* land and property." The prepositions add clarity to the phrase—they show more fully how the nouns relate to one another—and the meaning of your words becomes more readily apparent.

Here are some noun clusters I've recently encountered in student papers. See if you can figure out what they mean, and how to restate them so that they're clearer: war leader? children rulers? choosing skills? warfare tactics? administration abilities? the Mithras religion? feudalistic vassal pacts? a physical line division? a more culture description? a low birthright status? an overnight power thing?

Do you see why these phrases are imprecise? Can you rewrite them so that they speak to the reader more clearly? Try adding prepositions or turning the first noun into an adjective. If you can, you know what I mean. If you can't, that's my point.

C. Grammar and Spelling

Grammar is the physics of writing. In order to communicate clearly, we must all obey the basic rules of forming sentences and spelling words.

9. **Subject-Verb Agreement**. If grammar is physics, then subject-verb agreement is Newton's First Law. It's fundamental and a very simple thing really, but so many students in my experience don't do it right I feel the need to comment on it here. This is it in a nutshell:

- Certain subjects (the person or thing doing the action in a sentence) go with certain types of verbs.
- For instance, a subject like "he/she/it" or the equivalent (called "third-person singular") requires a present-tense verb that ends in *-s*, for example: the student understand*s*, she learn*s*, it doe*s*.

- Other forms which are not third-person singular take present-tense verbs that do not end in *-s*, for example: I have, they know, you learn.

This is true *only* of verbs in the present tense (i.e. when the action of the verb is happening at the present moment). Most other tenses do not employ the *-s* at all: she saw, he will see, Caesar used to see.[5] It's really very simple and should be automatic for most English-speakers: I read, you read, but he read*s*.

Compound Subjects. It's my experience that students most often fail to follow the rule of subject-verb agreement when the subject of a sentence is compound (two separate subjects linked by a conjunction such as "and"): "You and Mark learn," "she and I are," "knowing, understanding and teaching represent different stages of learning." In this case, because there are two (or more) third-person singular nouns acting as the collective subject, the subject is plural—one and one make two—and thus the verb doesn't end in *-s*.

Even more complex subjects only make matters worse: "The various myths of creation found in different societies around the world and their similarity *are* intriguing." Here, the subject is compound—"myths" and "similarity"—and thus it is plural. So again, there is no *-s* on the verb.

Worse yet, this rule is reversed with the conjunction "or": "Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar *is* said to be the first Roman emperor." Since it's either "Julius" or "Augustus," the subject is singular—one *or* one is still one—and thus there's an *-s* on the verb. When "or" joins a singular and a plural subject, the verb agrees with the one nearer to it: "The Senate or, later, the Senate and the tribunes *are* seen to have controlled Republican Rome, according to most Roman historians." Here the plural subject ("tribunes") is closer to the verb and so the verb is plural ("are"). If, in contrast, the singular subject is closer, the verb will agree with it: "The Senate and the tribunes or, earlier, the Senate alone *is* seen to have controlled Republican Rome, according to most Roman historians." The singular subject ("Senate") is closer to the verb which as a result is singular ("is").

All in all, it is vital you make sure the subjects and verbs of your sentences agree. Especially when you write more than a simple subject, check the agreement of the verb with the subject. Remember this will be a problem mainly with the present tense. Listen to your common sense. Most English speakers do this by nature correctly.

10. **Dangling Participles**. Adjectives ending in *-ing* (and sometimes *-ed*) are called participles and must be used with care. Consider the following sentences:

The robber ran from the policeman, *still holding the money in his hands.*

[5]Some irregular verbs, such as "to be" and "to have," have *-s* in their past-tense forms, but they are relatively few and should be automatic to native English speakers: she was, he has had (*versus* you were, they had).

After being whipped fiercely, the cook boiled the egg.
Flitting gaily from flower to flower, the football player watched the bee.

If you said the last sentence to the football player's face just the way it's phrased above, you could end up a bloody lump of pulp lying on the astroturf, because he might conclude you think he "flits gaily," a thing most people in his profession don't do, at least in public.

The grammatical problem here rests with the *-ing* and *-ed* words used in these sentences: "holding," "being whipped," and "flitting." They are all participles, a type of verbal form that modifies nouns. The antecedent—that is, the noun which the participle goes with—must be clear to the readers in order for them to understand what's being said. Otherwise, an action may be subscribed to the wrong player, such as "flitting" to athletes. That's called a "dangling participle," because it's left "dangling" without a clear antecedent.

Just as with compound subject-verb agreement when "or" links two or more subjects (see above, #9), proximity shows the link between a participle and its antecedent in English. In other words, the participle goes with the noun closest to it, either directly preceding or following it and the words which go with it in the sentence. In the example above, "flitting" is clearly intended to go with "bee"—bees, after all, naturally flit—but because the closest noun to "flitting" is "the football player," the sentence seems to suggest that the athlete is doing the flitting, not the bee. The sentence should read "The football player watched the bee flitting gaily from flower to flower." Can you see how to correct the problems with the dangling participles in the other two examples?

In academic writing, dangling participles can cause serious misunderstandings, which is why I dwell on them here. Consider the following sentence: "After *winning* the Peloponnesian war, Athens was ruled briefly by the Spartans." By juxtaposing "winning" and "Athens," the sentence implies that Athens won the Peloponnesian War, which is wrong. The Spartans won the war. The sentence should be rephrased so that the participle is closer to the Spartans than to Athens: "After winning the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans ruled Athens briefly." Or, you can just rewrite the sentence and not use a participle: "After the Spartans won the Peloponnesian War, Athens was briefly in their control." Remember that precision is at a premium when writing history—or better, "when *you're* writing history."

NOTE on "considering" and "focusing." Difficulties frequently arise from the misuse of two common participles, "considering" and "focusing," which often end up dangling. Consider this: "*Considering* the Assyrians' brutal policies toward foreigners, their catastrophic fall in 612 BCE comes as no surprise." What exactly is the writer of this sentence saying? "Considering" means literally "thinking about." So, who is doing the "thinking" in this sentence? Because "fall" is the noun nearest "considering," the sentence implies that the "fall" is doing the "thinking." But that makes no sense. "Falls" can't think; they just happen. Clearly the writer means to say that *we* (i.e. historians) are "considering." Thus, the statement needs to be rephrased: "*Considering* the Assyrians' brutal policies toward foreigners, *we cannot be surprised by their catastrophic fall* in 612 BCE" Now, we are "thinking," which is always good.

Another participle often entangled in similar trouble is "focusing." This example is taken directly from a student's paper I read: "While still *focusing* on the Greeks, the Persians were also a major civilization in antiquity." Do you see the problem here? As the Persians built their civilization, do you think they were "focusing" on Greece? That is, were they "looking at" the Greeks when they were building Persia. "Looking at" is, after all, what "focusing" literally means. So, can you correct this sentence in such a way that the participle isn't "dangling"?[6]

11. **Pronoun Referents**. I read this recently in a paper:

> Caesar was a powerful military general with a huge army at his feet *that made him the great ruler he was.*

Wait a second there! *What* is it that made Caesar "a powerful military general"? The writer means—or, at least, I *hope* he means!—that it was Caesar's army "that made him the great ruler he was." But, as the sentence stands, "that" goes with Caesar's "feet." Am I to conclude that, according to this author, Caesar's *feet* made him a great ruler? As a friend of mine said when I showed him this sentence, "Well, no wonder he had so little trouble crossing the Rubicon River!"

The sentence when read as it's written—and *technically* it's the only way to read the sentence!—contains a factual error, since I can assure you that, while Caesar's life included many amazing *feats*, his *feet* were not among them. This type of error is common in student papers. The basic problem here is that the referent of a pronoun—that is, what the pronoun refers to—is unclear. So, make sure it's self-evident what every "that" or "this" refers to in your writing, or "who" or "they" or any pronoun you use.

What is a pronoun? The definition of a pronoun is "a word used in the place of or as a substitute for a noun." The most common pronouns in English—and the ones which cause most problems in terms of their referents—are *who/whom, he/him/his, she/her, it/its*, or *they/them/their*.

[6]Here's one way to repair the participle. Clearly the writer means we—that is, historians in general—are doing the "focusing," so "we" needs to be introduced into the sentence, just as was done before: "While still focusing on the Greeks, *we must admit* the Persians were also a major civilization in antiquity."

