As we wrote in the introduction, history is far more than an assembly of facts. It is the writer's interpretation of facts that raises questions, provokes curiosity, and makes us ask the questions who, what, where, when, and why. The writer's interpretation adds up to what is called a "thesis," a point of view that binds everything in an essay together.

In this chapter, we suggest ten principles to help you study your own writing about history to see if it conforms to the expectations readers of history bring to books and articles. Readers typically bring to your writing expectations they have formed by reading other books and articles about history. Don't disappoint them. Guide your own work by the following standards.

1. Good historical essays have a sharply focused, limited topic.

You can develop a thrill of discovery only if your topic is sufficiently limited to let you study and think about the sources carefully. If you are able to choose your own topic, select one you can manage in the time and space you have available. Sometimes your instructor may assign a topic for your essay. Usually, such prescribed topics are already sharply focused, but even if they are not you can usually find ways to limit the essay you prepare.

Most unsuccessful history papers, in our experience, fall short because the writer presents a subject no one can possibly treat in a paper of the sort generally required in undergraduate history courses. Several years ago, an 18-year-old student of ours wanted to write a psychoanalysis of Henry VIII—in seven pages! England's Henry VIII was a complex and unpleasant man, as any one of his six wives as well as numerous courtiers might have testified. If a modern psychiatrist with degrees in medicine and psychotherapy put Henry on the couch and interviewed him week after week, two or three years would pass before the psychiatrist would feel capable of making a judgment about Henry's character and motives. A student with no training in psychiatry and no more than limited knowledge of the thousands of pages written about this complex and frequently ruthless king cannot say anything worthwhile on so broad a topic, and certainly not in such a brief essay.

Here is a lesson to brand in fire across any young historian's mind: If you try to do too much, you will not do anything. To write a good essay in history you must be sure that evidence is available, that you have time to study it carefully and repeatedly, and that you choose a topic on which you can say something worthwhile. Some of our students have written papers such as these: "A Study of the Prejudices against Blacks and Women in the 1911 Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica"); "The Impact of John H. Harris's History, A Century of Emancipation, on British Twentieth-Century Anti-Slavery Policies"; "How a Confusion in Orders Caused the British Disaster in the Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775," and "A Study of the Causes of Food Riots in Eighteenth-Century France." All of these papers depended on sources the writers could study carefully in the time available before the papers were due.

It is always a good idea to discuss paper topics with your instructor. Sometimes a brief conversation can sharpen a topic so that your paper will become a genuine exploration of an interesting subject. Or you may be able to discern a more focused approach to a topic your instructor has assigned. In either case, it is important that you write a good title for your essay, one that represents the contents of the essay as clearly as possible. And from a clear title, it will be easier to move quickly to the purpose of your paper.
title not only helps your reader know what you are talking about; it also helps you to be certain you have defined a subject clearly.

2. Historical essays should have a clearly stated argument.

Historians write essays to interpret something they want readers to know about the past. They provide data—information from sources as well as other evidence—and their argument about what the facts mean. "Argument" here does not mean angry, insulting debate as though anyone who disagrees with you is a fool. Rather, it is the main thing the writer wants to tell readers, the reason for writing the essay. It is the thesis of the paper, the proposition that the writer wants readers to accept. A good historical essay quietly expresses the thrill of a writer's discovery. You cannot have that thrill yourself or convey it to others if you do nothing but repeat what others have said about your topic. Don't be content with telling a story others have told hundreds of times, the sort of story you might copy out of an encyclopedia whose aim is to give you the facts, the facts, and nothing but the facts. Find something puzzling in the evidence, and try to solve the puzzle or to explain why it is a puzzle. Ask a question, and try to answer it. But get to the point straightaway.

A good essay sets the scene quickly, reveals a tension to be resolved, and sets out in the direction of a solution. Some writers take so long to introduce their essays that readers lose interest before they get to the writer's real beginning. Some writers shovel out piles of background information or long accounts of previous scholarship in a somewhat frantic effort to prove that the writer has studied the issue. Or they may give some sort of moral justification for the topic, implying something like this: "I am writing this paper to make a better world and to prove that I am on the right side." The best writers have something to say and start saying it quickly. Readers should know your general subject in the first paragraph, and within two or three paragraphs they should usually know why you have written your essay and the argument you wish to make.

