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GET WRITING!

After spending days, weeks, or months gathering and analyzing information, the time will come when you have to start writing. Making the transition from research to writing is often the most difficult stage of a project, but it must be done. Scholars facing the blank computer screen would do well to heed the advice of Samuel Eliot Morison, one of the greatest historians of navigation. In an article called "History as a Literary Art: An Appeal to Young Historians," Morison advised students to avoid the temptations to find that one last source or to brew another pot of coffee. Instead of procrastinating, Morison insisted that his students should "First and foremost, *get writing!*"³⁶ Once you start to write, you will have to think more rigorously about what it is that you want to say.

5.A. Consider Narratives and Analysis

Morison wrote, "get writing!" but how, exactly, should you start? You need to find a suitable framework for your argument, so think about how you want to organize your writing.

By now, your hypothesis has become a thesis, which is the main argument that you wish to sustain throughout your essay. You should also know which pieces of evidence you will be using to support your main argument. But chances are that you do not know yet whether you will organize the essay as one long narrative that touches on analytical topics, or as an analysis that uses short narratives to illustrate specific points.

5.B. Create a Draft Outline of an Analytical Essay

In the early stages of writing, it is usually a good idea to make an outline of your essay. Here you will merely sketch out the broader organization of an essay in order to test its feasibility.

If you are still writing a paper on the history of longitude, a draft outline of an analytical essay might look something like this:

- I. Introduction: science, culture, and longitude
- II. John Harrison
 - A. His background
 - B. His inventions
 - C. The chronometer trials
- III. Nevil Maskelyne
 - A. His background
 - B. His inventions
 - C. His bias against Harrison
- IV. Conclusion
 - A. George III decides the case
 - B. Significance of the case

This is an analytical essay because it is organized around an analytical point: the relationship between science and culture. It does not tell one narrative, but it compares several narratives: the story of Harrison and the story of Maskelyne; the story of how Maskelyne tested Harrison's clocks and the story of how George III tested them. This organization highlights an analytical problem—in this case, whether scientists are biased.

5.C. Create a Draft Outline of a Narrative Essay

It is also possible to organize your longitude essay around one narrative. In this case, you may have enough information about John Harrison to use his life's story as a narrative that contains within it important analytical points. Here is a possible draft outline of a narrative essay:

- I. Harrison's youth
 - A. Education and training
 - B. Becomes aware of longitude problem

- II. Harrison's early solutions to the longitude problem
 - A. Builds the clock H-1
 - B. Builds the clock H-2
 - C. Builds the clock H-3
 - D. Builds the clock H-4
- III. Harrison at the end of his life
 - A. Wins the longitude prize
 - B. Harrison dies

5.D. Complete Your Analytical Outline

The draft outlines above only provide skeletal frameworks for either an analytical essay or a narrative essay. They may be useful as beginnings, but they do not do much to help you articulate your argument. If you want a complete outline of your analytical essay, add some flesh to the bones. A complete outline of an analytical essay would explain why you are moving from one analytical topic to another.

- I. Introduction: The struggle to find a solution to the longitude problem shows that science is influenced by culture. This topic is significant for two reasons:
 - A. Finding longitude was a significant problem in the eighteenth century. We know this from the story of Anson's voyage of 1741.
 - B. A number of social scientists are now arguing that culture influences science, and we can use this case to test their position.
- II. John Harrison produced four marine chronometers, each of which met the criteria for winning the longitude prize.
 - A. Brief discussion of the role of artisans in eighteenth-century London's economy and society, with brief biographical narrative about John Harrison.
 - B. Tell the narrative of how Harrison built his clocks, H-1, H-2, H-3, and H-4, all of which solved the longitude problem because they embodied new mechanical innovations in clockmaking.
 - C. Tell the narrative of how Harrison had difficulty persuading the judges on the Board of Longitude to believe

that he had solved the longitude problem, even though his chronometers worked.

