

## **A Student Guide to Historical Essay Writing: A Brief Summary by Mel Pritchard, History Instructor, West Valley College**

### **Introduction: Why is essay writing an important academic skill?**

A new or returning college student frequently confronts the task, how do I write good papers for my courses? The task of writing is dependent on the course. In history and social science courses, there is a different emphasis and standards in writing for history. This is true compared to literary criticism or creative writing. This handout is a guide for writing for history for short essays to research papers.

Essay writing is an academic skill useful in the business, law, public service and other career paths. As a student the earlier you become proficient at it, it will be aid to you in furthering your career in other post-secondary institutions and/or in your chosen career path. Essay writing is an exercise in organizing one's thoughts, data and arguments. In historical writing, the focus is the following: stating an interpretation or thesis of an historical event, researching and presenting the evidence for it and summing up the information into a conclusion. Sometimes you find your initial thesis was wrong after searching for evidence, other times the writer finds the evidence confirms the initial thesis.

There is a lot of overlap with historical writing and a subject once taught as a course on colleges and universities, Rhetoric. Rhetoric, now called expository writing, is one of many subjects in the larger curriculum of college English departments. Knowledge of rhetoric gives the student the tools and skills necessary to write arguments: effectively, logically and succinctly. By learning the skill of historical writing, a student learns how argue persuasively *in print*. I used my essay writing skills to great effect in grievance

letters and contract negotiations as a labor union representative<sup>1</sup>. There are many details about historical writing not in this essay. Attached to this brief guide are some texts that you will find indispensable to the development of your writing.

In the brief guide we examine the short essay, book review, and the research paper. In this course, our emphasis will be on short essay writing for in class examinations and practicing writing for the three practice essays and our fourth graded essay. But the earlier you learn about skill of essay writing, assignments requiring essay writing will be a simpler and more manageable task.

### **Short Essays: Getting started with a essay structure**

The short essay is a baffling exercise for students. How do I communicate a great amount of complex information in a few paragraphs? Often students have limited time to put pen to paper: an hour for a midterm or two for a final examination. In other instances students have an assignment to write a two and a half to two page paper on a *typical essay question*; for example: the role of Oliver Cromwell in the English Revolution or operation of coffee plantations in Imperial Brazil, or some other theme the professor chose for you.

The short essay for classroom examinations require a command of information that a student is required to recite. This means a student needs to organize data into what is the most important and relevant to the question asked on the examination. Students cannot merely throw useless and irrelevant into an examination essay. This in an indication the student does not know the material. Also, history examinations will test the students' knowledge of historical interpretation. How can I do this, student asks?

---

<sup>1</sup> The author was a labor union representative for Service Employees International Union Locals 1877 and 949 from 1999-2003.

First paragraph organization is key here. You start off with a good topic sentence. Next, add the necessary information to support your argument. Then for the first paragraph, write a concluding sentence that provides an essay map. Succeeding paragraphs should include linking sentences to the successive ideas in the body of your essay. Since a good essay for an examination requires at least three or more paragraphs, the students should end her/his essay with a paragraph that sums up your argument and the information backing up your claims. Thus, argument-body-conclusion is the structure appropriate to the task.

For essays written in the context of a classroom examination it will require memorization of concepts, dates, the persons and social groups involved in the historical event. In an examination essay, the structure and content of student essay is important. For the assignment to be worked on as homework, more scrutiny will be on English grammar in addition to content of students' arguments, data, and essay structure. This is because the student will have time edit her/his work before it is submitted to the instructor. Now that I know the structure of the essay, how do we make proper arguments?

### **Logic and Argument:**

In making an argument in an historical essay, there are rules of argument that are used that most historians and other social scientists follow to persuade others in the discipline. First, a scholar will make a *thesis* or main assertion that is reasonable and can be supported by credible evidence. Greek and Roman philosophers systematized the rules for argument and logic, thus we are still using the same rules that governed debate in

Antiquity. They found a number of positions to be logical fallacies. We still point to them as signs of a faulty argument. What are these logical fallacies?

