

## ***History***

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### **What this handout is about**

This handout was written with several goals in mind: to explain what historians do and how they approach the writing process, to encourage you to think about your history instructor's expectations, and to offer some strategies to help you write effectively in history courses.

### **Introduction: What is history?**

Easy, right? History is everything that happened in the past: dates, facts, timelines, and the names of kings, queens, generals, and villains. For many students, the word "history" conjures up images of thick textbooks, long lectures, and even longer nights spent memorizing morsels of historical knowledge.

For your instructors in the history department, however, history is a fascinating puzzle with both personal and cultural significance. The past informs our lives, ideas, and expectations. Before shrugging off this abstract notion, ask yourself another "easy" question: Why are you here at UNC-CH?

Maybe you're at UNC because it was the best school that accepted you, or because UNC has great sports teams. In the big picture, however, you are here because of history, i.e., because of past events and developments. You are here (on the planet) because two people's lives collided—in the past. You may be here (in North Carolina) because you or some ancestor crossed an ocean several weeks, years, decades or centuries ago. You are here (in Chapel Hill) because, two hundred years ago, some people pooled their ideas, energy, and money to dig a well, collect some books, and hire some professors. You are here (at an institution of higher education) because long ago, some German scholars laid the groundwork for what we call the "modern university."

In other words, your presence on this campus is the result of many, many historical developments. Although we are all unique, we share parts of our identities with past peoples and cultures. The problems we face today may have puzzled—or even been created by—past people and cultures. This same past has eliminated many hurdles for us (think of the polio vaccine) and may even offer possible solutions for contemporary concerns (consider the recent revival of herbal medicines).

Finally, history is ever-changing. Question: what did Christopher Columbus do? Well, if you're like many people, you're thinking, "He discovered the New World." Well, sort of. It took a while

before the Spaniards realized he'd landed on an island off the coast of this New World. It took even longer for historians to figure out that the Vikings crossed the Atlantic long before Columbus. And now we know that this world wasn't really "new"—there were civilizations here that far predated organized cultures in Europe.

So, historians study the past to figure out what happened and how specific events and cultural developments affected individuals and societies. Historians also revise earlier explanations of the past, adding new information. The more we know about the past, the better we can understand how societies have evolved to their present state, why people face certain problems, and how successfully others have addressed those problems.

As you can see, the questions of history include the immediate and personal (how did I get here?), the broad and cultural (why do universities function as they do?) and the purely factual (what exactly did Columbus find?). The answers historians offer are all more or less educated guesses about the past, based on interpretations of whatever information trickles down through the ages.

### **History instructors' expectations of you**

You can assume two things about your Carolina history instructors. First, they are themselves scholars of history. Second, they expect you to engage in the practice of history. In other words, they frequently want you to use information to make an educated guess about some bygone event, era, or phenomenon.

You probably know how to guess about the past. High school history exams and various nameless standardized tests often encourage students to guess. For example:

1. The hula hoop was invented in

- a) 1650
- b) 1865
- c) 1968
- d) none of the above

In academia, however, guessing is not enough. As they evaluate assignments, history instructors look for evidence that students:

- know about the past, and can
- think about the past.

Historians know about the past because they look at what relics have trickled down through the ages. These relics of past civilizations are called primary sources. For some periods and cultures (20th century America, for example), there are tons of primary sources—political documents, newspapers, teenagers' diaries, high school year books, tax returns, tape-recorded phone conversations, etc. For other periods and cultures, however, historians have very few clues to work with; that's one reason we know so little about the Aztecs.

Gathering these clues, however, is only part of historians' work. They also consult other historians' ideas. These ideas are presented in secondary sources, which include textbooks, monographs, and scholarly articles. Once they've studied both primary and secondary sources, historians think. Ideally, after thinking for a while, they come up with a story to link together all these bits of information—an interpretation (read: educated guess) which answers a question about some past event or phenomenon.

Sounds pretty straightforward, right? Except when two historians using different sources come up with contradictory answers to the same question. Even worse, what if two historians ask the same question and use the same sources but come up with different answers? This happens pretty regularly and can lead to heated debates, complete with name-calling. Even today, for example, historians still can't agree on the extent of apocalyptic panic surrounding the year 1000.