- III. The members of the Board were mostly well-educated astronomers, in other words, they were from a culture that was different from Harrison's.
 - A. Discuss the role of astronomers in the intellectual life of eighteenth-century England, with specific reference to universities and government.
 - B. Tell the narrative of how the astronomer Maskelyne had solved the longitude problem in a different way, by creating cumbersome tables that ships' captains could use to measure the distances from the moon to the planets and stars.
 - C. Tell the narrative of how Maskelyne's behavior toward Harrison during the trials of the clocks illustrates his cultural bias against Harrison.
- IV. Conclusion: Harrison triumphed in spite of cultural obstacles.
 - A. George III intervened on Harrison's behalf and recognized the superiority of Harrison's chronometers.
 - B. Culture may be so deeply implicated in scientific and technological research that at times it seems that inventors and scientists have to be very lucky to gain recognition.

This outline provides a core description of an analytical essay about John Harrison's solution of the longitude question. It is organized around analytical points, but it contains evidence as well as small narratives.

5.E. Complete Your Narrative Outline

Alternatively, you may wish to write a narrative of the life of John Harrison that touches on analytical issues such as the relationship between culture and science. For this essay, too, a full outline would be helpful:

- I. Harrison's youth: humble origins in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, son of a carpenter. Touch on analytical point of the place of such a family in English society.

- A. As a child, Harrison learned skilled trades such as carpentry, also taught himself rudimentary mathematics and physics, unusual for someone from his background.
 - B. Harrison built his first pendulum clock, incorporating new technical innovations.
 - C. Harrison probably began to hear of problems associated with calculating longitude, a significant problem in eighteenth-century England.
- II. Harrison's career as a clockmaker in London. Touch on analytical point of role of social status of artisans in London.
 - A. Harrison built the first marine chronometer, H-1, and during the trials had his first encounters with naval officers and astronomers. Pause to analyze how Harrison was from a different sort of class and culture from the naval officers and astronomers.
 - B. Harrison built H-2 and H-3, solved numerous technical problems, began to have a poor relationship with the astronomers, especially Maskelyne. Provide some social and educational background on Maskelyne.
 - C. Harrison built H-4, a totally new design for a marine chronometer that deserved to win the longitude prize. Harrison had serious clashes with Maskelyne during the trials, illustrating the analytical point about the relations between science and culture.
 - III. The end of Harrison's life
 - A. Harrison dissatisfied by his treatment at the hands of the Board of Longitude.
 - B. George III intervened on Harrison's behalf and Harrison won the prize.
 - C. Harrison died. End with a reflection on the significance of his life for understanding the relations between science and culture.

5.F. Choose a Framework for Your Essay

Now that you have explored how to organize your essay around analysis and narrative, it is time to choose the right framework. You must think about several questions. Which framework is best suited to your sources? Which framework will be most enjoyable to use? Which framework does your audience expect?

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BUILD AN ARGUMENT

It is not enough that a historical essay should have an introduction, a series of paragraphs with evidence, and a conclusion. A good historical essay leads its readers in some direction, but it should also be said that it is challenging for a writer to articulate and sustain this direction. This is why it is crucial for an essay to have an argument. An argument is not an angry display of vituperation; it is an idea that develops over the course of an essay. An argument must capture and hold an audience's attention.

6.A. Start to Write a First Draft

The complete outlines given above contain frameworks for sustained arguments. A good outline shows the main argument as well as its significance, and it shows how subsequent sections of the argument are related to the main argument. And yet it does not really prove anything. It is, after all, only an outline.

As you think about the overall outline, go to the sources, find support for your possible arguments, and compose paragraphs around them. It is fine to start composing paragraphs that will fall in the middle of the essay, not in the beginning. An introduction does not have to be written first; in fact, you may wish to write the body of the text first. As you grapple with writing about your sources, you

will discover new things about them, things that will make an early version of the introduction obsolete by the time you finish the body of the text.

While you are writing a first draft, keep in mind your argument and think about how it is evolving. As you add more analysis and information, stand back occasionally to check and see whether your argument is developing in a reasonable and interesting way. You may even find yourself changing your line of argument to the point where it does not even resemble your original argument any more. If this is so, you must return to the beginning and check the entire argument for consistency.

