

## WRITING ABOUT HISTORY

### I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historians analyze data to develop theories about past events, ideas, experiences, or movements; to explain why or how something happened; and to place events in larger contexts. They are expected to use both primary and secondary sources, to do thorough, authoritative research, and to make a clear and concise argument in the correct format. **Audiences** include peers, teachers, students, and the general public.

### II. TYPES OF WRITING

- Critical Essays
- Book Reviews
- Research Papers
- Historiographic Essays
  - Historiography (how history is written)
  - Examining or analyzing assumptions, biases, contexts, or methods of other historians

### III. TYPES OF EVIDENCE

- **Primary sources:** material/ artifacts from the period being studied; used as examples or evidence
  - Government documents, public records, debates, numerical data, photographs, eye-witness accounts, speeches, diaries, letters, maps, newspapers
- **Secondary sources:** material that analyzes, synthesizes, or evaluates an event; secondary sources make arguments based on primary sources
  - books, scholarly journal articles, documentaries, newspapers written about the event
- **Some sources, such as newspapers and magazines, can be both primary and secondary sources.** For example, if a historian were writing about the war in Iraq, she could use a newspaper article from that period as a primary source by citing it as an example of how journalists write about the war. But if she supported her paper's argument by referring to the author of that same article as an authority on the war, she would be using the newspaper as a secondary source. *In general, newspapers and magazines don't make good secondary sources because they are not peer-reviewed. Also, some faculty members do not accept newspapers, magazines, or documentaries as secondary sources because they are not scholarly sources.*

#### IV. WRITING CONVENTIONS

- Historians value counterargument and consider conflicting theories and interpretations
- Research consists of multiple, credible, reliable, and authoritative sources
  - Assess evidence; do not rely on assumptions or personal opinion
  - Avoid value judgments
  - Reliable Sources
    - Library databases such as EBSCO and JSTOR
    - Online databases for Public Records Office
  - Unreliable Sources
    - Wikipedia
    - Blogs
    - News aggregation websites
- Credit the scholarship of others
- Establish credibility by being fair and unbiased
- Avoid first person (I/we) and opinion words (think, believe, feel)
- Avoid sexist language.
  - Sexist:** "When a historian writes a paper, he affects all of mankind."
  - Non-sexist:** "When a historian writes a paper, he or she affects all of humanity."
- Avoid passive voice:
  - Passive:** "The passive voice was used by the historian."
  - Active:** "The historian used the active voice."
- Use past tense for writing about past events:
  - "The thirteen colonies seceded from the British Empire in 1776."
- Use present tense when writing about another author's work:
  - "Charles Beard writes that the founding fathers were motivated by economic self-interest."

#### V. CITATION STYLE

##### CMS (Chicago Manual of Style)

- Cite when using someone else's ideas, whether quoting, summarizing or paraphrasing.

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##### Sources:

Cullick, Jonathan S. and Terry Myers Zawacki. *Writing in the Disciplines: Advice and Models*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2011. D-79-83.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.