

History Writing

STEP 1: Recall the link between history and writing.

When you write, you will most likely have to show that you know something about the past and can craft that knowledge into a thoughtful interpretation answering a specific question.

STEP 2: Read with an eye towards writing.

You will have to read before you write. If the reading has been assigned, guess why your instructor chose it. Whatever you read, ask yourself:

- How does this text relate to the themes of the lecture/discussion section/course?
- What does this text say? What does it not say?
- How do I react to this text? What are my questions? How could I explain it to someone else (summarize it, diagram the main points, critique the logic)?

For more on this, see also our handout on reading to write.

STEP 3: Dissect the question.

Since you now (having completed STEP 1) anticipate having to make—and support—an educated guess, pick the question apart. Identify:

A. Opportunities to show what you know. These are requests for information and are usually pretty easy to find. Look for verbs like these:

- Summarize
- Outline
- Review

B. Opportunities to show what you think. These are requests for interpretation. If you're lucky, they will be just as obvious. Look for key words like these:

- Why
- How
- Analyze
- Critique

Requests for interpretation may not always be worded as questions. Each of following statements asks for an educated guess:

- Compare the effects of the French Revolution and white bread on French society.
- Analyze what freedom meant to Cleopatra.
- Discuss the extent to which television changed childhood in America.

Warning: Even something as straightforward as “Did peanut butter kill Elvis?” is usually a plea for both knowledge and interpretation. A simple “yes” or “no” is probably not enough; the best answers will include

*Adapted from UNC: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/history/>

some information about Elvis and peanut butter, offer supporting evidence for both possible positions, and then interpret this information to justify the response.

STEP 3 1/2: Dissect any other guidelines just as carefully.

Your assignment prompt and/or any writing guidelines your instructor has provided contain valuable hints about what you must or could include in your essay. Obvious examples:

Consider the following questions.

- In all papers for this course, be sure to make at least one reference to lecture notes.
- Evaluate two of the four social classes in early modern Timbuktu.

History instructors often begin an assignment with a general “blurb” about the subject, which many students skip in order to get to the “real” question. These introductory statements, however, can offer clues about the expected content and organization of your essay. Example:

- The modern world has witnessed a series of changes in the realm of breadmaking. The baker’s code of earlier societies seemed no longer relevant to a culture obsessed with fiber content and caloric values. The meaning of these developments has been hotly contested by social historians such as Al White and A. Loaf. Drawing on lecture notes, class readings, and your interpretation of the film, *The Yeast We Can Do*, explain which European culture played the greatest role in the post-war breadmaking revolution.

Although it’s possible this instructor is merely revealing his/her own nutritional obsessions, a savvy student could glean important information from the first two sentences of this assignment. A strong answer would not only pick a culture and prove its importance to the development of breadmaking, but also:

- summarize the relationship between this culture and the series of changes in breadmaking
- briefly explain the irrelevance of the baker’s code
- relate the answer to both the arguments of White and Loaf and the modern world’s obsessions

For more on this, see our handout on interpreting assignments.

STEP 4: Jot down what you know and what you think. This is important because it helps you develop an argument about the question.

Make two lists, one of facts and one of thoughts.

FACTS: What do you know about breadmaking, based on your sources? You should be able to trace each item in this list to a specific source (lecture, the textbook, a primary source reading, etc).

THOUGHTS: What’s the relationship between these facts? What’s your reaction to them? What conclusions might a reasonable person draw? If this is more difficult (which it should be), try:

- Freewriting. Just write about your subject for 5-10 minutes, making no attempt to use complete sentences, prove your ideas, or otherwise sound intelligent.
- Jotting down your facts in no particular order on a blank piece of paper, then using highlighters or colored pencils to arrange them in sets, connect related themes, link related ideas, or show a chain of developments.

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- Scissors. Write down whatever facts and ideas you can think of. Cut up the list and then play with the scraps. Group related ideas or opposing arguments or main points and supporting details.

STEP 5: Make an argument. This is where many people panic, but don't worry, you only need an argument, not necessarily an earth-shattering argument. In our example, there is no need to prove that Western civilization would have died out without bread. If you've been given a question, ask yourself, "How can I link elements of my two lists to address the question?" If you get stuck, try:

- Looking back at STEPS 3 and 3½
- More freewriting
- Talking with someone
- Letting all the information "gel" in your mind. Give your subconscious mind a chance to work. Get a snack, take a walk, etc.