Here's an example where the referent of a pronoun is unclear. "Sparta attacked Athens, and *they* won." Who are "they"? While it may seem to the writer like he's saying the Spartans won, the sentence itself doesn't say that, at least not the way it's written. It says "Sparta," which is a city, and as a city is not a "they" but an "it." By the same logic which claims Sparta equals "they," one might infer Athens is also "they." The statement could, then, be taken to mean the Athenians won when the Spartans attacked, which is historically incorrect. So, as always, in order for me to assess what you know, I have to see precisely what you mean. And that means making it clear what "it" or "they" or any pronoun you use refers to.

There's a simple way to test whether your pronouns are right. Since a pronoun stands in place of a noun, look back over your sentence and see what's the last possible thing to which any pronoun you've written might refer—singular or plural—and if the last possible thing is the proper referent, your use of the pronoun is correct. For instance, if you write "The Spartans attacked Athens and *they* won," since the closest plural noun to "they" is Spartans, your sentence is correct because the Spartans did, in fact, win the Peloponnesian War.

12. **Spelling**. Recantly I must of scene a hunderd things like theze in studants' papers:

"History is *felled* with information."
"Today Joan of Arc is a *heron*."
"The *Roamins* got their name because they roamed around a lot."

The use of correct spelling indicates that you are semi-litterate. I, however, do knot ask that much of you. If you misspell a word, I will correct it and hope you lern the correct spelling as soon as possible. I recognize that everyone misspells the occasional word—I certainly do!—and that is no basus on which to assess your knowledge, especially of something as important as the past. Still, good spelling makes you look competant, an important first step toward being persuasive.[7]

However, my complacency about misspelling does *not* extend to the specific names and terms you've been assigned to learn in this course. Those, especially the ones in your reading assignments, I expect everyone to know how to spell correctly. If you have paid careful attention at all, the spelling of the important names, terms and events from history should present no problem. They are, in fact, a good gauge of how well you've studied, and I will treat them as such, as a barometer of your efforts to master the course material.

Furthermore, all teachers have pet peeves that make them see "read." Certain misspellings are mine:

[7]There is—did you notice?—at least one spelling error in every sentence in this paragraph, six in the first sentence alone: Recently, have, seen, hundred, these, students', semi-literate, not, learn, basis, competent. Can you identify the other misspellings?

WRONG	**RIGHT**
emporer	emperor
competant	competent
calvary	cavalry
thrown	throne
air	heir
of	have (as in "would have")
there	their ("belonging to them")
their	there ("in that place")
then	than (as in "more than")
heros	heroes
seige	siege
durring	during
seperate	separate
lead	led (past tense of the verb, "to lead")
tryed	tried
milatary	military
pharoah	pharaoh
writting	writing
conquorer	conqueror
amoung	among

Iffen your gowing too mispell theze wurds, than pleese bee moar orriginal then ta misspel em thiss weigh. Kay?

13. **Possessives and Plurals**. English has an odd convention, a remnant of medieval times and something we might all be better without, but it has become traditional and so, whether or not it should be discarded, it will not be done away with easily. It is the apostrophe signifying, among other things, possession: Mark**'s**, Cleopatra**'s**, Greece**'s**. It shows that "Mark," "Cleopatra," or "Greece" possesses something (or is closely associated with it).[8]

The situation becomes complicated with nouns, particularly names, which end in *-s*, such as Augustus, Achilles or Pope Pius. In making these possessive, standard English practice today presents a choice about whether or not to add an (extra) *-s* along with the apostrophe and, as far as I'm concerned, either is acceptable: Augustus' or Augustus**'s**, Achilles' or Achilles**'s**, Pope Pius' or Pope Pius**'s**. If, however, the noun ends in *-s* because it's plural, there is not a choice.

[8]Apostrophes are also used in verbal contractions, such as "there's," "who's," "can't," "isn't," "won't," and "didn't." But because these are verbs and don't have equivalent forms lacking apostrophes as the noun forms do, they cause far less confusion. Thus, I focus on possessive forms in discussing apostrophes.

You add only the apostrophe: the Greeks' culture, these peoples' conflict, the three kings' gifts. The only major exception to the rule that possessives in English use an apostrophe involves certain possessive pronouns, such as *its*, *hers*, *ours*, *theirs*, which don't use an apostrophe.[9]

This is so simple, and yet so many students get it wrong so often, I think there must be something else at work here. Perhaps the problem stems from the apostrophe itself which does not correspond to anything in spoken discourse. In other words, to judge only from the way we speak there's no way to tell whether or not to put an apostrophe in. And while most students *are* aware of the use of apostrophes in English, sometimes they become confused about whether a noun ending in *-s* should use one or not, that is, whether the noun is possessive or plural. Both, after all, have *-s* on the end!

If that's your problem, ask yourself this. Is the noun owning something (or being associated with it)? If so, it's possessive and you *should* add an apostrophe: Marcia**'s** book, Cleopatra**'s** asp, Greece**'s** mountains. All these things (book, asp, mountains) are the possessions of (or in close relationship to) Marcia, Cleopatra and Greece. If, on the other hand, the *-s* word is not in possession of the other thing, it's plural and does not require an apostrophe: the gods controlling Babylon, the rains in Spain, the punishments paid for sin.

So, it is worth memorizing these two simple rules.

> A. If a noun owns something or is closely associated with it, it's possessive. Use an apostrophe. [Exception: pronoun forms like *its*, *hers*, *whose, ours*, *yours*, and *theirs*]
>
> B. If not, it's plural. Do *not* use an apostrophe.

14. **Present-Tense Verbs**. The tense of the verb in a sentence reflects the time at which the action is set. In historical studies that is, by definition, in the past. The vast majority of verbs used in history papers are past-tense (e.g. came, saw, conquered). When the topic is literature, however, it's a different matter. The action which takes place in works of fiction exists in a timeless world. So, in describing characters or recapitulating the plots found in literature, it's best to use the present tense.

Here's how to construct tenses properly for both types of paper.

A. Literary Papers. When describing the action in a work of literary fiction, use the present tense: "At the midpoint of *The Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus *journeys* to the realm of the dead." It's best in this case to use the present tense ("journeys"), because stories like Homer's

[9]Unlike most other contractions, "it's" does get confused with "its" rather often, but *it's* easy to remember *its* rule, since all standard English contractions use an apostrophe, no exception. Thus, if there's an apostrophe with "it's," it must be a contraction of "it is," and "its" with no apostrophe must then be the possessive form of "it." The same is true of "who's" (contraction of "who is") and "whose" (possessive, "of whom, belonging to whom").

epics exist in a timeless realm where they can happen over and over again each time we read them. The present tense highlights the vividness with which they re-occur whenever they pass through our minds and, because they're works of fiction, they can and do relive with every re-reading.

This isn't true of the authors themselves, however. Discussing Homer, not his epics, calls for the past tense, because he's dead and can't come to life the way his works can. So, when writing about the man, you should speak in the past tense ("Homer *composed* his epics spontaneously in performance"), in contrast to recapitulating the tales he told ("The theme of Achilles' anger *runs* throughout *The Iliad*."). Thus, literary papers usually entail a balance of past-tense and present-tense verbs.

B. History Papers. Conversely, past-tense verbs should dominate history papers because the vividness of the present tense pertains less to the discussion of history than it does to literature. While it's possible to describe the historical past in the present tense, such a posture belongs more naturally to casual conversation than formal writing. That is, when a speaker is trying to make his account of something which happened in the past seem more real to a listener, he may use the present tense, saying, for instance, "So, yesterday *I'm standing* in line at this store and some man *comes* in and *robs* it!" Here, a past action ("yesterday") is being expressed in the present tense ("I'm standing," "comes," "robs"), with the speaker acting as if both he and the listeners were there when the event occurred.

The use of past tenses, on the other hand, makes it seem as if the speaker is more aloof and remote from what happened: "Yesterday I *stood* in line at a store and a man *came* in and *robbed* it." Because of the past tenses ("stood," "came," "robbed"), the speaker appears to care less about the past actions he's relating. Thus, to avoid the sense that they are neutral and unconcerned, speakers often use the present tense when relating a past action, since it lends the story a sense of being right there right then. After all, that's what the present tense is, by definition, "right here right now."

