



University of Sussex

History

How to write a history essay

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This guide was produced on the basis of the History QAA Benchmark, and while consulting in particular helpful guidelines by the universities of Aberdeen and Glasgow.

A History essay is a piece of written work in response to a particular question or issue. It requires students to demonstrate a number of skills in combination, including knowledge and understanding of a specific topic; the ability to gather and deploy evidence and data; the ability to understand arguments advanced by other academics including methodological issues; the ability to produce reasoned and sustained historical arguments and to demonstrate coherently and imaginatively individual thought and judgement. Essays may be long, reflecting depth of scholarship, or short, requiring precision of focus. They may be written to a target length, or under time. Essays written under exam conditions also afford safeguards against plagiarism and give students the opportunity to develop relevant life-skills, such as the ability to produce coherent, reasoned and supported arguments under pressure. Because of the integrative high-order skills which they develop, essays are therefore an essential element of all History assessment at the undergraduate level. The following guide is meant to offer helpful advice and assist you in producing a good History essay and developing your own style and thought. In some courses you will be given additional and more specific guidelines. Of course, you can always discuss any question with your tutor.

Time

It takes time and thought to write a good History essay. Make sure you allow yourself enough time to read, prepare, and write up. When writing under exam conditions, you should do your best to allocate to each question the time required.

Choosing the Question

An essay question will ask you to focus on one particular area or topic, and to pursue a line of argument. You should choose your question with care. Make sure you choose the question that most interests you, rather than the one you think might be easiest, closest to the lecture topic, or to what your friends choose to do.

Make sure you understand the question and its precise wording. If necessary, ask your tutor. It is always a good idea examine the question in your mind, in order to understand its point. Your essay will be assessed according to the quality of its engagement with a set title, so your understanding of the title is crucial for the quality of your answer. While preparing and doing your reading, you may also want at times to go back to the set question and reflect on it. Try to see to what extent your

understanding has changed. It is very likely that as you go on with your reading and writing, your understanding of the question and its ramifications will be enriched.

In the second or third year, students may also be asked to set their own question. In doing so, they should make sure they consult their tutor and follow the course procedure.

Reading and note taking

Get hold of the relevant texts and make sure you have time to read them. Remember to take notes. Don't simply rely on highlighted lines and marginal comments, produced by yourself or others. As you write your notes, be careful to distinguish between your own summaries and direct quotation. Copy quotations accurately, and use quotation marks. This will be crucial in order to avoid plagiarism at a later stage. Remember to note down page numbers: this will save you a great deal of frustration and extra work in the writing stage. It is worth investing some time early in your studies to plan how you are going to keep track of reading notes: you can do so by hand, electronically, or by using combined methods. There are various forms of software available to help you collect, organise, and search through notes, as well as set out footnotes and bibliographies. The programme 'Endnote' is supported by the University's Computer Services.

What to read

If you are researching a new subject, it might be a good idea to start by reading a summary of the basic information in perhaps one or two text-books. This will give you a basic understanding of the topic and, sometimes, a summary of historical views and debates. Be wary, however, of overly simplified or generalised arguments and outdated approaches. You should then proceed to investigate more specific scholarly works. Recent articles (which can often be obtained on-line) are often very helpful. Recent works may provide a good assessment of the state of the debate. Some reading lists also contain references to particularly important classical books and articles, which have made a special impact in the field – in some cases it may be a good idea to familiarise yourself with them. You can ask your tutor which books and articles are particularly recommended, but try also to explore on your own. To maximise your productivity, try to diversify your reading skills. Some items should be read and summarised with care, others could be more selectively explored, and while using the content pages and index.

While pursuing your reading, you may want to consolidate your thoughts. As you make notes and process your ideas, you will also create better order in your mind and will be able to identify those areas on which you need to read more or do more work. Some students find it useful not to delay the writing but combine it with the reading process. At any rate, you should strive to establish and cultivate working patterns that enable you to manage well your time and thought and maximise your ability.