The first is the *bandwagon* argument. An idea is popular so it correct. Wrong? Just because an argument is popular, does mean it is correct. Once it was thought the world was flat. Remember credible evidence proves an argument, not the arguments' popularity.<sup>2</sup>

*Begging the question* is also a way many people make a false argument. This is where a person makes a questionable statement as if it is already accepted. A good example is of this kind of argument is to say for example that the San Francisco Giants are the best baseball team ever. That is not supported by the facts.<sup>3</sup>

*Non sequitur* is an argument that does not follow from its premise. An example is that because Barry Bond is a great baseball player, he would be a good football player also. It does not follow at all the skills applicable playing baseball would make one successful as a football player.<sup>4</sup>

*False analogy/False comparison* is an argument that either compares two items as if they could be alike or equivalent. In the heat of argument, slavery of Africans and the genocidal holocaust against European Jews, some compare these horrible acts of inhumanity. Though certainly these are very horrible, to compare these historically specific and distinct acts of injustice is analytically faulty.<sup>5</sup>

*Post hoc (False cause)* is an argument that supposes that an earlier event caused a later one. An example of this would be, because a man is an adulterer, he would be a

---

<sup>2</sup> Toby Fulwiler, Alan R. Hayakawa, The *Blair Handbook 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Upper Saddle River NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1997), 136.

<sup>3</sup> Fulwiler, Hayakawa, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 136-137.

murderer. Adultery is a despicable act against one spouse, but this does not mean some one is capable of killing someone unless supported by evidence.<sup>6</sup>

The *false dilemma* is another faulty argument. It assumes there are only two options when there is probably more than two. A common argument is that if a person chooses to go to college she/he can only go to a California State University system (CSU) or not at all. In fact, there are many options for higher education in California from technical schools to community colleges to the CSU system or the University of California system and numerous privately funded colleges and universities.

*Oversimplification* is a reduction of an event or phenomenon to a broad generalization. An example of this is reducing the causes of the U.S. Civil War to the conflict over slavery between Northerners and Southerners. Though the conflict between had the conflict over slavery at its core, it was not the only reason a civil war occurred between the Northerners and Southerners.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, *conflation (conceptual inflation)* is the inflation and overuse of a concept beyond its specific and distinct meaning.<sup>8</sup> The word fascism was commonly overused as a synonym for repression against New Leftist activists of the 1960's. Fascism has a distinct meaning as a form of government and a political movement in Italy and Spain and for its followers in contemporary times. The overuse of any word contributes, in the case fascism, to the loss of its descriptive effect and meaning in intellectual discourse. Knowledge of these logical fallacies is important for the use of evidence in a writer's arguments that support a thesis. Beyond the logical fallacies, credible evidence is part of the body of an essay. Facts, expert and personal testimony are part of the arsenal of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Miles, *Racism* (London, UK: Routledge Press, 1985), 41-68.

credible evidence necessary for a strong argument. These elements, credible evidence and avoidance of logical fallacies, are part of proper argument in an essay. Our next step in the essay writing process is editing your work.

### **Editing your work, from first to final draft:**

Editing your work is perhaps one of the most important tasks when writing. Because human beings are not perfect, the writer needs to review what he or she has written for conceptual, grammatical, spelling and style errors. Even, the best writer will edit their work many times before submission. For the student, your audience is your instructor, but once you get into the world of work, your supervisor will review your work. Let's look at the elements of what we are editing.

Spelling is possibly the easiest to edit because since the advent of computers, the spell check function of word processing programs such as Word and WordPerfect eliminated the need for dictionaries. Though these dictionaries are not always complete; there are many missing words in computer dictionaries, for the most part they contain most of the words you will use in an essay. First on the editing checklist is to run a review of your essay for misspelled words.

Secondly, correcting grammatical errors are another editorial task. Read your essay to yourself. Do your sentences make grammatical sense? Two common mistakes are the run-on sentence and the sentence fragment. Simply, these are sentences that are too long or too short. A run-on sentence is a sentence that contains two sentences that are punctuated as one sentence.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the sentence fragment is a sentence missing the subject or predicate part of the sentence. Other grammatical errors include missing or incorrectly used: adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, pronouns, punctuations, tense and

---

<sup>9</sup> Philip Gucker, *Essential English Grammar*, (New York, Dover Publication, 1966), 132.

verbs. These are not always conscious errors. Sometimes because students are under multiple deadlines and due dates, they do not manage their time well, thus do not give themselves enough time for editing. Remember, the reader of your essay judges your level of education from your skill at writing, particularly your use of English grammar. A short book on the English Grammar that is accessible and contains practice exercises are: Gucker, Philip. *Essential English Grammar*, New York, Dover Publications, 1966.

