

Tips On Polishing Your History Paper

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2011

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Introduction

Writing pre-occupies us. In the age of “Twitter” and dozens of other communication options we write more than any previous generation. We write between and among more diverse groups of readers than ever before. What we write is more public today than at any time in the past. We work at texting well. Unfortunately, much of this writing is informal and untrained resulting in less effort to write well. This list of tips should help students edit and polish their writing.

These tips help freshmen and sophomore college students write with clarity. These suggestions are not meant to help students conduct research, or organize a paper. Instead, these ideas will help students work on the end product. Each section below addresses areas that inexperienced student writers tend to ignore as they edit their drafts for final submission. Read through the tips once, and then keep them handy as a reference while you edit.

A Fun Summary of Writing Well ☺

Here are some hilarious writing tips¹

1. Avoid alliteration. Always.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid clichés like the plague. (They're old hat.)
4. Employ the vernacular.
5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
8. Contractions aren't necessary
9. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
10. One should never generalize.
11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
12. Comparisons are as bad as clichés.
13. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
14. Profanity sucks.
15. Be more or less specific.
16. Understatement is always best.
17. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.

18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
20. The passive voice is to be avoided.
21. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
22. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
23. Who needs rhetorical questions?

This sarcastic list of tips, written by a former University of Michigan associate, offers a simple guide to clear writing! The following pointers may help.

Revising and Common Mistakes in Writing History

Professor Horace Merrill, formerly of the University of Michigan, developed a list of typical writing mistakes from history students. A few additions have been included.²

1. Write consistently in the past tense—it's a history paper
2. Avoid first person, write in third person if required
3. Avoid referring to the reader (use one instead of you if necessary).
4. Write in the active voice, not the passive voice
5. Always write complete clear sentences with a subject and verb.
6. Always write in your own words and reflecting your own ideas.
7. Always assume your reader is intelligent; but knows absolutely nothing about the subject you are writing about.
8. Always write with a purpose—to support your thesis.
9. Write the important stuff, not the trivial—and seek out the difference.
10. Never write using common knowledge or silliness as a substitute for information and insight.
11. Avoid extreme generalities (wonderful, best ever, etc).
12. Always write in chronological order—as things happen-- unless making a specific point. What is first, second, third matters.
13. Never designate persons by their last names only—use full names.

14. Always identify, however briefly, the persons you write about.
15. Never use slang or informal jargon.
16. Never split infinitives.
17. Proofread every sentence you write.
18. Look for ways to write with fewer words while making the same point.
19. Always write history as your considered thought based on research and reading—never use sweeping judgments on the world around you.
20. Avoid writer's showmanship and never use obscure terms or foreign language terms unless clearly required.
21. Never quote more than three lines--and seldom use "block" quotations.
22. Never quote anything you can say yourself.
23. Avoid contractions in writing (can't, didn't).
24. Avoid crutch transitional words (however, therefore, for example).
25. Avoid using "this" or "that" as the subject of a sentence.
26. Do not qualify (maybe, possibly, perhaps).
27. Focus on sentences when polishing the final paper.
28. Avoid long introductory clauses to begin a sentence.
29. Put the subject first in a sentence, within the first five words.

30. Do not separate the subject and verb with more than two or three words.

Writing About Time & Past Events or People

When writing history use a consistent style for numbers and dates. For numbers under one hundred, spell out the number using a hyphen for numbers with two words, such as forty-five. Use Arabic numbers for amounts larger than one hundred. If the numbers describe an important percentage, spell out the word percent. If you are doing a quantitative analysis or statistical study using historical data, you may need to spell out only single digits and write all others as Arabic numbers.

Dates and times of days are not written out in words unless you are quoting original usage. For a decade, or general era, write the 1920s; or the late 1800s. For eras given a common name by historians capitalize the name of that era by writing the Civil War; or the Cold War; or the Roaring Twenties. When using such titles be certain the reader knows where you are in chronological time. For a general century reference do not capitalize. Write the twenty-first century. For years before and just after the beginning of the modern calendar write 10,000 BCE for before the Common Era (before Christ); and 345 CE for Common Era (after Christ). For the time of day write 8:00 a.m. or 4:35 p.m. Use words, initial capitals and numbers to describe a date: March 23, 1901.