Planning your essay

An essay is expected to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The introduction can take various forms and depends on individual style. Some students, while carefully planning their essay, still find it useful to draft or edit their introduction at the end of the writing process. The main body of the essay consists of the argument, which is developed and extended sequentially throughout. Before writing, consider the order of your argument and the weight which different points require in the overall structure. Make sure you have sufficient evidence and examples to demonstrate your point. You might also need to consider alternative points of view, or think how to counter them. When processing your work electronically, you can of course alter the structure. As you write your essay by hand, remember always to ask yourself whether your writing proceeds in a logical order, and whether what you are writing helps to answer the question. The final part of the essay (that is, the conclusion), should weigh up the key points of your argument and offer a judgement in relation to the set question and the work you have done in the essay itself.

Sources

The essay is yours and should be written by you in your own words and on the basis of your own reading and analysis. You should aim to consolidate your essay to carry the points of your argument and avoid bitty lines and a patchwork of paraphrases and quotes.

All quotations and paraphrases should be acknowledged with conventional footnote references according to the guidelines below. Failure to acknowledge your sources may lead you to be charged with plagiarism, a serious offence bound to lead to punitive action. The only exception is when writing in an unseen examination, in which reference materials cannot be consulted and footnotes therefore are not expected to be made.

A quotation may be short or long. Short quotes can be integrated in the text in inverted commas and long quotes conventionally appear in indented lines. Use quotations sparingly, and only when appropriate. A paraphrase does not appear in inverted commas, but you must nonetheless acknowledge your source.

Style

In order for your argument to be convincing, it needs to be well-researched, reasoned, and sustained with evidence and examples. In order to communicate your ideas, you must also strive to convey them with a fluent and coherent style. This means that you need to pay attention to grammatical conventions. Make sure your sentences are complete, avoid cumbersome and lengthy sentences, and check your punctuation and spelling. Consolidate paragraphs, and learn to employ 'topic sentences' as signposts. It is normally best to write in the third person and to aim for conciseness and clarity.

Strive to be elegant without being pompous, and lively without being flippant. Clarity is more important than complexity. Avoid jargon, slang, bland generalisations, unsubstantiated arguments, and hackneyed phrases. Make sure not to lose track of the argument and never turn your essay into a lengthy narrative of events. All History essays aim to be analytical and offer evidenced and reasoned critical discussions and conclusions, based on learning and research, rather than mere narratives or statements of personal opinion.

Before submitting your essay, try to leave a day or two to re-read it and enter corrections. Many students benefit from asking a friend to go over their essay, spot weaknesses, and make sure their essay makes sense.

Presentation

All typed essays should be made in a 12pt font, double spaced. In many courses you will be required to submit essays electronically, although Tutors may require a paper copy. Non-assessed essays should be submitted clipped with an appropriate cover sheet. Assessed essays should be submitted by the deadline as notified to the students or stated in Sussex Direct. University guidelines for presentation can be also found in the Undergraduate Examination and Assessment Handbook:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/academicoffice/eandahandbooks/index.php>

Remember, presentation matters! The following notes will help you to ensure the quality of your submission.

Spelling: are there any spelling errors? If so, do your best to detect and correct them. If you tend to make repeated errors (such as their/there, principle/principal, its/it's), try to seek clarification.

Grammar, syntax: are there any errors? Read carefully and check. It is sometimes a good idea to read sections aloud.

Punctuation: are the errors (i) very few? (ii) Systematic ones of minor kind (for example, on unpaired commas only)? (iii) Systematic of a major kind (for example, incorrect use of full stops, or failure to distinguish plural and genitive)? Go over your submission and check.

Reference and/or bibliography: are they provided? Are any details missing, incorrect, or incomplete? Do your best to check and aim for consistency according to the conventions explained below.

General carelessness: are there lapses not covered above, such as illegibility, missing words, incomplete sentences? Examine your work and do the best you can to improve the quality of your submission.

If you feel you need help, don't hesitate to ask. You may start by contacting your tutor and student advisor.

Referencing

Please see the “History Referencing Guide”, which is on the department’s website.