To avoid unnecessary disagreements and survive legitimate debates, good historians explain why their question is important, exactly what sources they found, and how they analyzed those sources to reach a particular interpretation. In other words, they prove that both their approach and answers are valid and significant. This is why historical texts have so many footnotes. It's also why history instructors put so much emphasis on how you write your paper. In order to evaluate the quality of your answer to a historical question, they need to know not only the "facts," but also:

- why your question is significant
- where you got your facts
- how you engaged and organized those facts to make your point

To sum up: most UNC history instructors will expect you to both know information and interpret it to answer a question about the past. Your hard-won ability to name all the governors of Idaho in chronological order will mean little unless you can show why and how that chronology is significant.

### **Typical writing assignments**

(For general tips on understanding writing assignments, see the Writing Center's online [handout](#).)

A typical Carolina history course includes several kinds of writing assignments:

1. Research papers—As the name suggests, these assignments require you to engage in full-fledged historical research. You will read sources (primary and/or secondary), think about them, and interpret them to answer some question about the past. Note: Contrary to popular fears, research papers are not the most common kind of paper assigned in college-level history courses.
2. Response papers—Much more common in survey courses, these assignments ask you to reflect on a given reading, film, or theme of the course and discuss/evaluate some aspect

of it. Don't be disillusioned, however; these are rarely intended to be free-flowing, last minute scrawls on the back of a napkin. Be prepared to address a question and support why you think that way about it.

3. Exam essays—Essay exam questions are close cousins of response papers. Assuming you've kept up with the course, you should have all the "facts" to answer the question, and need only (!?!) to organize them into a thoughtful interpretation of the past. For tips on this, see our handout on essay exams.
4. Book reviews—These will vary depending on the requirements of the course. All book reviews in history should explain the basic argument of the book and assess the argument's strengths and weaknesses. Your assessment can include an evaluation of the author's use of evidence, methodology, organization, style, etc. Was the argument convincing? If so, then explain why, and if not, explain why. Some instructors will also expect you to place the book within its historiographical context, examining the relationship between this work and others in the field. For more information, see our handout on book reviews.
5. Historiographical essays—These assignments are common in upper-level and graduate history classes. Historiographical essays focus on how scholars have interpreted certain events, not on the events themselves. Basically, these assignments are "histories of history" and require that students be able to explain the different schools of thought on a subject.

Here's an example of a thesis statement for a historiographical essay:

The historiography of the American Revolution can be primarily seen as a shift between various Whig and Progressive interpretations. While Whig historians are concerned with political ideology and the actions of powerful people, Progressive interpretations generally examine the social causes of the Revolution.

To begin a historiographical essay, you will first read multiple works on the same topic, such as the American Revolution. As you would for a book review, you will then analyze the authors' arguments, being sure to avoid simple summaries. You can organize your essay chronologically (in the order that the books on the topic were published) or methodologically (grouping historians with similar interpretations together).

Some questions to consider as you write a historiographical essay are: How has the historiography on this subject evolved over time? What are the different schools of thought on the topic, and how do they impact the interpretations of this subject? Why have different scholars come to different conclusions about this topic? You may find some of the information in our handout on literature reviews helpful.

The specifics of your particular assignment will obviously vary. However, if you're not sure how to attack a writing assignment in your history course (and why else would you be reading this?), try our 8½ Step Plan.

**8½ step plan**

**STEP 1: Recall the link between history and writing.** In case you missed this, history is basically an

EDUCATED GUESS ABOUT THE PAST.

When you write, you will most likely have to show that you know something about the past and can craft that knowledge into a thoughtful interpretation answering a specific question.

**STEP 2: Read with an eye towards writing.**

You will have to read before you write. If the reading has been assigned, guess why your instructor chose it. Whatever you read, ask yourself:

- How does this text relate to the themes of the lecture/discussion section/course?
- What does this text say? What does it not say?
- How do I react to this text? What are my questions? How could I explain it to someone else (summarize it, diagram the main points, critique the logic)?

For more on this, see also our handout on reading to write.

