

Professor Campbell's Writing Hints Handout

Generalizations: Avoid broad generalizations in your writing. Sentences like “slavery was bad,” “women were oppressed,” or “history was changed forever,” are ineffective.

Past Tense: All history papers should use the past tense.

Chronology: Most of the time, effective history essays stay consistent with chronology. This means that if an author is discussing a document from 1884 and another one from 1904, the author will first mention the 1884 document and then move on to the 1904 one. Advanced writers can organize their essays thematically—rather than chronologically—but I do not recommend this approach for most students.

Paragraphs – Length and Organization: Sometimes students write long paragraphs (over a full page) that contain too many ideas. These often come across as disorienting to a reader and contain organizational flaws. In general, it is best to construct paragraphs between 4 to 8 sentences in length and with an overarching theme. If possible, make sure that the ideas in your paragraphs have a logical flow and that there are smooth transitions between them.

Personal Pronouns: Unless I state otherwise, assume that you are practicing *formal academic writing*. This means you should not write, “I think...” or use pronouns like “we” and “you.” Instead of saying, “I think the American Revolution in the South was really a revolution over the fate of slavery,” say something like, “There is compelling evidence to suggest that the American Revolution in the South was really a fight over slavery.”

Avoid Slang, Contractions, Informal Expressions and Colloquialisms: Do not use contractions. Do not use slang, conversational language, or informal expressions such as “the straw that broke the camel’s back” or “searching for a needle in a haystack.” These statements are vague and imprecise.

Use Short Quotations: Do not use block quotes, display quotes, or quotes that are longer than three lines long. Sometimes students stick these quotes in their essays to take up space and they do not take the time to think about what the quote actually means. My advice is to integrate quotes into your own sentences and use several short quotes rather than one long quote from a source.

Quote the actual historical text, not the italicized introduction. When you first come across a new source in the Primary Source Reader (PSR), you will notice a brief introduction written in italics. It is important to state that this introduction does not represent the historical character’s original words, but a historian writing much later. You want to analyze what the *original* author meant, not what another historian has written. Therefore, do not quote the italicized part.

Avoid the Passive Voice: The passive voice in writing indicates that someone or something has been acted upon. Although passive voice is common in journalism, in history it often comes across as weak and unclear. An example of passive voice would be “Jack had his lights punched

out.” This begs the reader to ask, “who punched Jack”? Instead, you should rearrange this sentence to say, “The unruly student punched Jack in the nose.”

Use Words Correctly: Make sure you know the meaning of the words you use in your essay.

Strategies for Constructing an Argument: First, take notes on the primary sources. The questions at the beginning of the primary source reader might be helpful. What can you prove? Figure out all of the main points of your paper first. There are different strategies to writing a paper effectively and there is not any single strategy that necessarily works better than others. However, if you are struggling, it might be wisest to write all of your body paragraphs first. Then write your introduction last. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows you to think about the paper’s main argument before you write the introduction. This will prevent you from having to write the introduction over and over. After all, the introduction should clearly state the main argument of the paper and act as a blueprint or roadmap for the rest of the paper.

PROOFREAD your papers: If a paper is full of grammatical errors and awkward sentences, it gives the impression to the grader that the student wrote the paper hastily and at the last minute. Clear writing is important and grammar counts. So, too, does presentation. As an analogy, consider if you were submitting a report to your boss at work. Would you want the report to look sloppy? Before you submit your paper, leave time for several revisions. Print your paper out in hard copy and read it aloud. Have a friend or classmate read it. Does it make sense? If you implement these techniques, you are much more likely to catch mistakes.

Writing is a process: Remember that even the best writers get discouraged. But the more you practice writing, the easier it will become. Enjoy the journey!