

A Guide to Improving Writing History Papers
Dr. Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie

1: Basics

- past tense* History papers are usually written in the past tense. Try to avoid the present tense. EG: “Emancipation is never an immediate process” should read “Emancipation was never an immediate process.” Historical events have already happened. Your paper should reflect this basic fact. *English papers are another matter altogether.*
- plagiarism* This is a type of cheating whereby one claims someone else’s work or ideas as solely their own. EG: I put this writing guide together. In fact, it is based upon a guide provided by a colleague. Needless to say, this one is much better!
- platitude* This is usually a meaningless sentence. EG: Bishop Butler once said: “Everything is what it is and not another thing.” Lauren Hill: “Everything is everything.” A H006 student paper: “Slavery was equally cruel to all blacks across the globe.” Try to avoid such richly informative statements!
- proof-read* Too many student history papers contain many of the errors pointed to in this guide. This is because they are not proof-read. Once your papers are ready, go over them once again looking for errors. Or exchange your paper with a fellow student and proof-read each other’s work. (This guide was proof-read by my wife). *Spell-check is not proof-reading!*
- weak support* Some student papers contain weak historical explanations for why things happened. EG: “...slowly but surely,” “only a matter of time,” “domino effect.” I like Donald Byrd’s *Falling Like Dominoes* but not as an historical explanation!

2: Sentences

- clarity* Achieving clarity in your writing is no easy thing since what is abundantly clear to you might not be clear at all to your reader. The reason it is clear to you, of course, is because you know what you are trying to say, whereas the reader does not and might need you to spell out some of your presuppositions more explicitly. The best way to make sure you are being clear in your exposition is to let someone else read your paper/essay and then explain back to you what she or he gets from it. Note that the books used in this course all have acknowledgements to readers who have helped the author. One guiding quote I like: “Good prose is like a window pane.” George Orwell, 1946.
- fragmentary* Some sentences miss either a subject or a predicate. Usually a series of

fragmentary sentences are not effective but rather indicate a laziness of thought or a perverse moral willfulness. Try to avoid fragments.

passive As a general rule, English prose is more effective when the active voice prevails. The voice is active when the writer uses active-verb sentences, that is sentences where the subject precedes the object. EG: “Black women also traveled, worked, organized, and protested in this Atlantic world.” Who did the traveling, working, protesting (subject) is mentioned before we find out where they did their stuff (object). The same sentence in the passive tenses would read: “This Atlantic world was traveled, worked, and protested by black women.” The sense is the same, but the sentence is more difficult to read. Try this rule: S-V-O. Read over each sentence and ensure it has a subject + verb + object.

repetition Rather than repeat the same points over and over again, learn how to develop these further.

run-on A conscientious writer should avoid writing run-on sentences because these sentences are long and leave the reader breathless at their conclusion which is not good because then the reader is out of breath, annoyed, or forgotten what the point of the given sentence was supposed to be. To correct, read over your sentences and modify those that are too long. Shorter sentences usually work better than longer ones.

3: Technical

apostrophe An apostrophe is used to indicate a contraction – such as “wouldn’t” for “would not” – or to indicate the possessive case – such as “That is Toussaint Louverture’s horse.” Sometimes, writers feel called on to use apostrophes whenever they add the letter “s” to a word; this is neither necessary nor correct.

hyphen Two words require a hyphen between them. A hyphen is usually required when you have a noun followed by a modifying participle. For instance, “decision making” requires a hyphen. It is almost universally the case that a hyphen is required whenever you use the word “self” followed by another word modifying it. For instance, “self-emancipation,” “self-respect,” and “self-worth” are all correctly hyphenated.

punctuation The most common punctuation error involves a missing or extraneous comma. A common belief among many students is that a comma must be used before each quotation. This is not true. Commas must be used only as they are needed in your sentence, and quotations should always be incorporated into your own prose. A good rule is to read your sentence aloud and then, when you notice the break in your sentence, insert a comma.

quotation If there is a quotation within a quotation, you use double quotation marks to set off the full quotation, and single quotation marks to set off the quotation within the quotation. EG: “Marcus Garvey believed that ‘Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God’.”

It is important that you write your quotations exactly as they are in the source from which you are quoting. Always double-check your quotation. If you take any words out of the quotation, use three ellipses (...) to note where you removed the words. If you change a word in the quotation, use square brackets [] to note the change.

titles All book titles must be *italicized* or underlined. All “article titles” or “chapter titles” must be set off in quotation marks.

transition Read each paragraph and see what it says, then determine how best to make the transition from that paragraph to the next one.

4: Footnotes, Endnotes, and Bibliography

i. Follow the University of Chicago style.

ii. Footnotes should be listed numerically at the bottom of the page.

iii. Endnotes should be listed numerically at the back of the paper.

iv. Footnotes or Endnotes for an authored book:

First name of author or editor, last name, *Title* (City of publication: publisher, date of publication), page number.

EG: Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History through Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 28.

v. Footnotes or Endnotes for an article in a journal or chapter in a book:

EG: Colin Palmer, “Modern African Diaspora,” *The Journal of Negro History* 85:1/2 (Winter-Spring, 2000), 27-32

EG: John Blassingame, “Culture,” in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 105-148.

vi. The Books Cited, Sources Used, Bibliography etc., should follow the same format as iv and v with the exception that all sources should be listed alphabetically by author’s last name and it must be on the last page of your paper.