**STEP 3: Dissect the question.**

Since you now (having completed STEP 1) anticipate having to make—and support—an educated guess, pick the question apart. Identify:

A. Opportunities to show what you know. These are requests for information and are usually pretty easy to find. Look for verbs like these:

- Summarize
- Outline
- Review

B. Opportunities to show what you think. These are requests for interpretation. If you're lucky, they will be just as obvious. Look for key words like these:

- Why
- How
- Analyze
- Critique

Requests for interpretation may not always be worded as questions. Each of following statements asks for an educated guess:

- Compare the effects of the French Revolution and white bread on French society.
- Analyze what freedom meant to Cleopatra.
- Discuss the extent to which television changed childhood in America.

Warning: Even something as straightforward as "Did peanut butter kill Elvis?" is usually a plea

for both knowledge and interpretation. A simple “yes” or “no” is probably not enough; the best answers will include some information about Elvis and peanut butter, offer supporting evidence for both possible positions, and then interpret this information to justify the response.

**STEP 3 1/2: Dissect any other guidelines just as carefully.**

Your assignment prompt and/or any writing guidelines your instructor has provided contain valuable hints about what you must or could include in your essay. Obvious examples:

Consider the following questions.

- In all papers for this course, be sure to make at least one reference to lecture notes.
- Evaluate two of the four social classes in early modern Timbuktu.

History instructors often begin an assignment with a general “blurb” about the subject, which many students skip in order to get to the “real” question. These introductory statements, however, can offer clues about the expected content and organization of your essay. Example:

- The modern world has witnessed a series of changes in the realm of breadmaking. The baker’s code of earlier societies seemed no longer relevant to a culture obsessed with fiber content and caloric values. The meaning of these developments has been hotly contested by social historians such as Al White and A. Loaf. Drawing on lecture notes, class readings, and your interpretation of the film, *The Yeast We Can Do*, explain which European culture played the greatest role in the post-war breadmaking revolution.

Although it’s possible this instructor is merely revealing his/her own nutritional obsessions, a savvy student could glean important information from the first two sentences of this assignment. A strong answer would not only pick a culture and prove its importance to the development of breadmaking, but also:

- summarize the relationship between this culture and the series of changes in breadmaking
- briefly explain the irrelevance of the baker’s code
- relate the answer to both the arguments of White and Loaf and the modern world’s obsessions

For more on this, see our handout on interpreting assignments.

**STEP 4: Jot down what you know and what you think.** This is important because it helps you develop an argument about the question.

Make two lists, one of facts and one of thoughts.

**FACTS:** What do you know about breadmaking, based on your sources? You should be able to trace each item in this list to a specific source (lecture, the textbook, a primary source reading, etc).

**THOUGHTS:** What’s the relationship between these facts? What’s your reaction to them? What

conclusions might a reasonable person draw? If this is more difficult (which it should be), try:

- Freewriting. Just write about your subject for 5-10 minutes, making no attempt to use complete sentences, prove your ideas, or otherwise sound intelligent.
- Jotting down your facts in no particular order on a blank piece of paper, then using highlighters or colored pencils to arrange them in sets, connect related themes, link related ideas, or show a chain of developments.
- Scissors. Write down whatever facts and ideas you can think of. Cut up the list and then play with the scraps. Group related ideas or opposing arguments or main points and supporting details.

**STEP 5: Make an argument.** This is where many people panic, but don't worry, you only need an argument, not necessarily an earth-shattering argument. In our example, there is no need to prove that Western civilization would have died out without bread. If you've been given a question, ask yourself, "How can I link elements of my two lists to address the question?" If you get stuck, try:

- Looking back at STEPS 3 and 3½
- More freewriting
- Talking with someone
- Letting all the information "gel" in your mind. Give your subconscious mind a chance to work. Get a snack, take a walk, etc.

If no question has been assigned, give yourself plenty of time to work on STEP 4. Alternately, convince yourself to spend thirty minutes on a 6-sided strategy Donald Daiker calls "cubing." (If thirty minutes seems like a long time, remember most instructors really, really, really want to see some kind of argument.) Spend no more than five minutes writing on each of the following (just thinking doesn't count; you have to get it down on paper).

