

US

**UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX**

History Department

**How to Write a History
Reflexive Essay**

1. Purpose of the exercise

The aim of the reflexive essay is to evaluate your understanding of the themes and topics covered by the module from the point of view of **method** and **approach**. In other words, you are not being asked to present an argument about the past or an interpretation of the past as you would in a standard essay. Instead, you are asked to reflect on and then present an argument as to why a particular approach or method is the most effective way to arrive at that argument or interpretation. In sum the reflexive essay addresses the questions '**How do we do history?**' and '**Why do we do history?**'

In the course of your History degree, the reflexive essay is usually connected with work undertaken for collaborative research in preparation for a group presentation. It therefore provides an opportunity to make your individual contribution to the group presentation visible to the examiners.

In a standard essay, you expect to present an argument, and strive to avoid simply narrating the past events you are trying to analyse. The same applies to the reflexive essay: it should not be a simple narrative of what you did, or a repetition of those aspects of the group's work which you produced in the presentation itself. Rather, you should consider the experience of group and collaborative research as just part of the evidence you can use to support the argument you wish to make about the 'how' and 'why' of history.

Other forms of evidence should include: your developing understanding of the content of the module within the group context; the ways in which the group work has influenced your approach to the research and production of historical knowledge more widely; highlighted pieces of reading, or work by particular historians which have especially shaped your thinking.

There is also the opportunity to reflect on the skills and aptitudes developed through the experience of group and collaborative research, and weigh this up against the more conventional experience of working as a sole historical researcher. Finally, you might want to connect work done for the module in question with work undertaken on other modules as part of your degree: can you see a pattern emerging about the kind of historian you are becoming?

2. Preparing for the essay

Building a Skills Portfolio

We encourage all History students to build a Skills Portfolio of material relating to the historical skills and methods that you have developed as part of the reflexive work you undertake throughout your degree. Your Portfolio should include:

- notes from the Skills lectures attended on the core modules during year 1
- feedback on assessments, and reflections on feedback, including use of the History Feedback Action Plan
- notes from any seminars devoted to skills topics, such as reading primary sources, referencing, essay-writing, finding archives etc
- notes from field trips, extra lectures in the department etc

- notes from personal tutor meetings, mentoring meetings, meetings with library staff etc
- records of skills exercises, tests and audits undertaken through the [Sussex Skills Hub](#)
- anything else you find relevant to the development of the historian's craft: this might be examples of reading that have especially helped or inspired you; or it might be information or ideas shared with your fellow students in a seminar

You can choose to keep this material in physical form in a folder or portfolio, or you might consider using online tools for collecting information over time such as [Padlet](#) or [OneNote](#) (part of the Microsoft Office365 suite which the University uses widely. You can [install this for free](#) on your own devices).

Recording the collaborative process

In the context of the module itself, and while the reflexive essay itself is not a research journal, it will be helpful to keep a diary-type record of your group work that can act as a reminder or aid to reflection for the essay. The diary can become a contemporary record of your development over even a few weeks that might otherwise get lost to memory or the specific moment of writing the essay and meeting the deadline.

Asking questions

You should also use some or all of the following questions to shape your reflexive essay:

- What are the central questions raised in the module about the 'how' and 'why' of history? What have you learned about historical methods and approaches?
- What historical methods did you employ in researching your sources? How did you identify the sources? How did you access them?
- What historical methods did you use in analysing your sources? How did you choose the appropriate methods for your located sources? What did you learn about using historical evidence more generally?
- What historical methods did you employ in structuring your main points and developing your key argument?
- What historical methods did you employ in presenting your material?
- Which particular historical skills did you contribute to the group's work overall?
- What areas would you need to improve or still develop?
- What did you learn about the processes of collaborative historical research from participation in the group project?
- At the end of the module, does your individual progression bring greater insight into some of the wider questions with which the module began?

3. Writing the essay

In order to respond to the above questions, you should seek to address a central question or issue about the 'how' and 'why' of history which became apparent during the module, and about which you gained further understanding through the work you did, including for the group presentation. You should then aim to

present a structured argument which defends the position you have taken, and the choices you have made.

In order to support your argument, you might draw on the following types of evidence:

- Evidence of reading from secondary sources that address research methods and issues. Did you encounter any of the problems discussed by these sources, or find their reflections insightful?
- Relevant material from your Skills Portfolio which helps show how you solved particular problems and developed your understanding of the 'how' and 'why' of history. Can you show the reader your careful thinking about skills, methods and approach, and your progression in mastering them?
- Evidence of how you thought through particular methodological, philosophical, theoretical or political issues which shaped your approach to the group research
- Examples of how you searched for, collected and ordered material BUT ONLY if coupled with how you analysed, drew impressions from and conclusions from that evidence
- Awareness of the problems and possibilities involved in using specific kinds of historical evidence, relating them to the overall themes of the module

4. Further resources

You can find more information in the section on reflexive writing for historians on the [Skills and Methods for History Students](#) canvas site.