The problem with "right here right now" in writing assignments for a history class is the writer doesn't have to engage the reader in the story. The writing has the reader's full and undivided attention at all times, because I'm the reader and I'm totally involved—I guarantee it!—in whatever you have to say. Nor do you need to encourage me to see the past vividly. I do that naturally, because it's my job and I love it. So, for your writing assignments in a history course, please don't use the present tense, when describing the past. Use the past tense, instead.

The Past Tense. Furthermore, to the same extent that the present tense is unnecessary in this particular context, the past tense is helpful. By stating the facts of history rather coolly in the past tense you appear calm and collected, which, in turn, makes your judgment seem more sober and reasoned. You don't look excited or excitable, and that's a good thing for a historian who's trying to convince others to see the past a certain way. Arguments in this arena work better when they appear to come from cool heads.

Let's look at how this works. Say you're describing Charlemagne's troubles with his Saxon neighbors, and you compose your words in the following way, using the present tense:

> As a result, almost every year of his reign Charlemagne *is* forced to go and vanquish the Saxons yet again and *has* to re-Christianize them on the spot.

It's very vivid, isn't it, quite intense even? But it doesn't sound very critical or reasoned. Now, say you use the past tense:

> As a result, almost every year of his reign Charlemagne *was* forced to go and vanquish the Saxons yet again and *had* to re-Christianize them on the spot.

Less exciting, true, but it seems more composed, less agitated or swept away with passion—or biased. And that makes for more dispassionate and thus more persuasive historical writing. By appearing aloof, you're simply more likely to win over your readers, in this arena at least.

Mixing Past Tenses and Present Tenses. Including present-tense verbs in historical, academic prose can also lead to trouble when, as is inevitable, you must at some point revert to past-tense verbs. Here's what it sounds like when you mix present and past tenses:

> Almost every year of his reign Charlemagne *is* forced to go and vanquish the Saxons again and *has* to re-Christianize them on the spot. It *was* a serious problem and he never completely *resolved* it.

The contrast between the present-tense forms ("is forced," "has to re-Christianize") and past-tense forms ("was," "resolved") is something short of graceful. Moreover, to vacillate between these can be disconcerting to your readers. I mean, are we supposed to imagine we are right there alongside Charlemagne suffering his troubles, or viewing him from a safe historical distance and reflecting calmly upon his tribulations with the Saxons?

The answer is simple. If your paper is part of a historical study and you must by definition spend the majority of your time in the past tense, it's best just to stay there as much as possible. Whatever you do, try not to flip back and forth between past and present verb forms.

When the present tense is necessary in all types of formal writing. There is one notable exception to the rule of excluding present-tense verbs in academic prose. When modern scholars are drawing conclusions about the past, their words should be expressed in the present tense. Despite the fact that the data are taken from history, the opinion exists now and should be stated as such.

For example, while it's true that Caesar ruled long ago, the conclusions which current researchers infer from the surviving evidence about his life and reign are modern, living things. Thus, "Caesar's generalship *leaves* behind the impression of the right man at the right moment in history." In other words, if your point is that some thesis about the past exists today, state that opinion in the present tense: "This *promotes* the idea that . . ." or "Justinian's failures *suggest* that the internal disarray of the Byzantine Empire was his responsibility because . . ."

This applies not only to what we think, but also to what we see and how we see it. So, for instance, "The Bayeux Tapestry *depicts* William the Conqueror as having a fair and justified claim to the English throne . . ." or "The Magna Carta *argues* for the strong sense of feudalistic duty the English barons felt incumbent upon them . . ." In sum, present-tense verbs are appropriate in historical argumentation, so long as the writer is discussing the current nature of research and modern ways of approaching historical data. In other words, "Homer *composed* poetry long ago, but we today *interpret* it along certain lines."

D. Organizing Your Work

Organizing the presentation of your writing is as important as any other aspect of your style. This includes the division of a paper into paragraphs and, further, of paragraphs and sentences into sections demarcated by various forms of punctuation. As minimally but powerfully as possible, use the tools you have at hand to show the structure of your thoughts.

15. **Paragraphs**. A paragraph is one of the greatest tools you have in organizing your writing. It's a simple, almost subconscious way of cluing your reader in on the divisions that underlie your thinking. Ideally, a paragraph delineates a thought. In antiquity, a paragraph often was a single thought—and also one sentence, usually a very long one. Writers today, however, tend not to go on the way classical authors did. In academic writing, most paragraphs include at least three sentences, though rarely more than ten.

So, how many paragraphs are enough, and how many are too many? For historical writing, there should be between four and six paragraphs in a two-page paper, or six and twelve in a five-page essay.[10] More than that, and it becomes difficult to see the larger contours of your argument. Fewer, and it's hard to see where sections start and end. A good general rule is **two to three paragraphs a page.**

But there's considerable flexibility here, too. So, perhaps it's better to look at paragraphs another way, from the inside. Instead of surveying the paper as a whole, you can count sentences within paragraphs. If so, **all paragraphs should have between three and ten full sentences**. All in all, a strong and coherent paragraph starts and ends itself, and so there's no need to count paragraphs when the argument is clear and directed.

In sum, remember the point of paragraphs is to show the structure of your thoughts. A paragraph should encompass one thought—that is, it should have some idea guiding it—which is then divided into separate sentences all of which address and advance that idea. So, put in a

[10]You should be aware these standards will vary from class to class, even within historical disciplines. So, for instance, journalists tend to write in many short paragraphs. The same is true in some of the sciences. Just know that many short paragraphs are generally to be avoided here.

paragraph break when you are making a transition between ideas, or adding a new line of thought, or when you've finished summing up, as I'll do right now.

16. **Punctuation**. There are seven legitimate pieces of punctuation: the comma (,), the period (.), the question mark (?), the exclamation point (!), the colon (:), the semicolon (;) and parentheses ().

Dashes are also acceptable these days but should be used with discretion. Avoid things like slashes, dots, a series of question marks, exclamation points and happy faces [;-)]. Indeed, you'd do well to restrict yourself as much as possible to the comma and the period. In particular, colons should be used only to introduce a list, such as a catalogue of punctuational situations to avoid in formal writing: asking too many questions, exclaiming noisily at your reader, including lengthy thoughts encased in parentheses, and overusing the semicolon.

? Questions, and thus question marks, are fine for your papers here, but don't put in too many, please. By asking questions you are essentially avoiding clear and definitive statements (see #2 above), aren't you? And it makes it harder for the reader to see your point, doesn't it? And in the end, questions piled on top of more questions are just plain annoying, aren't they, because the reader can't answer back but is faced with an incessant barrage of "don't you," isn't he?

! While I applaud and wish to nourish your enthusiasm for learning, your eagerness to study the past should not entail shouting or raised voices, which the exclamation point implies. Yelling is unnecessary in any form of academic discourse, since, as I've already said, I guarantee you my full and undivided attention whatever you write. So, don't use exclamation points! Nobody likes to be shouted at!! OKAY!!!

( ) Also, avoid parentheses are much as possible (they make it look like you are talking to the reader in some sort of informal confabulation, hee hee). That implies you have some secret to tell (as if you're looking directly into the camera and saying something privately to the audience). If, instead, you tie everything you say into the main argument, there will be no need for passing such notes in class or making coy asides (or using lots of parentheses).

; I'll be frank. I think the semicolon is a monster, the Frankenstein of modern punctuation, a mutant form not quite a period but something more than a comma, shaped out of both but functioning as neither. Skilled writers, like good drivers, know when to make a full stop and when to

slow down but keep going. So, if periods are full stops and commas show where the text merely slows down and changes lanes, semicolons frankly are sentences rolling through stop lights and crosswalks.

Furthermore, in my experience people tend to use the semicolon rather pretentiously, when they're trying to make their writing look scholarly, whether or not it really is. So while I can't absolutely forbid you from using semicolons since they're entrenched on our keyboards, I encourage you not to. But if you want to, then fine; go ahead; put in semicolons; just know that, if I were the punctuation police, I'd give you a ticket for rolling through syntax!

17. **Run-ons and Fragments**. Ticketing people for their punctuation calls to mind the English teacher's classic complaint about run-on sentences and sentence fragments. Both are problems resulting largely from a misunderstanding of the proper use of punctuation, not so much the rules of grammar.