6.B. Grab Your Reader's Attention, but Do It Gently

Every reader asks, "Why should I read this?" "Why should I care?" Writers must give their audiences reasons to care. Many historians use the beginning of an essay or book to connect their scholarly interests to broader academic and political debates. For example, in a book called *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, which is about medieval religious women, Caroline Walker Bynum begins with a quick discussion of the scholarship in her field. Then she grabs the reader's attention:

Sex and money . . . again and again modern scholars have emphasized the guilt engendered by their seductiveness, the awesome heroism required for their renunciation. Yet this modern focus may tell us more about the twentieth century than about the late Middle Ages. In our industrialized corner of the globe, where food supplies do not fail, we scarcely notice grain or milk, ever-present supports of life, and yearn rather after money or sexual favors as signs of power and of success.³⁷

Notice the tone of Bynum's paragraph. It addresses topics of universal interest like sex, money, and food, but it does so calmly and methodically. You do not need to drop a bomb to get your reader's attention. Be relevant, but be gentle. People prefer to read essays that they find agreeable, trustworthy, and authoritative. Even when you suspect that your audience may disagree with you, it behooves

you to treat them with some moderation. Put them in the right frame of mind to listen to your argument.

6.C. State Your Intellectual Interests Early

In the example above, Bynum caught the reader's attention by appealing to some personal interests. Your readers will also expect you to give them a sense of your intellectual interests. What are the broader historical problems that your essay addresses? Why have you chosen your specific topic to explore these interests? What argument will be developing over the course of your essay? Address these questions in the beginning of your essay, or else you will run the risk of confusing and losing your readers.

One introduction that answers these questions comes from an article by Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., about the Black Death. He begins in this way:

HIV / AIDS and the threat of biological warfare have refueled interest in the Black Death among professional historians, biologists, and the public, not only for assessing the toxic effects of the bacillus but for understanding the psychological and longer-term cultural consequences of mass death. This article makes two arguments. Against the assumptions of historians and scientists for over a century and what continues to be inscribed in medical and history texts alike, the Black Death was not the same disease as that rat-based bubonic plague whose agent (*Yersinia pestis*) was first cultured at Hong Kong in 1894. The two diseases were radically different in their signs, symptoms, and epidemiologies. The proof of these differences forms the major thrust of this article. The second argument stems from the epidemiological differences between the two diseases. Humans have no natural immunity to modern bubonic plague, whereas populations of Western Europe adapted rapidly to the pathogen of the Black Death for at least the first hundred years. The success of their immune systems conditioned a cultural response that departs from the common wisdom about "plagues and peoples." As far back as Thucydides, historians have seen the aftershocks of pestilence as raising the levels of violence, tearing asunder secular cultures, and spawn-

ing pessimism and transcendental religiosities. A fresh reading of the late medieval sources across intellectual strata from merchant chronicles to the plague tracts of university-trained doctors shows another trajectory, an about-face in the reactions to the plague after its initial onslaught. This change in spirit casts new light on the Renaissance, helping to explain why a new emphasis on “fame and glory” should have arisen in the wake of the West’s most monumental mortality.³⁸

In this introduction, Cohn captures the reader’s interest by mentioning present-day fears of epidemic diseases and biological weapons. Then he quickly introduces two related arguments that will interest anyone who has ever read about the Black Death. The first is that the Black Death may not have been caused by bubonic plague, for which there is no immunity. The second is that Europeans appear to have gradually developed immunity to the pathogen that caused Black Death, and that this immunological success may have inspired people, rather than disheartening them.

Cohn’s arguments are radical. He presents them as “paradigm shifts” that overturn a century of scholarship on the Black Death. Cohn highlights the originality of his argument, yet he establishes a reasoned tone that will cause even the most skeptical historians to consider his arguments carefully. He does not write scathingly about previous historians. Instead, he uses an excellent strategy. He starts to build his case in the first paragraph by giving us a glimpse of the evidence that he has considered: “late medieval sources” ranging from “merchant chronicles to the plague tracts of university-trained doctors.”

When an audience begins to read Cohn’s article, they know why they should be interested; they know which problems the author is addressing; and they have some idea of how the author will approach these problems. In the first paragraph of this article, the author has given his audience much to anticipate.

6.D. Build Your Essay with Good Paragraphs

A paragraph is much more than just an indented block of text. Good paragraphs develop inferences from sources, and they also contribute to the overall argument of the essay. To accomplish all this, the best paragraphs do the following things:

1. Make a Transition from the Previous Paragraph. Readers want to know the reasons why they are moving from one paragraph to the next. Good paragraphs connect to each other with one or two transition sentences, signposts that remind readers where they have been and that also tell them where they are going.