Often an apt quotation from a source provides a launch pad that allows the writer to get quickly into the subject at hand. Look at the quotation from a Chinese Emperor that historian Joanna Waley-Cohen uses in her article, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," and how she uses it to introduce her subject:

"We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures."

Having begun with this quotation, Professor Waley-Cohen proceeds with her essay:

By the late eighteenth century, the balance of European opinion had tilted against China. Westerners, earlier in the century almost uncritical in their admiration, came to the conclusion that the Chinese seemed unwilling, or unable, to improve on their earlier inventions, such as gunpowder and the compass, which formed part of the foundation for Western development. The famous assertion of Chinese self-sufficiency quoted above, made in 1793 by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795) in response to Lord Macartney's embassy from King George III, seemed to epitomize Chinese aloofness to the potential offered by Western knowledge.

Europeans especially equated this apparent lack of interest in what the West had to offer with a lack of interest in science and practical technology, because at that time the West had come to define itself in terms of, and derive a strong sense of superiority from, its undoubtedly technological power. From such a perspective, it was an easy step to regarding the Chinese as inferior in an overall sense. These views took firm hold as the nineteenth century unfolded and have remained tenacious to this day. Although scholars have recently exploded the myth of China's "opposition" to Western science, it remains widely believed, and, in the case of technology, neither the conviction of the Chinese lack of interest or the assumptions on which it rested have been subjected to serious inquiry.

Yet the situation in the eighteenth century was far more complex than Qianlong's public declaration suggests. In the preceding decades, he and a number of others in China had displayed considerable interest in all manner of things Western, particularly science and technology. Although this interest was duly recorded by a range of Western observers and made widely available to their European readers, the overwhelming body of opinion disregarded that evidence in favor of the attitudes outlined above.

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You can tell from this opening that Professor Waley-Cohen will attack the standard opinion about China and technology, and so she does. Try to be as direct as she is.

Once you have begun, don’t digress. Stick to the point. Be sure everything in your paper serves your main purpose, and be sure your readers understand the connection to your main purpose of everything you include. Don’t imagine that you have to put everything you know into one essay. An essay makes a point. It is not an excuse to pour out facts as if you were dumping the contents of a can onto a tabletop.

3. Historical essays should include original thoughts of the author.

Essays are examples of reasoning. The most respected essays demonstrate an author’s carefully setting things in order and making sense of them. Do not disappoint your readers by telling them only what other people have said about your subject. Try to show them that by reading your work, they will learn something new or see old knowledge in a new light, one that you have shed on the subject by your own study and thinking.

One of the saddest things we have found about teaching is the conviction of too many of our students that they have nothing fresh and interesting to say about their topics. They don’t trust themselves. They cannot express a thought unless they have read it somewhere else. A reason for this lack of confidence is that some students insist on writing about large, general topics that other people have written about hundreds of times. Only a little searching will turn up evidence of topics that have seldom been written about. Such evidence exists in every college library. If you take the time to look, you too can turn up new information and shape papers that are new and original.

You may not find new facts, but you can think carefully about the facts at your disposal and come up with something fresh and interesting. You can see previously unexamined relations. You can see causes and effects and connections that others have missed. You may reflect on motives and influences. You may spot places where some sources are silent. You can present your own conclusions, which have the weight of authority behind them.

Don’t write a paper in the spirit of the child who builds a model airplane bought in a kit from a hobby shop. The child sticks together parts that someone else has designed until he or she produces a model that looks like the picture on the box. While that is an achievement of sorts, it hardly compares to the simple, hand-carved airplane made by a craftsman. Some students go to the library looking for information on a broad subject like the beginnings of the Civil War and take a piece of information here and another piece there. They stick it all together without contributing anything of their own except manual dexterity. They retell a story that has been told thousands of times, and they do not present a thought that they have not read elsewhere. Why not instead read the speech Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi made in the United States Senate as he resigned to become president of the Confederacy? Explain in a paper his justification for secession—and see if you think he left something out. Then you have a thoughtful paper. Do not be happy until you shape a story that cannot be read in every encyclopedia or textbook in the field.