If no question has been assigned, give yourself plenty of time to work on STEP 4. Alternately, convince yourself to spend thirty minutes on a 6-sided strategy Donald Daiker calls "cubing." (If thirty minutes seems like a long time, remember most instructors really, really, really want to see some kind of argument.) Spend no more than five minutes writing on each of the following (just thinking doesn't count; you have to get it down on paper).

1. Describe your subject. It's breadmaking. Everyone eats bread. Bread can be different textures and colors and sizes...
2. Compare it. Breadmaking is like making steel because you combine raw ingredients...It's totally different than...
3. Associate it. My grandfather made bread twice a week. Breadmaking makes me think of butter, cheese, milk, cows, the Alps. Loaf talks about Germans, and some of them live in the Alps.
4. Analyze it. White thinks that French bread is the best; Loaf doesn't. There are different kinds of bread, different steps in the breadmaking process, different ways to make bread...
5. Apply it. You could teach a course on breadmaking. You could explain Franco-German hostilities based on their bread preferences...
6. Argue for or against it. Breadmaking is important because every culture has some kind of bread. People focus so much on food fads like smoothies, the "other white meat," and Jell-O, but bread has kept more people alive over time...

Now, do any of these ideas seem significant? Do they tie in to some theme of your reading or course? Do you have enough information in your earlier "facts" and "thoughts" lists to PROVE any of these statements? If you're still stumped, gather up all your lists and go talk with your instructor. The lists will prove to him/her you've actually tried to come up with an argument on your own and give the two of you something concrete to talk about. For more on this, see our handouts on making an argument, constructing thesis statements, and asking for feedback on your writing.

STEP 6: Organize.

Let's say you've batted around some ideas and come up with the following argument:

Although White's argument about the role of food fads suggests that French culture drove the modern breadmaking revolution, careful consideration of Loaf's thesis proves that German emigres irreversibly changed traditional attitudes towards bread.

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The next step is to figure out a logical way to explain and prove your argument. Remember that the best thesis statements both take a position and give readers a map to guide them through the paper. Look at the parts of your thesis and devote a section of your essay to each part. Here's one (but not the only) way to organize an essay based on the above argument.

- P1: Introduction: Why is breadmaking a relevant subject? Who are White and Loaf? Give thesis statement.
- P2: What is/was the breadmaking revolution? What traditional attitudes did it change?
- P3: How does White's argument about food fads lead one to believe the French have dominated this revolution?
- P4: Why is White wrong?
- P5: What is Loaf's thesis and how do you see it asserting the role of German emigres?
- P6: Why does Loaf's thesis make sense?
- P7: Conclusion: Sum up why Loaf's argument is stronger, explain how society has been changed the breadmaking revolution as he understands it, and tie these ideas back to your original argument.

STEP 7: Fill in the content.

Fill in each section—also called a paragraph—using your lists from STEP 5. In addition to filling in what you know and what you think, remember to explain each section's role in proving your argument and how each paragraph relates to those before and after it. For more help with this, see our handouts on introductions, conclusions, transitions, and paragraph development.

STEP 8: Revise.

Ideally, this would really be steps 8, 9, and 10 (maybe even 11 and 12 for a big or important paper), but you'd never have gotten this far if you suspected there were that many steps. To maintain the illusion, let's just call them 8a, 8b, and 8c.

8a: Check the organization. This is really double-checking STEP 6. Do the parts of your paper make sense—and prove your point—in this order?

8b: Check content. First, read your draft and ask yourself how each section relates to your thesis or overall argument. Have you explained this relationship? If not, would it be easier to rework the body of your paper to fit your argument or to revise your thesis to fit the existing content?

Next, reread your draft, and identify each sentence (based on its actual content): Is it “knowing” or “thinking” or both? Write one or both of those words in the margin. After doing this for each sentence in the whole paper, go back and tally up how many times you scribbled “I know” and “I think.” This next part is important:

THE “KNOWS” and “THINKS” SHOULD

BALANCE EACH OTHER OUT (more or less).

This should usually be true both within specific paragraphs and in the paper as a whole. It's fine to have 4 “knows” and 6 “thinks,” but if things are way out of balance, reread the assignment very carefully to be sure you didn't miss something. Even if they ask for your opinion, most history instructors expect you to back it up by interpreting historical evidence or examples.

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8c: Proofread for style and grammar. This is also important. Even though you're not writing for an English course, style and grammar are very important because they help you communicate ideas.