2. State the Argument of the Paragraph. Each paragraph presents and develops an argument that supports the overall development of the essay. Sometimes the argument may be located in the transition or “signpost” sentences; other times you may wish to write a separate “thesis sentence.”

3. Present Evidence to Support the Argument of the Paragraph. What sort of evidence do you have to support the argument of this paragraph? Present the information from your sources that has helped you to make historical inferences.

In the abstract, these three components of the paragraph sound easy to manage. In fact, it takes discipline and creativity to practice this advice. The best historical writers write paragraphs that blend together a transition, an argument, and evidence, but there are many ways to do this. There is not one, common structure for every paragraph.

If you are looking for a model of successful paragraphing, consider Daniel Headrick’s history of the global spread of European technologies, *The Tools of Empire*. In the fourth chapter, Headrick discusses how firearms changed during the nineteenth century:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the standard weapon of the European infantryman was the muzzle-loading smoothbore musket. It had a flintlock to detonate the powder through a hole in the breech and a bayonet that could be attached to the barrel for hand-to-hand combat. The Brown Bess, which British soldiers used until 1853, was much the same weapon their forefathers had carried at Blenheim in 1704. It had an official range of 200 yards but an effective one of 80, less than that of a good bow. Despite admonitions to withhold their fire until they saw the whites of their enemies’ eyes, soldiers commonly shot away their weight in lead for every man they killed. These muskets took at least a minute

to load, so to maintain a steady rate of fire on the battlefield, soldiers were drilled in the countermarch, each rank advancing in turn to shoot, then falling back to reload.

One of the most serious drawbacks of the flintlock muskets was their poor firing record. Under the best conditions, they fired only seven out of ten times, and in rain or damp weather they ceased firing altogether. For this reason soldiers were trained to use their weapons as pikes. In 1807, Alexander Forsyth, a Scottish clergyman and amateur chemist, offered a solution to this problem; using the violent explosive potassium chlorate as a detonating powder and a percussion lock instead of a flintlock, he made a gun that could fire in any weather. Tests showed that a percussion lock musket misfired only 4.5 times per thousand rounds, compared to 411 times for a flintlock. After 1814, Joshua Shaw of Philadelphia improved upon Forsyth's invention by putting the detonating powder into little metal caps, thereby simplifying the loading process and making the weapons even more impervious to the elements.³⁹

Notice how Headrick makes the transition from the first to the second paragraph. In the first paragraph, he was discussing some of the drawbacks to the old muzzle-loading muskets. He begins the second paragraph by telling readers that he is now going to discuss one of the most *serious* problems. Readers are still learning from him about problems with muskets, but he is introducing them to a new way to evaluate the muskets. Headrick also presents plenty of evidence (and in the original text, each paragraph ends with a note to his sources). The paragraphs develop intellectually; they are supported by evidence; and they relate closely to the broader argument he is making about the history of firearms. Headrick's paragraphs guide readers by relating the significance of the evidence to his broader point.

6.E. Define Your Key Terms Early

Do not assume that you and your audience understand important concepts to mean the same thing. Define them as soon as you introduce them, preferably in the beginning of your essay. You will

find that you can use a definition as a springboard to discuss the complexities of your subject.

1. Defining Uncommon Terms. Sometimes you will need to define specialized or foreign terms that your audience might not recognize. In his 1995 lecture to the History of Science Society on the subject of Arabic science, A. I. Sabra discussed the role of the *muwaqqit*. What, you may wonder, is a *muwaqqit*? According to Sabra, a *muwaqqit* is a timekeeper in a mosque who uses astronomical methods to determine the exact timing of the five daily prayers. But when Sabra defines this term, he takes the opportunity to discuss one of the things that makes Arabic science distinctive. According to him, "Through the introduction, apparently, for the first time under the Mamluks, of the office of *muwaqqit*, the timekeeper in charge of regulating the times of the five daily prayers, a place was created for the utilization of one form of scientific knowledge in a permanent religious institution." Sabra defines the word in such a way that it causes readers to think of a larger problem: the relations between religion and science.⁴⁰