4. A good history essay conveys the same spirit of a good story.

As we said in the introduction, a good story begins with something out of balance, some tension to be received or explained. Or you can say that a good story begins with a problem. The same is true of history essays, stories about the past that are intended to be true. Here is a good beginning of such a story:

"The whole affair was mismanaged from first to last." So wrote British Lieutenant John Barker in his diary after he survived the battles of Lexington and Concord on the first day of fighting in the American Revolution. Why did well trained professional British soldiers meet with such a disastrous defeat at the hands of disorganized
American farmers called 'minutemen'? Barker had one answer: the ineptitude of his own British commanders.

The writer gets to the point quickly by quoting Barker and revealing a tension that the reader wants to see resolved. Seeing the quotation, a reader asks questions: "How was the affair mismanaged?" "Was Barker right?" "How could the British have avoided defeat that day?" The beginning puts various elements together, reveals tension, makes us ask questions, and proceeds. A paper on ideas can begin the same way. The writer should introduce the tension in the subject quickly—perhaps differing interpretations of an issue—and set out to explain its importance.

The main quality of any story is that it makes readers relive the experience it describes. You likely would feel cheated standing in line to be admitted to a mystery movie if a kid coming out shouts, "The girlfriend did it!" Often you will hear people say to friends who have seen a movie they plan to see, "Don't tell me how it ends." Generally you want to live through the experience for yourself. A good writer creates the experience of living through events or of living through a step-by-step interpretation of those events.

The experience of the movie, however, is not exactly like the experience of historical writing. Later on we shall suggest that when you pick up a history book to use in your research, you read the last chapter before you read the book to see where the historian is going. Still, any good piece of writing leads you through a process of discovery, providing information that lets you follow the writer's lead and arrive finally at the climax, where everything comes together. In a good essay or book about history, you can know how the story comes out and still appreciate the art of the historian in getting to that conclusion. Readers not only want to know how things come out but also how they happen.

Writers of history papers should not give surprise endings. Inexperienced writers often fall into the temptation of withholding necessary information or otherwise distracting us to prevent us from guessing where they are going. Such tactics are annoying, and professional historians do not use them. The climax in a history paper is usually a place where the last block of information is fitted in place and the writer's case is proved as well as his or her knowledge permits. The paper closes shortly after the climax because once the case is proved, a summary of the significance of the events or ideas described may be all that is necessary.

5. Historical essays are built, step by step, on evidence.

You must give readers reasons to believe your story. Your readers must accept you as an authority for the essay you present to them. You cannot write history off the top of your head, and you cannot parade your opinions unless you support them. Nobody cares about your opinions if you don't know anything or if you don't take the trouble to tell them what you do know.

Writing about history is much like proving a case in a court of law. A good lawyer does not stand before a jury and say, "My friends, I firmly believe my client is innocent. You must believe he is innocent because I say he is. I feel totally convinced that he is innocent. You may think he is guilty. I disagree. I feel in my bones that he is innocent. I want you to rule that he is not guilty because in my opinion he is not guilty. Take my word for it." Clients with such lawyers should prepare themselves to spend a long time away from home in undesirable company. A bad lawyer may repeat himself. He may shout and weep and whisper and swear to the sincerity of his feelings. But the jury will not believe him unless he can produce some evidence.

So it is with the historical essay. Your readers are judge and jury. You assume the role of the lawyer in arguing your case. It is all very good if your readers think you are sincere or high-minded or even eloquent. It is much more important that you convince them that you are right. To do that you must command your evidence and present it clearly and carefully.
What is evidence? The issue is complicated. Evidence is detailed factual information from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are texts nearest to any subject of investigation. Secondary sources are always written about primary sources. Primary sources for an essay about the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata early in this century would be letters, speeches, and other writings of Zapata himself. Secondary sources would be books and articles by scholars such as John Womack and Samuel Brunk who have made careers of studying Zapata's movement and his assassination.

You must sift through all of the available sources, both primary and secondary, decide what is reliable and what is not, what is useful and what is not, and determine how you will use these sources in your work. But always keep in mind that good essays and papers are based on primary sources. Serious journalists follow a rule that historians would do well to use also: When you make a generalization, immediately support it by quoting, summarizing, or otherwise referring to a source. Generalizations are unconvincing without the help of specific information to give them context.