As you write history describe each item in sequence unless an out-of-sequence event is important for emphasis. Write so that your reader always knows where in the story they are—in what decade, year, battle, session of Congress, etc. Do this clearly, but try to avoid listing the date every few lines or every paragraph. Use transitional phrases to bring along the reader. For example as your story continues you might write “during the next month”, or “in ten days”.

Historical people, groups, buildings, and laws also deserve careful consistent style as you write. Governmental bodies, military designations,

named buildings, churches, presidents, congressmen, and important addresses all must be written out and capitalized when referring to a specific thing. Therefore, you would write the 2nd Michigan Infantry; VII Corps; or the United States Supreme Court. When referring to cultural or ethnic groups do not use a hyphen if the group name is used as a noun (African American); but do use a hyphen if it is used as an adjective (Polish-American men).

Writing about historical people requires special care. When writing about specific people use each person's full name in the first mention. In subsequent referrals to the same person use his or her last name. Using a person's commonly used initials, such as FDR for President Franklin D Roosevelt, is only acceptable when the person and the use of the initials have been introduced to the reader at this first instance. Avoid abbreviating a person's title until the person is introduced. Afterward designations such as Mrs., Dr., Rep. (for member of the House of Representatives), or Lt. (for Lieutenant) may be used. Always describe each person briefly to set the historical stage. Try to avoid biographical overkill. Write clearly about each person's gender; or write in a gender-neutral form.

Avoiding Colloquialisms

Writers should avoid most forms of slang, informal words, or colloquialisms. A colloquialism is an informal idiomatic form of casual speech. Colloquialisms often change with generations and with new forms of technology, such as the keyboard entry “lol” for lots of laughs.

Colloquialisms include slang or jargon, especially if they reflect changing cultural or social trends. Many colloquial phrases are aphorisms, or witty phrases that contain universal truths—“a stitch in time saves nine”. Other colloquialisms emerge during unusual historical events and then fade away. The phrase “snafu” was enjoyed by all during World War Two and stood for “situation normal, all fouled up”. The wartime economy produced long lines, short supplies, no new cars, and generally “snafus” developed. Today, persons not familiar with that era, would not know what snafu meant. Each younger generation has produced its own generational slang, and that slang has grown rapidly in the computer era. Such language may be fine for talking with or texting a friend, but not for formal writing unless you are discussing such phrases for cultural or historical insight. Since your primary goal is clarity, use only universally accepted words that all readers can understand.

The list to avoid is impossibly long, but here are a few just for fun. True colloquialisms to avoid: deader than a doornail, not the sharpest knife

in the drawer, ten bits short of a byte. Slang phrases to avoid: gonna, wanna, y'all, cool, so fine, wassup, hey, sup, huh, geek.

Students lean on colloquialisms for a writing crutch. This happens when more formal words do not come to mind, so informal words suited to familiar speech become substitutes. Try to avoid writing like you might speak. The examples below illustrate colloquialisms and informal phrases followed by more appropriate written text.

author breaks down the.....Smith (says)

is broken down into.....organized

broken down into different themes.....thematically organized

obtained a lot of information.....obtained information about (list)

in a short amount of time.....shortly, or soon

the Mughals came from nothing.....from modest backgrounds

overcoming great odds.....overcame (specific list)

comes together well.....resulted in

each section is set up with.....each section contains

this is really a great..... a great

keep it in mind.....remember

past history.....history

the question as to whether....whether

the reason why is that....because

came out with...produced, or created

owing to the fact that....since

rather, very, really....are qualifiers that are usually not needed

it was when Hurricane Katrina hit...Hurricane Katrina hit

Many other colloquialisms or informalities are just plain bad and should never be used in a formal paper:

there is no escaping it...do not use

a lot more out of them...do not use

learned a lot...do not use

I really enjoyed...do not use

had no clue about...do not use

big thing, big deal...do not use

The thing that caught my attention...do not use

put up with...do not use

Avoid Anachronisms

Anachronisms use words or phrases inappropriate for the time under study. An anachronistic word simply did not exist at the time of your study. The word "missile" is a modern term, and does not accurately describe arrows of the 1600s. The word "bomb" was first used in the 1500s, and could be used to describe armaments of that early period as well as contemporary weapons. Do not write about Spain as a "nation" in the 1400s, but as a "Kingdom". Write about the United States of America's Department of Defense after 1949; but about its War Department in earlier eras.