2. Redefining Common Terms. *Muwaqqit* demands definition, but sometimes you will even need to redefine commonly used English words like "landscape." This is exactly what William Cronon does in his book *Changes in the Land*. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines landscape as a "view or vista of scenery on land," but Cronon uses the word more broadly. When he looks at the ecological transformation of colonial New England, he tells a story that relates the management of natural resources to cultural and political debates among the Native Americans and English settlers. Cronon's New Englanders saw that the "landscape was a visible confirmation of the state of human society."⁴¹ An English landscape, a way of viewing and ordering the world, prevailed over a Native American landscape.

6.F. Set an Appropriate Tone

All historians must build a relationship with their audience. The best way to establish rapport is to find an appropriate, trustworthy tone.

1. Avoid the First Person Singular. Generally speaking, historical writers do not write in the first person singular. Historians all recognize that personal biases enter historical writing—there is usually no need to overemphasize it. A weak historical writer would state, “In my opinion, Frederick Jackson Turner ignored the role of Native Americans in the emergence of democratic institutions.” The writer might just as well say, “Frederick Jackson Turner ignored the role of Native Americans in the emergence of democratic institutions,” and spare readers the extra verbiage. Readers may confidently infer that this is the writer’s opinion.

Usually historians employ the first person singular only when they have personally experienced a phenomenon they are describing. They introduce this personal information to explain their own relationship to the subject matter. For example, Carl Degler begins his book about racial thinking in anthropology, *In Search of Human Nature*, by writing, “Like most white Americans of my sex and class (the son of a fireman) and my generation (born in 1921) I came into a world that soon made me a racist and a sexist.”⁴² He does this to draw the reader’s attention to personal and social issues of bias. He also honestly informs readers that he bears a close personal relationship to his subject, something they may wish to know when they evaluate his arguments.

2. Be Judicious and Dispassionate. All historians pass judgment on their subjects, but don’t be too heavy-handed. If your subjects engaged in some particularly horrible activity, it is important to strike a balance between the rendering of judgment and the presentation of evidence. Some of the most difficult evidence to handle comes from Nazi Germany, and the following two historians built trustworthy arguments by using judicious, dispassionate tones.

Psychiatrist and historian Robert Jay Lifton wanted to learn why medical doctors served the Nazi regime. He uses Dr. Josef Mengele as a case in point, a distasteful case indeed. Lifton writes in his book *The Nazi Doctors* that Mengele “committed real crimes, murderous crimes, direct murder . . . These crimes included selections, lethal injections, shootings, beatings, and other forms of deliberate killing.” All this is well-known, but the power of Lifton’s work comes from his judicious argumentation. He describes Mengele’s “research” in a matter-of-fact way, and puts Mengele’s experiments in the context of the Nazi’s medical career: “More than any other SS doctor, Mengele realized himself

in Auschwitz. There he came into his own—found expression for his talents.” Mengele remained the consummate clinical researcher, even in the midst of a concentration camp. Lifton presents Mengele objectively and ironically, so that readers will trust the book’s conclusion: that Mengele had a schizoid personality, making it easier for him to detach himself from the suffering he inflicted on others.⁴³

It is often enough just to describe a horrible activity in a subtle and ironic way. Your readers will understand that you have chosen to describe this activity because you find it repugnant. William Sheridan Allen wanted to learn how the Nazis came to power. Instead of focusing on well-known politicians in Berlin, he wrote a book called *The Nazi Seizure of Power* that focuses on the activities of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in a small German town called Northeim. He describes how the Nazis used public events to sustain enthusiasm for their cause:

Then on Sunday, March 19, the Northeim NSDAP gave its victory celebration, fittingly held in the Cattle Auction Hall. The hall, decorated with swastika flags, was full to the bursting point with at least a thousand people. The chief speaker was the Nazi preacher, Pastor Muenchmeyer, and his topic: “What a Transposition Through Divine Disposition!” The whole tone of the celebration was conservative, solemn, and religious.⁴⁴

Allen does not call the Nazis cattle; the Cattle Auction Hall is an appropriate place for their meeting. He does not say that the pastor and his audience are intellectual mediocrities; he gives the title of the speech. Allen makes his point—that the Nazis were dangerous, obsequious drones—cleverly and subtly in a reasoned tone.