Historians fit their evidence together to create a story, an explanation, or an argument. To have evidence at their command, they spend days in libraries, museums, or wherever sources of evidence are to be found. You cannot manufacture evidence out of thin air; you must look for it. When you find it, you must study it until you know it almost by heart. If you make a careless summary of your evidence and get it wrong, you lose the respect of knowledgeable readers.

Our student who wanted to examine attitudes towards blacks and women in the much-praised 1911 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica had read an article in The New Yorker magazine about this famous edition, noted for its clear writing and careful drawings illustrating the engineering marvels of the day. The New Yorker article commented on the encyclopedia's racist assumptions. The student wanted to see for herself not only what the 1911 edition said about race, but how it treated women. She studied articles on the "Negro," on Africa, and on various issues relating to women, and she considered what kind of women were deemed worthy to make the pages of this work. The article in The New Yorker she had originally read was a secondary source; the primary source was the encyclopedia itself, and it was available in several sets in the university library.

Evidence is everywhere. Sometimes people make spectacular discoveries of lost or forgotten documents. The discovery of the journals of James Boswell, the eighteenth-century companion and biographer of Samuel Johnson, was a remarkable event. They turned up in a Scottish castle where they lay scattered about like so much waste paper. The capture of German archives following World War II was momentous, allowing historians to trace German political and military policy through this century and much of the last. The Freedom of Information Act has opened many FBI and other government files that were long secret, and more recently the collapse of the Soviet Union has opened vast archives to scholars.

The letters and papers of men and women, famous and obscure, make fascinating records of their times, and many collections have been published from the classical age to the present. Both the diary and letters of the English writer Virginia Woolf have been published in many volumes and offer an intimate view of her important career. Letters and journals make fascinating reading, especially if they cover long periods of time, and they are gold mines for the historian. You can pick a subject and follow the writer's thoughts on it, or activity in events related to the subject, and have an excellent paper for a college history course.

Sources of local history abound in courthouses, old newspapers (often preserved on microfilm), diaries, letters, tax records, city directories, the recollections of older people, and myriad other papers. These sources can provide details, often small ones, that can make the past come alive in a moment. And never forget the power of the interview in writing about history. If you write about any historical event of the past sixty or seventy years, often with a little effort you can find somebody who participated in it. Participants frequently may be delighted to share their stories with you. And
their stories can illuminate major social movements in the country as a whole. Did a strike take place at a paper mill in your Maine town some years ago? Go interview some of the strikers and some mill managers to supplement what you read on the subject. Consult old newspaper and perhaps magazine files for stories about the strike that will help you ask questions.

You may also find transcripts of previous interviews in local history publications or archive collections. But always remember that in an interview, participants can get things wrong. Human beings forget, or they tell the story in such a way to exalt themselves, and sometimes they simply lie. The historian is always skeptical enough to check out the stories he or she hears, even from eyewitnesses. In doing so, you frequently will confirm that secondary sources are also essential. You should always consult books and articles written by historians about the subject you write about yourself. These books and articles will help you learn how to think about history, and they will provide much information that you can use.

Historians and their readers love evidence. They love telling details. They love old things. They immerse themselves in evidence—both primary and secondary sources—see its patterns, and write about them. To try to write a good paper without evidence is like trying to ride up a mountain on a bicycle without wheels. Of course, common sense should dictate that you consult with your instructor about your choices of evidence. And you should always take care to evaluate your sources carefully; in the next chapter we offer some suggestions about how you may do so. The confidence you develop by providing evidence for your points is only as good as the confidence your readers have in how you obtained it.

6. Good historical essays always document their sources.

Formal essays in history document their sources by means of footnotes, endnotes, or attributions written into the text. Readers want to know where you got your information. Later in this book we will discuss specifics concerning various modes of documentation. Even as you write, however, remember that you will only gain authority for your own work if you demonstrate that you are familiar with the primary sources and the work of others who have studied the same material.