However, if your argument is illogical, it does not matter if your grammar is perfect.

The previous section of this essay covers the logic of historical and rhetorical writing. It cannot be overstated the importance of avoiding logical errors when making historical interpretations. Incorporation of this important part of critical thinking will improve your expository writing. Your readers will be impressed with your effective argument if you employ logic in your essay.

Finally, style is an important element of your writing. Your word choice is important here. Voice is also important stylistic element for your essay. In the case of voice, your voice whether active or passive will depend on the point of view you want emphasize in your sentence. Remember what you are writing for academic setting. Thus, your essay cannot be written in a conversational style. Use your imagination, you might want add a little drama to your sentences or descriptive prose (like Faulkner or his Colombian admirer Garcia Marquez). So, you edited your essay to satisfaction. How did you conclude it?

#### **A Word about Conclusions: Summing up the Essay:**

The conclusion of an essay is an important part of the whole essay. Its purpose is to sum up your arguments, evidence and effectively conclude your essay. To make an

essay conclusion stronger by being direct and to the point, ensuring your conclusion is not too narrow and focusing your argument on specific points.<sup>10</sup>

What do we mean by these points? In being direct this means the author of an essay needs to be explicit about the aims and direct of the concluding paragraphs. Closely related to this is the need to focus the concluding arguments to what the author proved or not proved in the body of the essay. Next, the author can speculate about the original question or thesis of the essay, though it should be noted that the author should be intellectual honest if the thesis was not proved.

**Concluding thoughts of writing:**

This guide concentrated on the mechanics and techniques of writing and critical thinking. You should consult the author's recommended text for longer papers. Its author's goal was to provide a model for students to develop these important skills in the course of their academic work. These skills are important for future work at the college level and in many occupations. Without these skills it becomes impossible to communicate complex ideas and arguments in an intelligent manner.

Though I have written down some of the important elements of an expository essay, imagination and creativity are important elements of writing. Without an imaginative use of argument and information, essay writing is a dull enterprise. The use of an intriguing thesis can make a dull subject come alive.

Recently, previously unavailable Chinese documents revealed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese sailors made their own trade route to East Africa and India for products from those areas. It was proposed that the Chinese sailors certainly had the technical ability to sail to the Americas. This is quite an intriguing thesis. But the evidence did not reveal

---

<sup>10</sup> Fulwiler, Hayakawa, 385-387.

that any Chinese sailors traveled to the New World. Authors should have the intellectual maturity to say the evidence whether exist or cannot be known. But even though we cannot find the answer, we should still ask questions that push the boundaries of knowledge.

**\*A Final Note for Students on Plagiarism:**

Plagiarism is the substitution of someone else's work as your own. In the context of college, it is a very serious form of academic fraud, a form of stealing intellectual property. If the charge of plagiarism is upheld, it can get a student expelled from any college or university. In the monograph, *The Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, the author Peter Novick makes no bones about the seriousness of plagiarism as an offense to the both students' and history professionals' work<sup>11</sup>. I will only point to the *West Valley College Catalog, 2004-2005*. The West Valley College Student Conduct Policy states that a student can be disciplined for violation of 5.19.2 (h) "Dishonesty (such as cheating, plagiarism or knowingly furnishing false information to the College or College official)<sup>12</sup>. Punishment can lead to expulsion. In most cases it is punished by temporary suspension to complete and permanent expulsion from the academic institution.

With the Internet bigger and better than ever, academic fraud takes less time and effort than it used to in the days before the PC or MAC. A mouse click can get you a fully written research paper. The plagiarized paper can also get you into serious academic trouble. Don't be tempted by ads on the Internet. Do your own work. It will save you

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Novick, *The Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56

<sup>12</sup> West Valley College, *West Valley College*. (Saratoga, CA: West Valley College, 2004), 178,180.

from ruining your academic career and work history. Don't think that an expulsion from a college will not follow you around to the next college or job prospect.

**Recommended books on Grammar, Historical Writing and Term Papers:**

Frakes, Robert M. *Writing for College History*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 2004.

Gucker, Philip. *Essential English Grammar*. New York: Dover Publications, 1996.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Sixth Edition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Steffens, Henry, Dickerson, Mary Jane, Fulwiler, Toby and Biddle, Arthur W. *Writer's Guide: History*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987.