6.G. Treat Other Writers with Consideration

Scholarship is a very fragile enterprise. It thrives on lively debate and open disagreement, but it depends on mutual respect and careful consideration. When you write about other historians, give them the same amount of respect you would give if you were speaking to them in person. Do not oversimplify or misconstrue the arguments of your opponents, and do not make personal attacks on opponents in order to discredit their arguments.

6.H. Account for Counterarguments

Do not select one argument and ignore all the other possibilities. When you acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations you increase the credibility and complexity of your own work. Your readers will not think you are weak; they will think you are open-minded. In fact, your readers may already be aware of some possible contradictions to your argument, and they will expect you to deal with them.

By the very nature of their work, historians know it is impossible to write a flawless interpretation of anything. Knowledge is a slippery thing. In a short essay, it is often effective to note a few main counterarguments toward the end, and then conclude by re-asserting the reasons why you still wish to articulate your own position. In a longer essay, thesis, or book, authors often engage in multiple counterarguments as they consider the evidence.

One such example of counterargumentation can be found in Robert McElvaine's book, *Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History*. McElvaine reviews evidence from prehistory and also from evolutionary psychology that suggests that humans are adaptable social animals who are both competitive and cooperative. Their cooperative side inclines them to build families and groups in which both sexes work together. For most of human history, differences between the sexes did not necessarily result in the subordination of one sex to another. McElvaine argues that it was the Agricultural Revolution, starting around 10,000 B.C.E., that caused men to subordinate women in almost every culture. According to McElvaine, men lost their roles as hunters, then, out of insecurity and envy, they turned to misogyny. Patriarchy in the home mirrored male domination in politics, religion, and business. Male domination is not natural; it can be explained historically.

To make this argument, McElvaine has to address two possible counterarguments: that human behavior is completely determined by biology, and the opposite argument, that all people are born with a clean slate, and that it is nurture, not nature, that is important.

McElvaine wants to show that nature and nurture are both important. First, he engages these two opposite positions with a joke. Quoting his own father in an early chapter title, he writes that people are "90 percent nature and 90 percent nurture." Next he moves

to consider the "nurture" position, espoused by many contemporary American liberals. McElvaine writes:

The reason that so many liberals have clung to their insistence that human nature should be ignored is, I believe, a fundamental misapprehension concerning the implications of human nature. They have feared that the admission of the existence of innate characteristics will lead to findings on how people *differ*. In fact, the real meaning of human nature, as [Franz] Boas understood, is to be found in showing the ways in which people are *alike*. As Robert Wright has said, unlike the old social Darwinists, "today's Darwinian anthropologists, in scanning the world's peoples, focus less on surface differences among cultures than on deep unities."

After considering the "liberal" position, McElvaine turns to the "conservatives," who often believe in the determining power of genetics over human nature. He quotes from the work of Richard Dawkins and Edward Wilson, two "sociobiologists" who have written that people "are machines created by our genes," and that "Human behavior . . . is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function." In response to these "biodeterministic" arguments, McElvaine writes:

As Darwinism had been a century and more ago, sociobiology has been latched onto by people who seek to justify the unjustifiable. Conservatives seize on the principle of natural selection to maintain that everything that exists should be left alone, because it was made that way by the god of adaptation. But this is not so. It ignores genetic drift, whereby characteristics come into being that provide no evolutionary advantage, but also no disadvantage, and so survive despite Darwinian selection, not because of it. The actual essence of the Darwinian principle of selection is not that a trait must be well adapted in order to survive, but that it not be *poorly* adapted relative to other traits. It is possible for some features to continue to develop after they have fulfilled their original evolutionary function. Human intellectual ability is probably an example of this. It grew far beyond what was necessary for

human survival in the eons during which it was physically developing (although perhaps not beyond or even up to what is necessary for survival in the nuclear age; indeed it may yet prove to be ultimately maladaptive by destroying the species).