Documenting sources is the best way to avoid plagiarism, and plagiarism remains the unforgivable sin of any writer. Plagiarism is the act of presenting the thoughts or words of others as your own. It constitutes the ultimate dishonesty in writing, a theft of intellectual property that is never forgiven in the publishing world. Tennessee writer Alex Haley claimed that his book Roots came from his investigation into the history of his own ancestors who came as slaves from Africa. The book was made into a television miniseries that gripped millions of Americans when it was aired over 12 nights in 1977. Haley was charged with plagiarism and paid $650,000 in damages to the writer whose work he had copied. Further investigation by historians revealed that he had made up much of his evidence, and when he died in 1992, his reputation among scholars was in ruins. Leading historians and writers usually ignore him, and when he is mentioned, "plagiarist" is often attached to his name. His sad example should be a warning to all writers to document their sources with care.

In colleges and universities the penalties for plagiarism are also severe. If you copy paragraphs out of an encyclopedia or another book or article, or if you don't credit ideas you have taken from other writers, and if your instructor discovers what you have done, he or she will never trust you again. You must familiarize yourself with the guidelines at your institution. Policies on plagiarism are usually stated in the college catalog. If you cannot find them, or are unclear about what they mean or how they will be applied, consult with your instructor. In many universities plagiarists are summoned before a disciplinary board and sometimes expelled for one or more terms of study, and usually the plagiarism is recorded permanently on their records. Always put material you copy from your sources in quotation marks if you use it word for word in your essay as you found it in the sources. Always tell your readers when you summarize or paraphrase a source. Always give
credit to ideas you get from someone else, even if you express those ideas in your own words.

You do not have to document matters of common knowledge. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. Zora Neale Hurston wrote the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Pieces of information like these are common knowledge. They are not disputed and are known to anyone who knows anything about these subjects.

But suppose you consider a complex topic such as the difference between a seminar and a lecture course in teaching history. You might easily find Bonnie G. Smith's 1995 *AHR* article, "Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century." If you use her data and her research on how seminars began and how they differed from the lecture courses that had gone on before them, the limitation of the historical profession to males, and the extraordinary difficulties of doing research in the nineteenth century, you must document your reliance on her work. You lose your honor and your reputation if you don't.

You may find that some ideas you get on your own are similar to those you read in secondary sources. You should then document those secondary sources and, either in a footnote or in the body of your text, point out the similarities and the differences.

7. **Historical essays are written dispassionately.**

Don't choke your prose with your own emotions. Historians identify with the people and the times they write about, and often in studying history emotions are aroused. In writing about the past, you judge people and decide whether they were good or bad. The best way to convey these judgments is to tell what these people did or said. You don't have to prove that you are on the side of the angels. You can trust your reader. If characters you describe did terrible things, readers can see the evil if you give them the details. If characters did noble things, your readers can tell that, too, without any emotional insistence on your part.

Describing the British retreat from Concord and Lexington on April 19, 1775, historian Louis Birnbaum simply narrates the story:

The mood of the British soldiers was murderous. They surged around houses along the route, instantly killing anyone found inside. Some of the regulars looted whatever they could find, and some were killed while looting by Minutemen who had concealed themselves in the houses. Houses with fires in the hearth were burned down simply by spreading the embers about. Generally, those homes without fires on the hearth escaped destruction because it was too time-consuming to start a fire with steel and flint. As the column approached Menotomy, the 23rd Regiment was relieved of rear-guard duty by the marine battalion. Colonial fire reached a bloody crescendo in Menotomy, and again British troops rushed house after house, killing everyone found inside, including an invalid named Jason Russell.

The author could have said, "The criminal and bloodthirsty British soldiers acted horribly in what they did to those poor, innocent people, and these wicked British soldiers killed in the act of looting houses got what they deserved." But readers don't need such coercive comments, and they often resent them. If you present the details, you can trust your readers to have the right reactions. You waste time and seem a little foolish if you preach at them.

Good historians try to tell the truth about what happened. If you study any issue long enough and carefully enough, you will form opinions about it. You will think you know why something happened, or you will suppose that you understand someone. And you may develop strong personal views about the personalities or the outcome. Yet the evidence in history seldom stacks up entirely on one

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side of an issue, especially in the more interesting problems about the past. Different parts of the evidence contradict each other; using your own judgment about it all means that you must face such contradictions squarely. If you do not, knowledgeable readers may decide that you are careless, incompetent, or even dishonest.