1. Describe your subject. It's breadmaking. Everyone eats bread. Bread can be different textures and colors and sizes...
2. Compare it. Breadmaking is like making steel because you combine raw ingredients...It's totally different than...
3. Associate it. My grandfather made bread twice a week. Breadmaking makes me think of butter, cheese, milk, cows, the Alps. Loaf talks about Germans, and some of them live in the Alps.
4. Analyze it. White thinks that French bread is the best; Loaf doesn't. There are different kinds of bread, different steps in the breadmaking process, different ways to make bread...
5. Apply it. You could teach a course on breadmaking. You could explain Franco-German hostilities based on their bread preferences...
6. Argue for or against it. Breadmaking is important because every culture has some kind of bread. People focus so much on food fads like smoothies, the "other white meat," and Jell-O, but bread has kept more people alive over time...

Now, do any of these ideas seem significant? Do they tie in to some theme of your reading or

course? Do you have enough information in your earlier “facts” and “thoughts” lists to PROVE any of these statements? If you’re still stumped, gather up all your lists and go talk with your instructor. The lists will prove to him/her you’ve actually tried to come up with an argument on your own and give the two of you something concrete to talk about. For more on this, see our handouts on making an argument, constructing thesis statements, and asking for feedback on your writing.

### **STEP 6: Organize.**

Let’s say you’ve batted around some ideas and come up with the following argument:

Although White’s argument about the role of food fads suggests that French culture drove the modern breadmaking revolution, careful consideration of Loaf’s thesis proves that German emigres irreversibly changed traditional attitudes towards bread.

The next step is to figure out a logical way to explain and prove your argument. Remember that the best thesis statements both take a position and give readers a map to guide them through the paper. Look at the parts of your thesis and devote a section of your essay to each part. Here’s one (but not the only) way to organize an essay based on the above argument.

- P1: Introduction: Why is breadmaking a relevant subject? Who are White and Loaf? Give thesis statement.
- P2: What is/was the breadmaking revolution? What traditional attitudes did it change?
- P3: How does White’s argument about food fads lead one to believe the French have dominated this revolution?
- P4: Why is White wrong?
- P5: What is Loaf’s thesis and how do you see it asserting the role of German emigres?
- P6: Why does Loaf’s thesis make sense?
- P7: Conclusion: Sum up why Loaf’s argument is stronger, explain how society has been changed the breadmaking revolution as he understands it, and tie these ideas back to your original argument.

### **STEP 7: Fill in the content.**

Fill in each section—also called a paragraph—using your lists from STEP 5. In addition to filling in what you know and what you think, remember to explain each section’s role in proving your argument and how each paragraph relates to those before and after it. For more help with this, see our handouts on introductions, conclusions, transitions, and paragraph development.

### **STEP 8: Revise.**

Ideally, this would really be steps 8, 9, and 10 (maybe even 11 and 12 for a big or important paper), but you’d never have gotten this far if you suspected there were that many steps. To maintain the illusion, let’s just call them 8a, 8b, and 8c.

8a: Check the organization. This is really double-checking STEP 6. Do the parts of your paper

make sense—and prove your point—in this order?

8b: Check content. First, read your draft and ask yourself how each section relates to your thesis or overall argument. Have you explained this relationship? If not, would it be easier to rework the body of your paper to fit your argument or to revise your thesis to fit the existing content?

Next, reread your draft, and identify each sentence (based on its actual content): Is it “knowing” or “thinking” or both? Write one or both of those words in the margin. After doing this for each sentence in the whole paper, go back and tally up how many times you scribbled “I know” and “I think.” This next part is important:

THE “KNOWS” and “THINKS” SHOULD

BALANCE EACH OTHER OUT (more or less).

This should usually be true both within specific paragraphs and in the paper as a whole. It’s fine to have 4 “knows” and 6 “thinks,” but if things are way out of balance, reread the assignment very carefully to be sure you didn’t miss something. Even if they ask for your opinion, most history instructors expect you to back it up by interpreting historical evidence or examples.

8c: Proofread for style and grammar. This is also important. Even though you’re not writing for an English course, style and grammar are very important because they help you communicate ideas. For additional tips, see our handouts on style and proofreading.

## **Conclusion**

While every assignment and course will have its unique quirks and requirements, you’re now armed with a set of basic guidelines to help you understand what your instructors expect and work through writing assignments in history. For more information, refer to the following resources or make an appointment to work with a tutor at the Writing Center.

## **Works consulted**

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

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