McElvaine's summary of the conservative and liberal positions on human nature is balanced and fair-minded, even though he strongly disagrees with these views. By reporting and engaging opposing arguments, McElvaine makes it more likely that liberals and conservatives will consider his argument, that liberal views on social and gender equality are actually supported by biological evidence about human nature.⁴⁵

6.I. Lead Your Readers to an Interesting Conclusion

Over the course of your essay, you will develop the significance of your claims. All your analysis should sustain your main argument in interesting ways. As you lead your readers to their destination, give them plenty of signposts and evidence in the paragraphs. By the time you reach your concluding paragraph, your readers will be ready for you to put your ideas back into a broader context.

There is no formula for a concluding paragraph, just as there is no formula for an introductory or supporting paragraph. Even so, there are certain things that historians look for in a conclusion. A conclusion must reflect on the essay and answer the "Who cares?" question once again. A strong conclusion will not simply repeat the introduction. If the essay has truly developed and sustained an idea in an interesting way, then there should be a new way to sum things up. How are the findings of the essay significant? How might the findings of the essay change the way the readers think?

One example of a concise but interesting conclusion can be found in Liana Vardi's article "Imagining the Harvest in Early Modern Europe," which addresses the ways in which early-modern European artists and writers depicted peasants. Over time, representations of peasants had less to do with farm work and more to do with rustic leisure. She concludes:

The eighteenth century thus adopted a new vision of the peasant. As a laborer, he was harmless and piteous and therefore a natural object of charity and paternalist concern. As an independent farmer, he was virtuous, hard-working, and devoted to his family. Anxious to learn and to be guided, the peasant emerged as a fitting citizen of the state. By the end of the eighteenth century, this figure had become an emblem for mankind.⁴⁶

She summarizes her argument but she goes beyond it, suggesting, in the final sentence, that there was a broader significance to this image of the peasant.

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7

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES FOR HISTORIANS

You may decide to organize your essay into one long narrative, or you may organize it along analytical lines, using short narratives to illustrate particular points of analysis. The narrative approach is often used in political and intellectual history, while analytical organization is often used in social, cultural, and economic history.

7.A. Write a Narrative to Tell a Story

Every narrative has some easily recognized components. A narrative has a narrator; it is organized chronologically; it develops a story; and it has main characters, a plot, and a setting. Historical narratives share many features with other forms of storytelling, such as novels and epic poems. During the fifth century B.C.E., a Greek adventurer and storyteller named Herodotus wrote one of the first historical narratives. He used dramatic tension and colorful description to help his readers imagine the past. While re-creating the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.E., Herodotus described how the emperor Xerxes and his huge army destroyed the small contingent of Spartans guarding the pass at Thermopylae. Herodotus did not simply

say that the outnumbered Spartans were brave and fought to the death. Herodotus did not just tell readers that the Spartans were calm when the massive Persian forces came into sight; he told how the Spartans ignored the Persians and combed their hair. Instead of describing every episode of bravery, Herodotus selected the story of one Spartan soldier named Dieneces for special mention:

It is said before the battle he was told by a native of Trachis that, when the Persians shot their arrows, there were so many of them that they hid the sun. Dieneces, however, quite unmoved by the thought of the strength of the Persian army, merely remarked: "This is pleasant news . . . if the Persians hide the sun, we shall have our battle in the shade."⁴⁷

7.B. Write a Narrative to Support an Argument

Herodotus was not just telling a story about a gutsy warrior at Thermopylae. He was selecting specific events to illustrate a broader interpretation. Historians use such anecdotes and stories to make arguments, and the best storytellers can wrap a powerful argument within a seamless narrative. When Herodotus presented his work to the Athenian public, he used dramatic techniques to make a connection with his audience: Xerxes lost the war because he had too much pride, the downfall of many a character in Greek drama. Herodotus told the story of Thermopylae because he wanted to show in a colorful way that the Spartans had fought bravely in defense of a united Greece. He also wanted to draw a stark contrast between the Greeks who died willingly for their liberty and the Persians who had to whip their troops to make them fight.⁴⁸ The Greeks were clearly superior. Herodotus, like other historians, used a narrative to make an argument.

7.C. Combine Chronology with Causation

In narratives, historians use time to give structure to the past. For this reason, narratives have some obvious chronological features: a beginning, a middle, and an end. This may seem simple, but in the

hands of a skilled historian a narrative's events do not just follow each other: early events cause subsequent events to happen.