Students often create anachronisms when using a thesaurus or searching for an alternate word. One might be looking for a synonym for military command and use the journalistic inclusive phrase "the Pentagon". If writing about the United States after 1943, that word choice would be fine since the building known as the Pentagon and housing the combined military command opened that year. Refer to the Confederate States of America after the confederacy was formed, nor before. Avoid referring to the "colonies" when you mean those that become the United States, but refer to the "British North American Colonies".

Words always matter.

Editing for Passive Voice

Passive voice weakens the clarity of writing. Passive voice also creates generalized writing lacking precision. Writing in passive voice is not a grammatical error. Passive voice can legitimately build your sentences in some cases. Unfortunately, many college students over-use passive voice. Some helpful hints at editing passive voice follow.

Passive voice in a sentence happens when you make the object of an action the subject of the sentence, instead of making the "actor" or "action" the subject. Look at this sentence from a history student:

The Social Security bill was passed by Congress.

In this sentence, the actor (Congress) is not the subject. Instead, the object (Social Security bill) is the subject. You can think of it as an indirect way of creating a sentence, instead of directly stating your thoughts.

Compare the above to this sentence:

Congress passed the Social Security bill in 1935.

As revised, we have a much clearer sentence. To find passive voice look for a form of "to be" (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a past participle, usually words ending in "-ed." In the above example, we took out "*was passed by*" and flipped the sentence around. As you edit, you should re-read all passive phrases and make sure they are clear—especially make sure the reader (often your instructor who is giving you the grade) knows who or what is

doing the acting. Often this simple step in bringing clarity to your draft means a boost to your grade, as your instructor will not have to guess at your meaning.

This does not mean that all forms of “to be” are bad or to be avoided. In fact, some scientific writing guidelines require passive voice as a way to make statements objectively. But in history and humanities classes, take a second look at all passive voice and edit for clarity. So, how does passive voice impair precision? Take a look at the sentence below from a history student:

Each emperor was greater than that before him...

In this sentence, the passive phrase “was greater” becomes an easy writing crutch. Who were the emperors involved? How much “greater” were they? The sentence begs for more definition. Here is a simple fix providing clarity and precision:

Babur [who] used gunpowder[what] to build the early Mughal Empire and others continued his practice...

Each statement pair below contains a student’s sentence in passive voice followed by a sentence in active voice. Each edited revision makes the sentence clearer and, in some cases, also provides more definition and precision.

Passive: "For Cause and Comrades" is also a scientific investigation to try to understand their motivation...

Active: "For Cause and Comrades" methodically investigates soldiers' motives...

~ ~ ~

Passive: Each chapter has an underlying theme which is supported not only by letters from soldiers...

Active Each chapter's theme reflects the content of letters from soldiers...

~ ~ ~

Passive: This is because most psychological studying of veterans...

Active Most psychological studies of veterans...

~ ~ ~

Passive: It is a very useful book for someone who is trying to have a better understanding of the war...

Active Anyone looking for a better understanding of the Civil War will find this book a great read...

~ ~ ~

Passive: Diplomacy, where the Indians were concerned, was paramount...

Active President Jefferson strongly supported peaceful diplomatic relations with western tribes ...

~ ~ ~

Passive: The British Museum is designed to explain Ancient India...

Active The British Museum describes Ancient India...

~ ~ ~

Passive: The Mughals were of Islamic faith...

Active: The Mughal culture embraced the Islamic religion (or faith)...

Learning to edit for passive voice that is unclear and imprecise will help students write better. It will also sharpen your ability to critique the writing of others. For example, if others fail to offer clear and precise examples, you should note that. Some writers expressing political issues, daily conversation, or purposeful obfuscation leave out the "who" and the "what" on purpose.

