

Discipline-Specific Writing Guide: History

Emphasized Writing Skills and Typical Assignments

Writing about literature requires **close reading** and **critical analysis** of primary texts, sometimes incorporating **synthesis** of external research and explanations of how that research helps to understand the primary text. *Close reading* involves careful attention to how the author's choices contribute to the text's effectiveness. *Critical analysis* requires students to **interpret** the text, focusing on a key issue and developing arguments to support this interpretation. Students should **use quotations** from the text to support their arguments, clearly articulating the relevance of the quotation to the analysis. Typical assignments include:

- Reflections
- Textual analyses
- Research papers
- Essay Exams

Some Key Questions to Guide Writing

Assignments may not directly require reflection on personal responses to or questions about a text, but awareness of these responses and questions can be helpful in finding a focus for critical analyses. These questions are other useful starting points:

- What is the primary goal of the piece?
- What is the significance of the title, key phrases, or names of people or places? What do these contribute to the text?
- What theme(s) or message(s) does the text convey? What elements in the piece communicate or contribute to this?

Preferred Patterns of Organization and Use of Headings

MLA does not provide specific organization or section heading requirements. Papers typically follow the **introduction, body, conclusion** format and should be organized in a logical fashion and by clearest flow of argument.

Preferred Style, Tone, Terminology

- Writing should be clear and to the point.
- Formal papers do not allow the use of "I", "we", or "you".
- Papers should convey information and interpret the relevance and importance of that information to the reader.

Some examples:

- **Incorrect:** “The Classical Period was a wonderful time when the ideals of democracy were being formed by great minds. We owe all our democratic ideals to this important period. Many men who were great lived in this time, like Aristotle and Socrates and Pericles.” This relies on (often incorrect) generalizations and oversimplifications, and it uses random terms with no indication that the writer understands or cares about their relation to the issue being discussed.
- **Better:** “The Persians invaded Greece in 490 B.C.E. They were led by the Great King Darius. The Persians were defeated at Marathon by the Greeks. Then Xerxes attacked Greece in 480 B.C.E.” This shows a grasp of the facts, but gives no indication that the writer has thought about them deeply or attempted to interpret them.
- **Best:** “The democracy at Athens was the product of a struggle between two sides. Aristocrats such as Cimon wished to preserve class privilege for themselves through the oligarchy, and they valued tradition. The opposing politicians, represented by Ephialtes and Pericles, were also aristocratic and concerned with their own privileges, but saw ways to use an empowered lower class for their own goals.” This describes and interprets the important issues of the period and links them to important names and terms in an explicit way.

Favored Research Methodologies

Reading and analysis of primary documents is the preferred type of research used for history papers.

Authoritative Sources/Evidence

Acceptable sources include books published by legitimate presses or articles from peer reviewed academic journals. Within the History department, sources such as Wikipedia or other respectable websites are perfectly acceptable for use in gathering background information, but they should not ever be cited or quoted from.

Documentation Style

MLA (Modern Language Association) *or* CMS (Chicago Manual of Style)

All information which does not constitute common knowledge and all interpretations that you have gleaned from reading the work of historians **must** be properly cited.

“Common knowledge” is straightforward factual information available in a history book or encyclopedia, and does not need to be cited. Some examples:

- “Women were given full suffrage in the U.S. by 1920 and in England by 1928”
- “The Civil War lasted from 1861-65.”
- “Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.”