A. Run-ons, for instance, require only that you see to it every independent verb has a period or conjunction between it and the next independent verb.

B. Fragments are equally easy to correct. Just make sure every sentence you write has its own independent verb.

What's an independent verb? "Verbs *are* independent if they *function* as the main verb of a sentence, which *means* that the clauses *they're* in *can stand* alone and still *make* sense." For instance, in the sentence you just read, the verb *are* is an independent verb, while all the others (*function*, *means*, *they're*, *can stand* and *make*) are dependent. You can see the difference for yourself if you say just the dependent clauses by themselves: "if they function as the main verb of a sentence," "which means," "the clauses they're in," "can stand alone," "and still make sense." None of these separate clauses makes sense on its own, while "Verbs are independent" does. That makes "Verbs are independent" a full sentence with an independent verb.[11]

However difficult this may seem, understand that you inherently know the difference between independent and dependent verbs, or you wouldn't be able to speak English at all. Using your natural instincts about the language, you can learn to recognize the difference. If, for instance, I were to say "What you did" and left it at that, you'd be confused about what I meant because "What you did" is not a full sentence. It's a fragment. If, however, I were to say "What you did *is* good!," I've turned the fragment into a full sentence by adding an independent verb, "*is* (good)." Now you're not confused about my meaning. Thus, all I'm asking for here is that you pay attention to what you already do automatically whenever you talk, think or listen.

[11]Dependent clauses are introduced most often by subordinating conjunctions like "which," "since," "when," "although," and the like.

So it's very simple to avoid fragments and run-ons if you're conscious of which verbs are independent and which are not. "Indeed, every correctly punctuated sentence you read or write *shows* you how. Either *there is* a period between independent verbs, or the writer *inserts* a conjunction linking them, creating a compound sentence." The last two sentences demonstrate exactly this. The first (beginning "Indeed, every . . .") has an independent verb (*shows*) and a period following it which separates it from the next sentence that has its own independent verbs (*there is, inserts*). The second (beginning "Either there is . . .") is a compound sentence with the conjunction "or" linking two independent verbs (*is* and *inserts*). So, the lesson here is very simple, really. Just insert a period or a conjunction of some sort between independent verbs.

While simple things to correct, run-ons and sentence fragments can leave behind quite a negative impression of your writing, something you want to avoid especially in academic prose.

> When you are reading along in a sentence, I mean, and you just never seem to get to the main verb which is absolutely essential to any sentence, instead, you can't see the writer's point because you can't figure out what the main sentence is since you're stuck in some dinosaur of a clause that is lumbering all over the place and not headed anywhere, and so you begin to forget what the writer's talking about because it has been so long since he last mentioned it that who could remember back that far back anyway except maybe Einstein or some memory genius but not a poor teacher who has a big stack of papers to read and has to evaluate them in terms of what this person or that person has or has not learned, you know. For example, students' papers.

The first sentence (everything up to "you know" near the end) is a run-on, and the second ("For example, students' papers.") is a fragment. As a result, neither sentence makes good sense on its own, and reading both is difficult.

Actually both sentences above are fragments—neither has a main verb—so it's not necessarily true that all run-on sentences are long or all sentence fragments are short.

> Run-ons can be relatively short and have many conjunctions like "and" or "but" or "yet" and still include too many things in that one small sentence for the reader to follow easily and grasp and digest and understand what the writer is saying and means. On the other hand, fragments that are a common problem especially since students tend to write as they speak and colloquial speech frequently includes fragments, such as answers to questions in which a full sentence is implied by a one- or two-word answer, like "How are you?" "Fine" (implying "<I am> fine."), but in writing a paper which is not a dialogue where such ellipsis (that is, the omission of words that are implied) is not possible because the reader is not filling in the writer's words with grammar from his own speech, which is just the different natures of writing and speaking.

Here the first, shorter sentence is a run-on (from the beginning through ". . . is saying and means.") and the second, longer one (from "On the other hand, . . ." to the end of the paragraph) is a fragment—and also a run-on, I suppose.

If I sound to you like the punctuation police again, let me end by saying that students are not the sole or even worst criminals on record when it comes to run-ons and fragments, not by a

long shot. Scholars and professors, for instance, are among the most notorious perpetrators of run-on sentences, because a lengthy thought is often presumed, in and of itself, to be a weighty one—a grossly false assumption since short sentences can carry weight and force but without bulk—to wit:

> If the Roman government at the height of its power, and at a time when means of communication had been greatly improved, showed anxiety for the food supply of that Italy which was dominant in the Mediterranean world, it may be imagined that in the period preceding the great economic organization introduced by the Roman Principate the peoples of the Mediterranean region, peoples no one of which at the height of its power had controlled the visible food supply of the world so widely or so absolutely, had far graver cause for anxiety on the same subject, an anxiety such as would be, under ordinary circumstances, the main factor, or, even under the most favourable circumstances possible in those ages, *a* main factor, in moulding the life of the individual and the policy of the state. (from an article on Rome published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed.)

This run-on sentence is a very, *very* long and convoluted way of saying the Romans worried about getting enough food, and frankly, whether published or not, this sentence represents a style of writing to be avoided.

The moral of this story is simple: Keep your sentences short— but not *too* short! (see above, #5)—and make sure there's a period or conjunction between each independent verb.

E. The Presentation of Your Work

Finally, the way your paper looks is very important, too. Its professional appearance shows you care about the reader's opinion. You should always present a neat paper which you have proofread and that represents your own work.

18. **Neatness**. I am concerned much more with what your papers say than with how they look but, when you are given time outside of class to prepare them, as you are here, I expect something legible, at the very least typewritten. In an age of computers and keyboards the ability to type is a must in virtually every field. Even car mechanics have to type these days. If your keyboarding skills are limited, now's the time to learn.

What's "neat"? In this class, neatness entails the use of a standard format acceptable to most editors, which means your papers should be formatted in the following way:

- one-inch margins all around
- 12-point character width
- Times New Roman font (or some other professional-looking font—definitely no cursives!)

- double-spaced
- black ink
- *no* empty lines between paragraphs
- and *no* right-margin justification.

A title page is unnecessary if the paper includes your name, the name of the assignment and the date you turned in the paper in the upper right-hand corner. Any paper of more than one page must be stapled in the upper-lefthand corner. **Dog-earring is absolutely forbidden!** Foreign words and the titles of literary or historical works should be italicized or underlined, including "The" or "A" if the title begins with an article.

So, before you turn it in, look your paper over for blank spaces and any general flaws in its presentation. Only papers which meet these basic professional courtesies and look formal in a way appropriate to formal education will be accepted for credit in this class.

19. **Quotes**. Do not quote someone else's work extensively. One sentence (ten to twenty words) drawn from a book or article is usually enough to show your idea has general merit and is grounded in scholarly consensus. Beyond that, paraphrase others' words. That is, restate their words in your own. It is important that you maintain ownership of the thoughts you express in your papers, even if they are built upon someone else's (see Plagiarism, below).

Understand this, too, please. If you quote another's words at length, I won't subtract points from your paper, but I won't give you credit for them either. I'll attribute what's good in your paper to Benjamin Franklin or whomever you quote. And, believe me, people like Benjamin Franklin don't need any more credit on their papers and you do. The point here is, formulate your own ideas and do your own work.

20. **Proofread**. Revision is an essential part of the writing process, and I expect it of you, just as you expect it of me. By now, for instance, I've probably read this Writing Guide at least thirty times over, and never once have I failed to make changes in it—changes, I might add, for the better. No writing of any sort should ever be handed over to a reader without the author having closely and rigorously reviewed the style and presentation of the work: no "the's" or "and's" left out! No sentences without verbs! No misspellings (run SpellCheck)! You *must* learn to be your own editor. It's one of the most valuable skills you can have in life, and one of the best reasons there is for going to school.

Let's look at it another way. Say I'm your guest at dinner and you're serving me a meal. But I can see *you're* not eating it. Shouldn't I wonder? What if I say to you, then, "I'll eat this but only if *you* eat some first!," and you refuse? Should *I* eat the food? If the situation were reversed, would *you* eat the food? It's the same with a paper. Don't "serve" me a paper you yourself haven't and can't bear to read. That is, before you ask me to read your words, take a

long, hard look at them yourself! Ninety percent of what's wrong with your writing will be self-evident to you upon even the simplest review.