Different historians interpret the same data in different ways. In highly controversial issues, you must take into account views contrary to your own. For example, if you should argue that Robert E. Lee was responsible for the Confederate defeat at the battle of Gettysburg in 1863, you must consider the argument of a number of historians that the blame should be laid at the feet of General James Longstreet, one of Lee's subordinates. You can still argue that Lee was the major cause of the Confederate disaster (although you should recall that the Federal army also had something to do with it). You don't weaken your argument by recognizing opposing views if you then can bring up evidence that supports your opinion against them. On the contrary, you strengthen your case by showing readers that you know what others have said, even if their opinions contradict your own. Readers will believe you if you deal with contrary opinions honestly, but they will scorn your work if you pretend that contradictions don't exist. This advice translates into a simple principle. Be honest. Nothing turns readers off so quickly as to suppose that the writer is not being fair.

Another principle is at stake here. History is not a seamless garment. Knowledge of the past—or of almost anything else—has bumps and rips and blank spots that remain even when historians done their best to put together a coherent account of it. The best plan always is to approach the study of the past with the humility that rises from the experience of ignorance.

8. The first and last paragraphs of a good history essay mirror each other.

The first and the last paragraphs of a good essay reflect some of the same words and thoughts. You can read these paragraphs and have a pretty good idea of what the intervening essay is about. An essay is somewhat like a snake biting its tail: The end always comes back to the beginning. As an example, consider the 1996 essay by Dauril Alden on "Changing Jesuit Perceptions of the Brasis During the Sixteenth Century," published in the Journal of World History. Professor Alden begins with this paragraph:

During the sixteenth century, one of the most conspicuous weapons of militant Catholicism was the newly founded Society of Jesus. In many parts of Europe, its representatives served as diplomats, court preachers, confessors, and educators of the high and mighty. Throughout the empires of Spain and Portugal, Jesuits energetically confronted peoples of high and low cultures in East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Africa, and the Americas and encouraged them to convert to Catholicism and to adopt western modes of behavior and values. Perceiving themselves as spiritual descendants of the early apostles, the Jesuits resolutely pressed their evangelical campaigns and remained remarkably optimistic about the ultimate prospects of success of their evangelical campaigns, despite many obstacles. With the passage of time, however—as their experience among the Brasis in sixteenth-century Brazil demonstrates—their initial optimism became tempered by the realities that confronted them. Accordingly, they shifted their approach to the Amerindians from one of gentle persuasion to one that included the use of coercive measures when they deemed such steps necessary to achieve their spiritual objectives.4

Professor Alden goes on to tell the story of the early Jesuit missionaries in Brazil and their developing frustrations. When he comes to the end of his essay, he returns to these same themes; his final paragraph comes back to the beginning, but not in a mechanical way.

Assuredly, the Jesuits, like their secular rivals, viewed the Amerindians through European spectacles. Like other Europeans, they were

convinced that the indigenes were their cultural and moral inferiors and ought to be remolded in accordance with European norms. But the attitudes that the Jesuits and their secular rivals developed over time toward the Brasis were not significantly different from those of the English towards the Irish, Castilians toward the Guanches, the French toward the Hurons, or Anglican missionaries toward the Uganuri of East Africa. Each dominant group was convinced of its own innate intellectual and moral superiority; each believed that it possessed a divinely ordained mission to uplift non-European inferiors; and each was blind to the cultural damage that later generations would claim that it had inflicted upon other people. The Jesuits who served in Brazil were dedicated, tireless workers in what they believed to be the Lord’s vineyard, but the harvest they sought was not material gain, either for themselves or for their converts. Rather, it was a harvest of souls assured of a better world in the hereafter. That was their promise, their expectation, and the primary opportunity that drew them to hazardous missionary theaters throughout the world.5

Notice how the energetic Jesuits in the first paragraph become “tireless workers” in the last and how their evangelical campaigns are, at the end, referred to as a “harvest of souls.” Alden effectively opens and closes his essay by giving readers a clear and consistent image of his argument. This approach is much more effective than beginning an essay by saying, “In this essay I am going to do this, this, and this,” and then bringing it to an end by simply asserting, “I have done this, this, and this.” Try to begin and end with more interesting statements. But however you begin, your first and last paragraphs should demonstrate some common words and thoughts.