Avoiding Overuse of the Personal Pronoun "I"

Every semester students ask how can "I" write about what "I" did without using "I"? The use of a personal pronoun is not necessarily wrong—and should be used where you are being emphatic; being personal on purpose; or wish to identify your view as different from the main viewpoint of the paper you are writing.

Personal pronouns become a problem in writing when college students over use "I" to the point that the personal pronoun becomes a "crutch" and appears dozens of times per paragraph. This over use should be avoided.

Overuse of the personal pronoun can also reduce the credibility of the paper. All researchers, especially students, need to strive for a paper with a professional sound or voice; and a paper that credibly reflects learning based on research and knowledge. This professional voice is seldom found in a paper filled with a bunch of statements like "I think that"..., "I feel that..." , or "I learned that...."

Your audience is your history professor. We know who you are and that it is you writing. You do not need to remind us several times. Instead of writing that "you" learned so and so, just write so-and-so.

If you can avoid most uses of "I" your paper should be clearer, more professional in tone, and directed at your audience. See the student writing below before and after editing for personal pronoun abuse:

Student draft:

"In this paper I will discuss the eight cyber voyagers [sic] I took. I will explain why I chose each destination. I will also give a brief description of the things I saw and learned while on each trip. I am not going to list each trip in order; instead I will be writing about the ones I enjoyed the most first."

One possible edit:

"This paper discusses eight cyber voyages, starting with the most enjoyable! The analysis includes the selection of trips, and a description of each."

Notice the original uses "I" nine times in three short sentences. This is a very typical miscue when opening your paper. Students are told to outline what "they" are going to talk about—and so the use of "I" comes naturally. But if you read the edit out loud, it clearly sounds better. Below are another few sentences and an edit....

Student draft:

"I have always been interested in how women developed and grew over time. I was to an extent surprised at the things I learned while on this voyage. Women in Ancient Athens were considered a step above slaves. They weren't expected to learn to read or write and were shortly married off by their father after they hit puberty...."

One possible edit:

“Interestingly, the culture of Ancient Athens considered women a step above slaves. Fathers forced the young women of Athens to remain illiterate and to marry shortly after puberty....”

Your professors don't need to be told that you are interested in a topic—just begin the discussion without these types of personal comments, as they add little.³

Some Other Ideas & Conclusions

The following checklist is generalized for a research paper in history. Students should always follow the specific instructions of their professors. Complete this checklist (non-prioritized order):

1. Is the paper spell checked on your PC?
2. Is the paper personally (manually) proofed for spelling?
3. Does the paper eliminate excessive repetition of key words?
4. Is the paper in proper style, as assigned?
5. Does the paper meet all the guidelines?
6. Is the paper formatted correctly?
7. Does the paper include your name in proper style?
8. Does the paper include a full style source list, if required?
9. Is the paper free from errors in dates, proper names, personal names, and other special spellings not apparent to spell-checking or proofing?
10. Is the paper clear of short jerky sentences?
11. Does each sentence in the paper have a subject and a verb?
12. Is each paragraph written in the same tense, preferably the past tense?
13. Does the paper include fully developed paragraphs, or does it include short (2-3 sentence) undeveloped paragraphs?
14. Does the paper include 1 to 2 introductory paragraphs?
15. Does the paper include a clear strong thesis statement?
16. Does the paper include several clear specific paragraphs as evidence supporting each point of your thesis?
17. Does the paper include easy flowing transitions from one paragraph; one supporting concept to the next?
18. And, is the paper free from weak transitional devices such as: "and", "again", "and then", "besides", "finally", "further", "furthermore", "next", "lastly", "moreover", "in addition", "first", etc
19. Does the paper include a strong paragraph of conclusions?
20. Does the paper clearly cite all sources?

Endnotes

1. Frank L. Visco, "How to Write Good," Federal Aviation Administration, <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/humor/writegood.cfm> (accessed December 1, 2010).
2. Horace Samuel Merrill, *Basic Rules for Writing Narrative History*, (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, nd).
3. Kate L Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 117.

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