Prepositions at the End of Sentences. Finally, with all I have said you shouldn't do, here's one traditional point of style I don't care about. Let your sentences end with prepositions. It's a natural feature of English—I can show that linguistically!—so whoever made up the ridiculous rule that prepositions ought not come at the end of sentences didn't understand the nature or history of the English language and probably should be put on trial for linguistic perversity. Thereupon, I call Winston Churchill as my first witness. When some pompous cretin complained that the great British leader ended his sentences with prepositions, Churchill retorted, "That is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put." Right on!

Plagiarism. I'm sure I need not remind you that plagiarism is not only an offense but a crime. It's defined as "knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise or activity." Thus, if any idea you put forward in your paper is not your own—let's say, three or more words in succession—instead, you've derived them from somewhere else, you must cite that source.

Plagiarism includes either the restatement or the wholesale copying of another's words or ideas which you then hand in as if you had created them. This means "borrowing" from other students' papers, or from any of the materials I present to you in class (including texts) or from material you've found in print or on the Web. Nor does ignorance of these laws constitute a valid excuse for plagiarizing.

All in all, your paper should represent your own thoughts phrased in your own words. Otherwise, it is unacceptable for credit. Bear in mind that at this university plagiarism may result in:

> (a) a reprimand; (b) a grade adjustment; (c) being placed on warning or probation; (d) suspension from the University; or (e) expulsion from the University.

The point is, make your work your own! If not, be assured that I will prosecute any misrepresentations to the fullest.

NOTE: It is permissible—in fact, advisable!—to seek help from the Writing Center in the English Department (in the basement of the Ray B. West Building). In general, any good advice you encounter there and include in your papers is fine, as long as the words and thoughts you compose are fundamentally your own.

Part 2: Content

The content of papers is as important to address as their style, arguably more so. Here are several things to think about in choosing a suitable topic, structuring your paper and focusing its argument.

F. Topic

As long as you address an approved topic or one of the questions or thesis topics cited in class or among course materials, the exact content of your paper is up to you. So, let me begin this section by encouraging you to think for yourself, but only to the extent permitted by the topic assigned. While it's your right and duty as a member of a democratic nation to state your honest opinions, by the same standard it's also your responsibility to present the evidence which supports your ideas when you air them in public. So, think freely, but not over-freely. Remember the question you're addressing, whatever it is for any particular paper, and always bear in mind whom you are addressing, in this case, a teacher. So, write *for* yourself but *to* me.

Conversely, do not seek to please anyone but yourself in formulating your opinions. That is, don't tell me what you think I want to hear. You'll end up pleasing neither of us. To be frank, kiss-ups are readily transparent and servility does no one's cause any good here. As long as your theme directly addresses a valid topic outlined somewhere in the course materials, your paper ought to reflect your own heartfelt and considered opinion.

21. **Stick to the Question/Topic**. If I've given you a question or thesis topic to address, or we have discussed your paper topic and agreed on it, please don't refocus the question or thesis topic onto another subject of your own choosing without consulting me. Also, don't leave any part of the question or topic out. Remember that, as much as it's *your* answer, it's *my* question and I—or more often we together—have worked very hard to put these questions or thesis topics into a form that guides you toward a professional, scholarly response. Don't undercut that foundation. It's there to help you learn.

Starting Off Your Paper Right. Begin by reading carefully the entire thesis topic or question handed you. Underline key words and look for ways to include them in your paper, in the very first sentence if possible. So, for instance, if the question is "How does the history of Western Civilization affirm that *women* have played a *visible role* in *public life*?," you might start your paper with something like "The history of Western Civilization shows *women* have played meaningful *roles* in political, military and commercial life." Then sow throughout your paper words like "visible" and "public life" to remind both yourself and your reader about the specific issue at hand. With all that, it will be clear what issue you're addressing, and how.

Should I Copy Out the Question/Thesis Topic at the Top of the Paper? Unless I tell you to do so explicitly, I prefer you *not* copy out the question or thesis topic, because in a paper that's well-written it's unnecessary. Especially when we have designed a roster of suitable topics or questions and the first sentence of your paper includes key-words drawn from them, then it should be self-evident which question or thesis topic you're addressing. There's simply no need for you to copy it out, assuming, of course, the rest of the paper is sound. If not, then copying out the question or thesis topic will hardly fix the situation. Only rethinking and rewriting will. So, whether or not the paper's well-written, copying out the question or topic doesn't help.

Staying on the Subject and Not Wandering Off Topic. One of the most important things to bear in mind as you write your paper is that everything you say in it should be directed to the theme. Wandering off topic, no matter how insightful or true your comments may be, detracts from the force of your argument and hence does more damage than good. Instead, tie every sentence you write *directly and explicitly* to the point you're making, that is, to the theme. And don't count on the readers to make the connection. Instead, if you're at all unsure about whether the relationship between fact and theme is clear, say it outright. Tell us why the data you cite pertain to the issue at hand. And if you can't, take the statement out of your paper.

22. **Positive Themes**. When allowed to choose their own subject and thesis—that, is, not presented with a roster of questions or topics—all too often students seek to demonstrate that something does *not* exist or did *not* actually happen. For instance, they attempt to show that, because so little remains of life in the ancient world, we today really know nothing meaningful about some aspect of it. So, for example, they argue that politics didn't influence economic policies in Western Civilization, since most rulers in the past demonstrate no real understanding of commerce. Right or not, themes like this are about as hard to execute as historical studies get, and I strongly advise you to steer clear of such negative themes.[12]

That's not to say negative themes are somehow inherently wrong. They're not. Obviously, an expert historian can show that all kinds of historical data are lacking. A negative theme is simply wrong for most students, because demonstrating that something did *not* exist in the past depends on a comprehensive understanding of ancient history, entailing both knowledge of all possible instances where something might have occurred and also wide-ranging study, prudence and enough data that one can say with assurance something could never have happened in the past. That's often impossible, even for experts.

Here is an example. There is simply no external corroborating evidence for the existence of Moses or the flight of the Hebrews from Egypt as recounted in the second book of the Bible. Still, few historians today—and, frankly, none with any sense—would assert that the exodus of a number of Hebrews from Egypt in some way resembling the biblical account could never have happened under any circumstance. In reality, we know so little about this period in history it

[12]By "negative," I mean arguments designed to prove the *non*-existence of something, as opposed to "positive" themes which argue in favor of something.

would be unprofessional of anyone to weigh in on either side of the issue, certainly the "negative" side. Given the tattered data remaining from the thirteenth century BCE—and at that, most of it patently propagandistic one way or another—who can say for sure *anything* didn't happen back then? We're lucky to be able to say what little we know did! So, it really isn't possible to argue that Moses and the Exodus never happened, even though our current picture of this era provides no corroboration that this part of the Bible reflects historical reality.

Instead, it's far easier to prove something does exist, especially in an arena where information is limited. In other words, a "positive" argument is much easier to effect. To wit, we may not know about every building constructed in classical Athens, but we do know quite a bit about the Parthenon, and from that it's easy to demonstrate the presence of certain tendencies in classical architecture. Whether or not all the principles of construction seen in the Parthenon were employed in all buildings erected then, its design certainly embodies a clear love of balance and "optical symmetry" (the appearance of perfection, straight-looking lines, elegance and lightness). So, to judge from the Parthenon, those principles look to be definitive in classical architecture.

A positive theme like that makes for a paper far easier to write than trying to argue, for example, that the Parthenon was unique and atypical and that we, in fact, stand to learn little about classical architecture in general by studying the Parthenon. While it's one of few buildings preserved from its day—and so who's to say it's representative of its time?—nevertheless, in terms of constructing an argument, though the Parthenon surely was unique, if there's even one classical building found resembling it in some way, then the negative theme of the Parthenon's singularity in its time comes crashing to the ground, because even a *single* piece of contradictory information severely undercuts a negative argument. If, instead, you argue in favor of something and later contradictory evidence comes to light, you can claim it's just an exception. One of the benefits of a "positive" theme is that exceptions don't necessarily undermine your argument. They're just that, exceptions.

