

Writing Your History Paper

Being able to write well is one of the most valuable things you can get out of your education. In fact it is your education, since writing well is just thinking and organizing your thoughts in a way that others can understand. The items below should help you construct the best possible essay.

The following points should give you an idea of what to strive for in an "A" paper. Generally speaking, an "A" paper is one that has a clear and meaningful thesis; an "A" paper is researched thoroughly and makes use of all information on the topic; an "A" paper is documented fully and completely with footnotes; an "A" paper is one that engages evidence and marshals it critically and persuasively in support of the thesis; and finally an "A" paper is one that is both well-written and free of grammatical and typographical errors.

Ultimately, there is no substitute for thorough research; no matter how well written, a paper researched sloppily or at the last minute will always bear the tell-tale marks of a rush-job, and will be evaluated accordingly. In addition to careful study, however, there is much you can do to polish your work. The following strategies will improve the quality of your writing immensely

- **Proofread your paper before you turn it in.** Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are the most easily avoided flaws in any paper, and failure to detect them indicates sloppiness. A word to the wise: don't rely on spellcheckers. By themselves, spellcheckers are never enough.
- **Make an outline of your paper before you write it.** Taking the time to think about the structure of your paper before you write it usually results in a clearer, more effective argument. Another word to the wise: don't feel bound to stick to an outline, if as you think harder about your thesis you discover that your original views were flawed.
- **Never use the passive voice, if you can avoid it.** There are occasions, of course, when the passive voice is unavoidable. But generally speaking, passive prose reads as if it had been generated by a passive mind.
- **State your thesis clearly and organize your argument around the task of defending it.** This can't be stated often enough...an essay that lacks a thesis is not, properly speaking, an essay at all. A full thesis statement will explain in a few words what the argument of your essay is and how you will substantiate it. Here are a few things that a thesis statement is NOT:
 - **A thesis statement is NOT a statement of the topic** [e.g. "This paper is about..."]
 - **A thesis statement is NOT a statement of intention** [e.g. "In this paper, I will look at..."]
 - **A thesis statement is NOT a statement of some blindingly obvious truth** [e.g. "This paper shows that Nazis were antisemitic"].

The Unsatisfactory Essay:

The D or F essay either has no thesis or else makes an argument that is vague, broad, or uninteresting. There is little indication that the writer understands the material being presented. The paragraphs do not hold together. Ideas do not develop from sentence to sentence. This essay usually repeats the same thoughts again and again, perhaps in slightly different language, but often in the same words. The D or F essay is filled with mechanical faults (subject verb disagreement, obscure pronouns, and sentence fragments), errors in grammar, and errors in spelling.

More seriously, the use of plagiarized material -- material copied without citing the source, or ideas taken from another source without giving the original author credit in an endnote -- constitutes an automatic F, and places the student at risk of disciplinary sanctions by the university.

Compiled directly from:

- "A Guide to Writing History Papers," Department of History, University of Oregon (Eugene, Oregon), 2008.
- "How to Write," by Alan Baumlner, Department of History, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (Indiana, Pennsylvania), 2008.