

# *The Preparation of History Essays*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Essays form an integral part of your history courses. They can also be one of the most rewarding aspects of a course, giving you a chance to research the raw material of history (primary sources) and to analyze other historians' interpretations of the past (secondary sources).

Essay writing is an opportunity to develop your research and writing skills. It is ultimately a lesson in communication. No matter how comprehensive your research or how brilliant your ideas, the essay will flounder if it is not well-organized and presented in clear and grammatically correct English. Obviously, good essay writing requires time. Pay attention to deadlines and give yourself sufficient time to research, write and revise your essay.

The following guidelines are geared to the writing of History essays, but many of these tips may apply to essays in any discipline.

## **2. DEFINING THE TOPIC**

In many classes, you will be given a list of essay topics from which to choose. It is wise to do some preliminary research to determine what topics really interest you and it is also advisable to clarify your chosen topic with your instructor. If you are allowed to select your own topic or wish to substantially modify a given topic, **be sure** you have your topic approved by your instructor.

## **3. COMPILING A BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Finding and researching appropriate and adequate sources for your essay will be a critical part of its success. No essay should be attempted on the basis of text books or one or two sources. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the LSUS library homepage and Libguides. All holdings can be searched on-line using SIRSI, the library's on-line catalog; **knowing how to use it is an essential research tool**. It can also be helpful to do an actual shelf search; several hours spent browsing through library shelves on areas indicated in your first sources often lead to valuable discoveries.

In addition to books, don't neglect articles on your subject. Articles in periodicals are too often overlooked by students, although they may contain new approaches to and concise sources of information. Discuss research problems with librarians and do employ all available aids for use of the library system. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.**

Your research should also include primary sources. Primary sources on many topics in Louisiana history, particularly north Louisiana history, may be found in LSUS Archives and Special Collections. Of course, since primary sources originate with

individuals or entities, they may be found in many places such as local libraries, the National Archives and Library of Congress (on-line), museums, or personal interviews. Research in primary sources takes more time than looking up articles and books, so plan ahead.

Websites: Students often turn to rapidly-proliferating websites for sources for essays. Sometimes these can be helpful, especially if they are archival websites which can give you direct access to primary documents. However, **websites should be used with caution**. In some fields, websites can be the source of much inaccurate information and controversial and/or ill-founded opinion. If you want to use a website in your essay writing, you should adhere to the following procedure.

- a. Get the approval of your instructor **in advance** for websites that you are planning to use.
- b. Websites must be listed **accurately** in your bibliography and if you use material from them, it must be properly noted.

#### 4. RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Research does not mean hunting for books, or just reading them. It means reading your sources with definite questions in mind. Essays should **not** be written from open books, but from notes made while reading sources. Orderly arrangement of these is imperative, including the author, title, and page number of the source. Whether you are taking notes by hand or by computer, be sure you are systematic and accurate.

There are a number of methods for organizing your notes. One traditional way is to use two different types of notes, "bibliography" (author-title) notes and "research" (subject-information) notes. Bibliography notes give relevant information about the sources used. They include the name of the author, the full title, and the location and date of the edition used. This note should include your evaluation of the usefulness of the source for your topic and relevant details about the author and his/her method. You will need this summation if you are asked to do an annotated bibliography.

Sample bibliography note:

JN	Elton, Tudor Rev.
81	
.T32	G.R. Elton, <u>The Tudor Revolution in Government Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII</u> .
.E4	(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) (first published
(Sig. Sam.)	1953)
Monograph based upon primary sources (mostly manuscript). Sees 1530s as crucial decade in Tudor history. Argues that Thomas Cromwell created the privy council. Good on differentiation between privy council and star chamber.	
Valuable for development of household.	

The research note contains your notes on the topic, with a separate card for each important idea or piece of information. If you are copying material that you might wish to quote, be sure that it is copied accurately, that you have the exact source including page numbers, and that you have separated "quotes" from summaries in your own words.

Sample research note:

759 Victories	Marshall, 18th C. Eng.
Sum of Pitt's Role	pp. 310-311
M. see P. as a key influence. Suggests P.'s influence overrated by some historians but affirms that P. set strategy, organizes and pushes other to act, chooses good commanders.	
"His contribution was a threefold one... [He] had gathered information from many sources and welded it into a coherent strategy. It was his meticulous attention to details of supply which not only collected transports and troops but saw that they had the necessary equipment and stores. Often imperious and unreasonable over other people's difficulties, he forced men to do and provide things which hitherto they had considered impossible and impracticable. Thirdly, he had [311] chosen his commanders with skill, though considerably hampered by George II's intense personal interest in this field."	

Note-taking by computer should be an adaptation of these basic procedures. You should keep all your research notes. In some courses, you may be required to submit them with your essay.

## 5. PLANNING THE PAPER

You should make and revise outlines while researching the paper, emphasizing your developing perception of the major issues. Research notes are your main tools. They should be filed under topic headings, reviewed, and rearranged frequently in order to fill in gaps in information or analysis. This enables you to determine what is of value as you research the paper; to return to an orderly collection of material if you have to leave it for any reason; and to organize your thoughts when you finally sit down to write the paper.