The lesson here is to aim at proving something in your writing, not disproving it. It's just so much easier to assemble data that support a case than to look across a field of ruins and try to show what wasn't ever there and never could have been. Before doing that, a person really has to understand a subject fully and thoroughly, which is a point few ever reach.

23. **Narrow Themes.** In a recent class of mine where students were allowed to choose their own paper topics, one essay launched off with the claim that "the role of women has been important in Western Civilization all throughout its history." My initial reaction was, to quote your own generation, "Well, *duh*!" After all, without women where would any of us be? Who doesn't have a female relative who's made that point at least once? But that's not the real problem at hand here. The trouble is the general importance of women in history is such a huge theme I doubt sixty volumes, much less one paper, could even begin to do it justice.

The lesson is, choose a narrow theme. If you think women are important, fine! Just don't try to encompass the entirety of such an enormous issue in one paper. Instead, explore a single facet of their importance, for example, their contributions to politics, or economics, or industry.

Then, evaluate what history tells you about the development of their role in this one area. End by asserting that, although the paper has addressed only one aspect of the situation, it's representative of all areas, suggesting the general centrality of women in history.

Moreover, a narrow approach offers another advantage. When you opt to focus on a particular aspect of an issue, it says a great deal about your priorities and intellect, the way you see the world. That alone is important information, and not just for your reader to know but you, too. By exploring a narrow theme, you learn what interests you, what seems to you compelling and worth investigating. According to the ancient Greeks, to "know yourself" is the beginning of all knowledge. So, make yourself choose a narrow topic and you will learn something valuable about not just the world but who you are.

G. Structuring and Organizing Your Paper

In longer papers—essays and research papers, in particular—it's necessary to structure your argument in such a way it's accessible and persuasive to your reader. That involves laying it out ahead of time in an introduction so that the reader knows where the paper is heading, and also summarizing it at the end in a conclusion which drives your point home.

Introductions and conclusions are strictly required in formal, persuasive essays and, while other sorts of papers do not necessarily have to include them, it's often helpful. In any case, whatever type of paper you're writing, you should make the flow of your thinking clear somehow. In other words, it always matters the way the facts you cite feed into your argument. In particular, pay careful attention to transitions between paragraphs. Different topics should blend together smoothly. Use the theme of your paper to link them.

24. **Introduction and Conclusion**. These represent the most serious omission students regularly make. Every essay or paper designed to be persuasive needs a paragraph at the very outset introducing both the subject at hand and the thesis which is being advanced. It also needs a final paragraph summarizing what's been said and driving the author's argument home.

These are *not* arbitrary requirements. Introductions and conclusions are crucial in persuasive writing. They put the facts to be cited into a coherent structure and give them meaning. Even more important, they make the argument readily accessible to readers and remind them of that purpose from start to end.

Think of it this way. As the writer of an essay, you're essentially a lawyer arguing in behalf of a client (your thesis) before a judge (the reader) who will decide the case (agree or disagree with you). So, begin as a lawyer would, by laying out the facts to the judge in the way you think it will help your client best. Like lawyers in court, you should make an "opening statement," in this case, an introduction. Then review the facts of the case in detail just as lawyers question witnesses and submit evidence during a trial. This process of presentation and cross-examination is equivalent to the "body" of your essay. Finally, end with a "closing statement"—that is, the conclusion of your essay—arguing as strongly as possible in favor of your client's case, namely, your theme.

Likewise, there are several things your paper is *not*. It's not a murder mystery, for instance, full of surprising plot twists or unexpected revelations. Those really don't go over well in this arena. Instead, lay everything out ahead of time so the reader can follow your argument easily. Nor is a history paper an action movie with exciting chases down dark corridors where the reader has no idea how things are going to end. In academic writing it's best to tell the reader from the outset what your conclusion will be. This, too, makes your argument easier to follow. Finally, it's not a love letter. Lush sentiment and starry-eyed praise don't work well here. They make it look like your emotions are in control, not your intellect, and that will do you little good in this enterprise where facts, not dreams, rule.

All in all, persuasive writing grips the reader though its clarity and the force with which the data bring home the thesis. The point is to give your readers no choice but to adopt your way of seeing things, to lay out your theme so strongly they have to agree with you. That means you must be clear, forthright and logical. That's the way good lawyers win their cases.

A. How to Write an Introduction. The introduction of a persuasive essay or paper must be substantial. Having finished it, the reader ought to have a very clear idea of the author's purpose in writing. To wit, after reading the introduction, I tend to stop and ask myself where I think the rest of the paper is headed, what the individual paragraphs in its body will address and what the general nature of the conclusion will be. If I'm right, it's because the introduction has laid out in clear and detailed fashion the theme and the general facts which the author will use to support it.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. The following is an introduction of what turned out to be a well-written paper, but the introduction was severely lacking:

> The role of women has changed over the centuries, and it has also differed from civilization to civilization. Some societies have treated women much like property, while others have allowed women to have great influence and power.

Not a bad introduction really, but rather scant. I have no idea, for instance, which societies will be discussed or what the theme of the paper will be. That is, while I can see what the general topic is, I still don't know the way the writer will draw the facts together, or even really what the paper is arguing in favor of.

As it turned out, the author of this paper discussed women in ancient Egypt, classical Greece, medieval France and early Islamic civilization and stressed their variable treatment in these societies. This writer also focused on the political, social and economic roles women have played in Western cultures and the various ways they have found to assert themselves and circumvent opposition based on gender.

Given that, I would rewrite the introduction this way:

> The role of women <*in Western society*> has changed <*dramatically*> over the centuries, <*from the repression of ancient Greece to the relative freedom of women living in Medieval France. The treatment of women*> has also differed from civilization to civilization <*even at the same period in history*>. Some societies <*such as Islamic ones*> have treated women much like property, while others <*like ancient Egypt*> have allowed

> women to have great influence and power. <*This paper will trace the development of women's rights and powers from ancient Egypt to late medieval France and explore their changing political, social and economic situation through time. All the various means women have used to assert themselves show the different ways they have fought against repression and established themselves in authority.*>

Now it is clear which societies will be discussed (Egypt, Greece, France, Islam) and what the general theme of the paper will be (the variable paths to empowerment women have found over time). Now I know where this paper is going and what it's really about.

B. How to Write a Conclusion. In much the same way that the introduction lays out the thesis for the reader, the conclusion of the paper should reiterate the main points—it should never introduce new ideas or things not discussed in the body of the paper!—and bring the argument home. The force with which you express the theme here is especially important, because if you're ever going to convince the reader that your thesis has merit, it will be in the conclusion. In other words, just as lawyers win their cases in the closing argument, this is the point where you'll persuade others to adopt your thesis.

If the theme is clear and makes sense, the conclusion ought to be very easy to write. Simply begin by restating the theme, then review the facts you cited in the body of the paper in support of your ideas—and it's advisable to rehearse them in some detail—and end with a final reiteration of the theme. Try, however, not to repeat the exact language you used elsewhere in the paper, especially the introduction, or it will look like you haven't explored all aspects of the situation (see above, #7).

All in all, remember these are the last words your reader will hear from you before passing judgment on your argument. Make them as focused and forceful as possible.

25. **Rough Transitions**. Sometimes I read papers that move so rapidly and violently between topics I feel as if the writer is jerking my head from one side to the other. Believe me, if it's possible to get whiplash from reading, I've had it! And frankly, if some writers whose work I've read drive on the road the way they careen through their papers, their cars must be seriously scraped up and their passengers in shock, if still alive. Instead, here are some hints on how to write an essay that corners smoothly and safely changes lanes.

The guiding force behind every well-constructed paper is the theme, the central question or issue to which the writer is responding. Everything in the paper should be directed at and connected to that theme (see below, #26 "Narrative"). Bear in mind, too, that even when the link between the theme and the facts you're citing seems clear to you-the-writer, it may not be to me-the-reader. The theme must be reinforced often, more frequently than you might think, at the very least once every paragraph.

When it isn't, rough transitions will undoubtedly occur, especially between paragraphs. What's happened in this case is the writer has become so engrossed in recounting the facts he's forgotten to point out their relevance to the issue at hand. The paper lurches abruptly from one set of facts to another without tying them to the theme. Writers, instead, should reinforce in the

reader's mind what underlies the citation of these facts, what holds them all together, and that is, of course, the theme. The lesson is, use the theme to tie paragraphs together and, thus, link the facts to one another.