9. History essays observe the common conventions of written English.

Sometimes student writers feel abused when instructors require them to spell words correctly, follow common practices of grammar and punctuation in writing, and proofread their papers. But it is a terrible distraction to try to read a paper that does not observe the conventions. Readers want to pay attention to what a writer says. They do not want to ask questions like these: “Is that word spelled correctly?” “Why is a comma missing here?” “Does this word fit the context?” Reading is hard work, especially when the material is dense or complicated, as it often is in history courses. A careless attitude towards the conventions may not bother writers because they think they know what they want to say. But it throws readers off.

Students who complain when instructors enforce the conventions do themselves a great disservice. In the world beyond college, few things about your writing will be more harshly judged than careless disregard for the conventions. Most everyone would like to believe that their ideas are so compelling that no one can resist them, no matter how sloppily they write. Readers you seek to impress in a job application, a report, or a letter will judge otherwise. Later (in chapters 6 and 7) we offer some suggestions that should help you effectively express your ideas in writing. But merely reading over those suggestions, or listening to others from your instructors, is not enough. You must actively apply them.

Never hand in a paper without proofreading it carefully. Read it over and over to find misspelled words, lapses in grammar, typos, and places where you have inadvertently left out a word (a common error in these days of writing with the computer). Use the spell checker on your computer, usually an integral part of your word processing program. But remember! The computer cannot replace the brain. The spell checker can tell you when a word does not appear in the dictionary, but it cannot tell you that you should not use “there” when you mean “their” or “shout” when you mean “shut.” If you also have a grammar check feature with your word processor, it will sometimes help you ask questions about your writing before your readers do. But as with the spell checker, it is not a substitute for your own careful rereading of your essay before you hand it in.

5 Alden, “Jesuits Perceptions,” 217–218; we have removed Alden’s helpful documentation on his comparative points.
10. Historical essays speak to their intended audience.

No one can write to please or interest every possible reader. Different essays are intended for different audiences; always consider what your intended audience already knows. For most history courses, you should write for your instructor and other students who are interested in your topic but may not be specialists in the field. Define important terms. Give enough information to provide a context for your essay. Say something about your sources, but do not get lost in background information that your readers know already.

For example, if you write an interpretation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail of 1965, you will bore readers and even offend them if you write as if they have never heard of Dr. King. In the same way, you don't inform your readers that Shakespeare was an English playwright or that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States. No writer can be entirely sure what an audience knows or does not know. Just as you convey to your readers an "implied author" in what you write, you should also write with an implied reader in mind, someone you think may read your work. So the best you can do is to imagine yourself as a reader and consider the sort of thing you might read and believe, and write accordingly. But it is not always an easy task. The main principle is that you must always be making decisions about what you need to tell your readers and what you think they know already.

We tell our students that they should write their essays so fully that if their friends or spouses picked one up, they could read it with the same understanding and pleasure they might find in an article in a serious magazine. The essay should be complete in itself. The important terms should be defined. Everyone quoted or mentioned in the essay should be identified—unless someone is well known to the general public. All the necessary information should be included. Try to imagine a friend picking up an essay and not being able to stop until he or she has finished the piece. And it is always a good idea to have some other person read your work and try to say back to you what he or she thinks you have said.

These principles for a good essay should serve you well. Keep them in mind as you write your own history essays. This short summary checklist will help you focus on them as you do.

**Writer's Checklist**

- ✔ Have I narrowed my topic sufficiently?
- ✔ Do I have a clearly stated argument?
- ✔ Are my ideas on the subject clear?
- ✔ Have I told a good story?
- ✔ Is the evidence on which I based my essay clear?
- ✔ Have I documented my sources?
- ✔ Do I write dispassionately and acknowledge other opinions?
- ✔ Do the first and last paragraphs of my essay mirror each other?
- ✔ Is my essay written clearly, using the common conventions of written English?
- ✔ Have I written with my intended audience in mind?