## 6. WRITING THE PAPER

Again, it must be emphasized that you should leave sufficient time for at least one draft. Work from an outline, coordinating your research notes, but leaving yourself enough flexibility to make changes. The first draft can be written quickly, as it is for substance and arguments, which can be refined with each succeeding draft. In later drafts you can concentrate on polishing your style. You should make sure:

- a. the introduction is clear, indicating the historical context and the problem under discussion
- b. the narrative and argument are presented logically and concisely in the body of the essay
- c. the conclusion summarizes and unifies the arguments presented

## 7. STYLE

Essays should be carefully proofread and checked for correct spelling and grammar. Academic essays are usually written in formal style. Thus you should generally avoid contractions and colloquialisms unless the subject matter particularly calls for such usage. On the other hand "formal" does not mean verbose, stodgy or vague. Long Latinate words, passive constructions, and sentences that begin "it is" or "there are" are common patterns which result in obscure or boring writing. Good academic writing is formal, but also lively and direct. As a general rule, it is better to aspire to clarity and economy; few students find difficulty meeting the suggested length of the essay. Verbosity is demonstrated more often than brevity.

Good writing is also precise. Try to choose words that express your intention exactly. Modern academic style requires care and precision in the use of language regarding race and gender. Just as you would avoid racist slurs and words that convey old-fashioned racial stereotypes, it is important to avoid phrases and words that are gender exclusive, unless you consciously intend them to be so. Do not use phrases such as "the history of mankind" when you really mean humanity. Avoid using the pronoun "he" when you are referring to subjects of both genders. Beware of false universals; for example, do not say "the inhabitants" when you mean the adult male residents, or "universal suffrage" when you really mean "white adult male suffrage".

## 8. FORMAT

Your instructor may already have given you instructions with regard to format. If so you should follow those. If not, here are some standard guidelines. The final draft should be typed on standard size 11" x 8 1/2" paper. Use double spacing, except for long quotations (over twenty-five words) and footnotes which should be single spaced. Remember to number all pages. The essay should have a title page which includes your name, student number and course number (and tutorial section if appropriate). **Be sure you keep a copy of your paper.**

## 9. DOCUMENTATION AND NOTES

It is obvious that most ideas presented in an undergraduate essay will derive from other sources, and these must be acknowledged. In general, footnotes or endnotes should be used to make clear to the reader on what authorities you are basing your statements. History papers are usually documented using *Chicago Manual of Style*,

which is available in the library and electronically via the link on the Noel Library homepage. If your instructor has given you specific instructions about which system of reference to use, you should follow those instructions. In lieu of specific instructions, the traditional system of footnotes and endnotes, is illustrated below.

In particular, footnotes/endnotes should:

- a. indicate the exact source of every quotation used
- b. acknowledge indebtedness to others for opinions and ideas
- c. give authority for a fact which the reader might question
- d. call attention to other interpretations, additional authorities or more extended treatment of the topic. Such a "substantive" footnote should be used with restraint.

Footnotes can appear either at the bottom of the page or collected together at the end of the essay where they are referred to as endnotes. The numeral indicating the footnotes should come at the end of the quotation or the sentence, usually as a superscript. Think of a footnote as conveying four pieces of information which are set off by commas in the following order:

- e. Author name (in normal order)
- f. Title
  - i. The title of a book is underlined or written in *italics*.
  - ii. The title of an article is put within quotation marks, followed by the periodical title underlined or in *italics*
  - iii. Place, publisher, and date of publication in parentheses ( )
  - iv. Article citations do not include the place of publication and publisher.
- g. Page number (including volume and issue number if applicable)

For example:

<sup>1</sup>Gilbert C. Din, *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 207.

<sup>2</sup>Basil Davidson, "Questions about Nationalism", *African Affairs* 76, no. 302 (Jan. 1977): 42.

In subsequent references, a shorter reference should be used. It should include the author's last name, a meaningful short title, and page numbers. For example:

<sup>3</sup>Din, *Canary Islanders*, 179-206.

Where the reference is *exactly* the same as the preceding one, the Latin abbreviation *ibid.* can be used; where it is the same, but the page number is different, use *ibid.*, followed by the relevant page number. However, the short title form is preferable for

subsequent references and the use of other Latin abbreviations such as *op.cit.* is not recommended.

Consult *Chicago Manual or Style* or the *Turabian Manual for Writers* for examples of citations for articles and unpublished materials (such as archives).

All works consulted, not just those cited in the footnotes, should be indicated in the bibliography. You may be required to prepare an annotated bibliography, wherein you comment on the contents, utility, or worth of each source. If so, make sure you understand what the instructor expects, in particular the length as well as the nature of each annotation.

Generally, list the sources in alphabetical order, by author last name. In some assignments, you may be required to subdivide the bibliography into primary and secondary sources. The format for a bibliography is similar to that for footnotes, except that the author's surname *precedes* the other names and initials, periods instead of commas are used to divide the constituent parts, publication data is not put in brackets, and pages numbers are not included except in the case of articles where the full page reference is necessary. For example:

Din, Gilbert C. *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988

Davidson, Basil. "Questions about Nationalism". *African Affairs* 76, no. 302 (Jan. 1977): 39-46.

NOTE: Documentation is crucial to a good paper. It demonstrates good scholarship and lends credibility to your points. It enables your readers to delve more into the subject by consulting the same sources (just think how helpful the bibliography in a book you used was in finding other books and articles on your own topic). It is also a matter of personal and academic integrity. If you incorporate the ideas or words of someone else into your own writing, *even if it's not a direct quotation*, you should document your source with notes *and* bibliography.