Let me show you what I mean. Suppose that you're writing about the importance of women in Western Europe. And, in the course of that paper, you've chosen to discuss Roman women and Medieval queens. So you write:

> . . . Finally, Livia, the wife of Augustus, dominated Roman politics toward the end of her husband's life. She was responsible for the succession of her son Tiberius, who was not Augustus' child, and through Tiberius all but ruled the Roman state during the early part of his reign.
>
> Eleanor of Aquitaine controlled much of southern France which she had inherited from her father. In marrying Henry II, she brought with her a power and authority which even her husband, the king of England, could not defy—indeed, *dared* not defy, at least not publicly!—. . .

The problem here is the rough transition between Livia and Eleanor as data cited in support of the importance of women in Western civilization. What's been forgotten is the reason these women are being discussed at all, the theme, that is, the argument that women throughout history have asserted their authority through unconventional means to gain and maintain power.

Instead, use the theme to bridge transitions between different facts, or bodies of fact:

> . . . Finally, Livia, the wife of Augustus, dominated Roman politics toward the end of her husband's life. She was responsible for the succession of her son Tiberius, who was not Augustus' child, and through Tiberius all but ruled the Roman state during the early part of his reign. *Thus, certain Roman women like Livia possessed great power and were not afraid to use their authority in maintaining control of their world.*
>
> *Medieval women prove little different, some of whom were quite powerful, too.* Eleanor of Aquitaine, *for instance,* controlled much of southern France which she had inherited from her father. In marrying Henry II, she brought with her a power and authority which even her husband, the king of England, could not defy—indeed, *dared* not defy, at least not publicly!—. . .

What I added to the paragraph above is probably only what the writer was thinking when he wrote it. The point is, he forgot to say it, and it needs to be said.

There's a larger lesson here at hand, too. The theme is the most important element in any paper and, as such, should command the greatest share of attention. It needs to be repeated often—granted, in different wording, so don't just write the very same thing ten times (see below, # 27 [Repeated Phrases and Facts])!—because you need to remind the reader why the facts you're citing pertain to your paper. And, especially at transitions, restate the theme in order to bridge the gap between paragraphs as you shift focus from one group of facts to another. In other words, turn corners gently, brake smoothly and, when you change lanes, look ahead and behind. No one wants to ride with a reckless writer.

H. Argumentation: What to Include and How Much

Finally, here's some specific advice about the type of content to include, that is, what sort of detail works best in history and classics papers. For instance, don't recite long stories (narrative) without making it clear why. Nor should you repeat the same fact in a paper, since it makes you appear not to know any others. Instead, ground your argument in specific data, employing technical terminology appropriately. With all that, I leave the length of your paper largely up to you. It will have to vary according to the theme you have chosen and the task assigned. Make it "as long as it needs to be."

26. **Narrative**. Many students think I want them to prove in their papers that they've read the assignment and "know the story." I do *not*! I have exams and various other means of assessing your knowledge of the details. What I'm seeking from your written work is whether or not you've listened in class and read and absorbed the assigned material. Papers tell me something very important and very different from other types of assessment. They show me not just what facts you know but that you've *thought about* what you've learned!

Thus, students who write about the success of the Romans and lapse into a narrative account of the history of the Roman Republic tell me only that they can regurgitate the story, not that they've tried to make sense of it. But making sense out of historical data is the ultimate goal of studying the past. The struggle that comes of trying to impose some order on the often discordant data surrounding past events is the way we learn about history, human nature and, above all, ourselves. So, don't write just to show what you've learned but to teach, especially yourself, about life then *and* now!

Remember this, too. I know the history we're studying in this class fairly well. There's no need to teach me anything about that. Inform me, instead, about something else just as important, your way of organizing the past. Thus, a mere reference to the Gracchi as Roman revolutionaries is usually sufficient, if your point is that Republican government in Rome was flexible enough to withstand severe internal disruption. Conversely, going on and on about the Gracchi is debilitating on two counts: it's unnecessary for your argument, and it skirts one of the central goals of writing in this class, that you set the data within some sort of coherent structure, your theme, your answer to the big questions about life.

So, don't let yourself get lost in details and forget the big picture. Cite an example as concisely as possible, and then return immediately to your main point. That is, don't start story-telling! Aim at saying what you *think*, not just what you *know*.

27. **Repeated Phrases and Facts**. To some extent, repetition is unavoidable in academic writing. After all, if your job is to give a specific answer to a question or to discuss some issue relevant to history—that is, to put forward a theme—you will have to restate that theme several times. It entails quite a bit of repetition, and there's no way around it.

But it doesn't have to be *tedious* repetition, not if you vary the wording of the theme, in other words, tailor it to suit different circumstances each time you repeat it. For instance, in the

introduction assert the theme as succinctly as possible and in the conclusion as fully as possible. In between those—that is, in the body of the paper where you will have to reiterate your thesis several times to ensure that the connection between fact and theme remains clear to the reader—highlight whatever aspect of it best supports each individual section. To put it bluntly, driving home a single point does not mean your writing has to be monotonous. You can repeat creatively.

Repeated Facts. Repeating facts is a completely different matter. It's far more deleterious to your argument than monotonous phrasing, because by bringing up the same fact twice or more you leave the impression that, as far as you know, there *are* no other facts supporting the case. With so few data underlying it, how strong is your argument then? If, on the other hand, there *are* more and you know them, why aren't you citing them? The reader will conclude that either your case or your preparation is shaky, which doesn't help advance an argument. Instead, construct a better case and include more data, or re-modulate the argument so you can include more corroborating evidence. But whatever you do, don't repeat the same fact in a paper!

Please note that this pertains only to the body of your paper. For instance, it's perfectly fine to repeat facts in the conclusion when you're recapitulating your argument and reviewing the data at the end of the paper. There, in fact, you *should* repeat the specific information you've cited in the body. Just don't repeat facts anywhere else.

All in all, persuasive writing ought to encompass as wide a range of data as possible. The broader the array of facts and the more abundant they are, the more comprehensive an argument will seem and the more convincing it will be.

28. **Specific Facts**. This is one of the most important aspects of the content of your paper. The facts you use must be *specific*! If, for instance, you say, "Using their legions, the Romans conquered many lands," you leave a great deal in question. How did their legions achieve such dominance? Whom did they defeat, and when? Were legions the sole agents responsible for Rome's triumphs, or did issues of leadership and management in the wake of conquest play a role in Rome's dominion, too? As stated above, this weak, vague generality undercuts your argument.

Instead, cite particular names, people, places and events from the past: the deft courage of early Roman generals like Cincinnatus, the cunning of Fabius who avoided battle with Hannibal, the reforms Marius instituted in recruiting legionaries which led to improvements in combat and retention, and the skill and bravery exhibited by Caesar's soldiers at the Battle of Alesia. These concrete fixtures are the common heritage shared by all who study and debate history. Any of us can utilize them to underscore and bolster our notions about the past—assuming, of course, the facts do, in fact, advance our arguments. Think of it this way. Fabius, Marius and Julius Caesar are the public property of everyone who studies classical antiquity. Anyone can and should use the particulars of history in structuring our collective understanding of the past.

Specific facts are important in another way, too. By referencing the particular data that support and comprise our common knowledge of Western civilization, you are, in effect, meeting your readers halfway, on neutral ground so to speak. That is, to begin your paper in a place to which we all have equal access makes it just that much easier for someone to walk along with you wherever you're headed, because in building your ideas on well-known, precise, mutually agreed-upon data, you start the trek toward new ideas in territory everyone's familiar with. From there, others can follow you more readily.

In sum, the specific data constituting our understanding of the past form the basis of all historical and scientific inquiry. The bytes of information we share in common are the elemental vocabulary of any discipline. Therefore, if you mean to write a paper arguing for any larger trend in history and hope to persuade sensible people to see things your way or even if you wish only to convince others you have a handle on the past, you must use specific facts in building your case.

29. **Technical Terms**. Many words you may consider generic are, in fact, technical terms when one is talking history. In the study of ancient Egypt, for instance, "Kingdom" refers to one of three distinct periods: the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2000-1800 BCE) and the New Kingdom (1550-1000 BCE). Likewise, in discussions about ancient Rome "Empire" means that period from 31 BCE to 476 A.D., when a succession of "emperors" dominated Roman government. If you're speaking about the centuries preceding 31 BCE, the technical term for Roman government is "Republic." Thus, words like "kingdom," "republic" and "empire" need to be used carefully in certain historical disciplines.

If you have doubts about whether or not a term has a technical sense, or the proper way to deploy it, it's probably best to substitute a neutral term. For instance, when you wish to refer to Roman government in general, neither the Republic nor the Empire, just say "the Roman *state*." "State" is not a technical term in Roman history, as readings in this field will show.

Misuse of such terms not only may cause confusion between writer and reader but betrays a failure to grasp some basic principles of history. The best way to make sure you deploy technical terms correctly is to watch closely how they're used in the reading assignments for a class. By imitating that, you demonstrate your understanding of the laws of history's linguistics, namely the dialect any particular species of historian speaks. All in all, be aware that the proper use of technical terms is yet one more gauge at my disposal in assessing the quality of effort a student is putting into a class. When you use technical terms appropriately, I can see you've done your reading well.

30. **Length**. Finally, some students think I am impressed by miles and miles of writing. Our greedy society has trained them to equate quantity with quality. Frankly, vast tracts of writing—even *good* writing!—do not impress me. Indeed, past a certain point, expansiveness for its own sake irritates and depresses me. Instead, I think it's a worthy goal to use as few words as

possible in saying what you mean. That means, be as thorough as possible in thought but as thrifty as possible in word.

I know it's maddening to say—and, honestly, as a student I hated when my professors said it, but unfortunately it's true—a paper should be "as long as it needs to be." That is, it should explore as fully yet concisely as possible the topic the writer has set out to explore. The body of the paper should provide a reasonable number of examples—three at the very least!—for every point made. All examples should pertain directly to the question at hand and their pertinence, especially in the introduction and conclusion, should be absolutely clear to the reader. With all that, it should be clear how long to make the paper.

As far I can tell, when students are uncertain about how long their papers ought to be, it's actually a sign of trouble on other fronts. If the theme of a paper is strong and there are sufficient data to support the writer's assertions, the paper writes itself. Conversely, if facts are lacking or weakly connected to the theme, or the theme itself is unmanageable because the evidence of the past simply doesn't support it, that's most often in my experience when questions begin to bubble up about a paper's length. The writer is looking with frustration and regret at how far he has to go, not where he's going.

So, the real question at hand is not how long the paper needs to be but what it's about, in other words, why it's being written. And if that's the case, the real problem is not the paper's length but the writer's preparation. A paper with no clear direction is indeed very hard to write. When you don't know why you're writing in the first place, you end up just wanting to get it over with, all along the way lamenting every word you have to add. Of course, it's painful to write that way.

So, if you find yourself in that position, stop and clear the decks. The problem is so serious it's best just to start all over again. Begin by doing more research. Review the data and see if there's something you missed which supports your ideas. If there isn't, search for another way of approaching the issue. Women's presence in history, for instance, is visible not only through their own activities but also in their influence on their families, their husbands and children. Can you broaden the scope of the theme in some way that will give you access to more data and make writing the paper easier?

If not, then you may have to face the fact that your theme is infeasible. There are some notions history just does not permit. In that case, it might be best to reconsider your position on the issue. If the historical data strongly suggest a different way of thinking, why not adopt that approach? Swimming against the current will only wear you out more quickly. So, consider changing your mind if that's the way the facts appear to dictate. Rethinking your ideas about life is not a sign of weakness but strength. Mature, healthy-minded people change their minds when the situation calls for it.

And now from this new vantage point, see if the theme and facts don't come into sharper focus more easily. If they do, adopt that approach. If not, keep looking for themes that write themselves. So, all in all, when the theme is strong and you understand clearly what you're trying to say and the data that underlie your case, how long your paper needs to be is rarely an issue. The paper itself will tell you.

Conclusion

Finally, I realize I'm asking a great deal of you. I know it's hard to bear all these factors in mind at once and at the same time tackle the great issues of history. I also realize you're not going to become professional writers—or historians!—in the space of one paper, or even ten. The suggestions and guidelines above are intended only to help you start down the road toward a more competent expression of your ideas. Your grade will not rest primarily on your following these strictures. They serve merely as guidelines to better writing.

Indeed, if all you achieve in this class is the mastery of one or two of the aforementioned items, you'll be just that much better a writer. For instance, if spelling is a problem for you, conquer it word by word. Learn to paragraph in moderation. And don't let yourself get lost amidst the details, lapse into narrative and forget the main point of your argument. Above all, understand that preparation is the key to success in making any argument, frankly, in any endeavor.

Also realize that good writing is a powerful tool by which you can reshape and accommodate your ideas to suit the world better, and vice versa. Let this class be part of a process that will lead you eventually to higher achievement in life and the fuller enjoyment of its opportunities. If you do all this, you'll be a better student, a better worker and a better voter. Indeed, those who know how to construct a good argument can see through bad ones more readily, especially the many, many bad ideas cast about in the world of politics. Our democracy, no less, depends on its voters' ability to cut through folly when they meet it. So, start by understanding your own fallacious thinking, exposing and eliminating your own illogical and unconvincing presumptions, and then turn that savvy on the world at large, making it a better, more reasonable place for us all.

On the following page is a sample of the grading form I will use in evaluating your paper. Look it over carefully and be aware of what I'm emphasizing in this exercise.

PAPER GRADE

Specific Evaluation. If any of the following are checked, read the corresponding section in the handout entitled "A Guide to Writing in History and Classics."

STYLE

1. Informality _____
   - A. Abbreviations _____
   - B. Numbers _____
   - C. You _____

2. Definitive Statements _____

3. Overstatements _____

4. Meaningless Words/ Non-Statements _____

5. Choppy Sentences _____

6. Phrasing _____
   - A. Dialects _____
   - B. Prepositions _____
   - C. Technical Jargon _____

7. Repetition of Words _____

8. Noun Clusters _____

9. Subject-Verb Agreement _____

10. Dangling Participles _____

11. Pronoun Referents _____

12. Spelling _____

13. A. Possessives _____
    B. Plurals _____

14. Present-Tense Verbs:
    - A. Literary Papers _____
    - B. History Papers _____

15. Paragraphs _____

16. Punctuation _____

17. A. Run-ons _____
    B. Fragments _____

18. Neatness _____

19. Quotes _____

20. Proofread _____

CONTENT

21. Question/Topic _____

22. Positive Themes _____

23. Narrow Themes _____

24. A. Introduction _____
    B. Conclusion _____

25. Rough Transitions _____

26. Narrative _____

27. Repeated Phrases/Facts _____

28. Specific Facts _____

29. Technical Terms _____

30. Length _____

General Evaluation. Included here are comments on the overall impression your paper makes on the reader.

PAPER GRADE

Specific Evaluation. If any of the following are checked, read the corresponding section in the handout entitled "A Guide to Writing in History and Classics."

STYLE

1. Informality _____
   - A. Abbreviations _____
   - B. Numbers _____
   - C. You _____

2. Definitive Statements _____

3. Overstatements _____

4. Meaningless Words/ Non-Statements _____

5. Choppy Sentences _____

6. Phrasing _____
   - A. Dialects _____
   - B. Prepositions _____
   - C. Technical Jargon _____

7. Repetition of Words _____

8. Noun Clusters _____

9. Subject-Verb Agreement _____

10. Dangling Participles _____

11. Pronoun Referents _____

12. Spelling _____

13. A. Possessives _____
    B. Plurals _____

14. Present-Tense Verbs:
    - A. Literary Papers _____
    - B. History Papers _____

15. Paragraphs _____

16. Punctuation _____

17. A. Run-ons _____
    B. Fragments _____

18. Neatness _____

19. Quotes _____

20. Proofread _____

CONTENT

21. Question/Topic _____

22. Positive Themes _____

23. Narrow Themes _____

24. A. Introduction _____
    B. Conclusion _____

25. Rough Transitions _____

26. Narrative _____

27. Repeated Phrases/Facts _____

28. Specific Facts _____

29. Technical Terms _____

30. Length _____

General Evaluation. Included here are comments on the overall impression your paper makes on the reader.