If you are crafting a narrative, your first task will be to select influential events and then place them in chronological order. This is vital to understanding the causes of things, and it is not as easy as you may think. For example, historians draw on the accounts of both Muslims and Christians when they write about the Crusades. Unfortunately the two religions kept different calendars, meaning that historians must translate the dates of one into the dates of the other in order to form a coherent chronology. Sometimes you will not know a firm date for an event, meaning that you must do your best to place it in relation to another source. Eighteenth-century English parish records tell when children were baptized, not when they were born. If you wish to establish an individual's date of birth, you will have to find another source that tells you how long families and churches waited before baptizing their children. Placing events in a chronology is more than just an exercise: it helps you to understand change over time.

7.D. Get a Sense of Change and Continuity

When you have established the sequence of events, you will begin to get a sense of how some things changed over time while other things remained the same. Which events were entirely predictable in the context of the times? Which events were unexpected? This is not as easy as it sounds. Different historical actors might have interpreted the same continuities and changes differently. In 1833, the British Parliament emancipated all colonial slaves. Politicians and activists had been debating abolishing the slave trade, ameliorating the lives of slaves, and emancipating them from bondage for more than thirty years. From the perspective of London, some people may have seen emancipation as predictable and maybe even inevitable. From the perspective of a Barbadian slave who may not have been able to keep abreast of London politics, emancipation may have come as a sudden and dramatic change in status. But even that interpretation may be too simple. After emancipation, former masters invented numerous ways to coerce former slaves. Sugar production still required land, labor, and capital, all of which remained available to plantation owners and unavailable to former slaves. Former slaves may have felt

more continuity than change.⁴⁹ In any case, it would be difficult to sort out such problems without establishing a firm chronology.

7.E. Select the Key Participants in Your Story

If you were telling a narrative of emancipation in Barbados, you might choose to focus on former slaves and masters. You might also work on slave women entrepreneurs, previously freed townsmen, colonial bankers, or government officials. Remember, your story must make an argument. Do certain individuals illustrate the argument of your narrative better than others? Were certain individuals more significant agents of change than others? You may wish to exclude some people from your narrative altogether, or you may wish to relegate them to the background.

7.F. Find Your Own Voice as a Narrator

Discovering your own voice as a narrator will be especially challenging the first time you try it. Every historian does this differently, but one rule always applies: every narrator must be as faithful as possible to the people and events of the past.

1. The Omniscient Narrator. Some historians prefer to recede into the background, telling their story from the perspective of an omniscient outsider while refraining from making comments about themselves or their engagement with the source materials. In his account of India's anticolonial rebellion of 1857, *The Great Mutiny*, Christopher Hibbert uses this style of narration. He is arguing that the rebellion began when British officers ordered Indian troops (*sepoys*) to use a new kind of bullet cartridge:

One day in January 1857 a low-caste labourer at Dum-Dum asked a sepoy for a drink of water from his *lota*. The sepoy, being a Brahmin, had naturally refused: his caste would not allow him to grant such a request; he had just scoured his *lota*; the man would defile it by his touch. "You will soon lose your caste altogether," the labourer told him. "For the Europeans are going to make you bite cartridges soaked in cow and pork fat. And then where will your caste be?"⁵⁰

2. The Uncertain Narrator. Not all historians feel that their sources permit such an omniscient narration. In fact, great controversy surrounds the origins of the 1857 rebellion. Sometimes historians use less certain strategies of narration to reveal the ambiguities of their source materials. Writers can strengthen a narrative by informing readers of the limits of their interpretations. John Demos uses such a strategy in a book called *The Unredeemed Captive*, which is about Eunice Williams, an English girl who was captured by Mohawks in the Deerfield Massacre of 1704. After her abduction, Eunice adapted to the ways of the Kahnawake Iroquois. This disturbed her family but it did not stop them from trying to bring her back to Massachusetts. Demos worked with limited sources, mostly the letters and diaries of Eunice's English relatives. The family spent decades trying to learn about Eunice, but in the end they recorded very little information. Demos struggled to extract meaning from these scarce sources, but his narrative is at its most compelling when he speculates about the changes in Eunice's life:

Different it was, very different. And yet, within a relatively short time, it took. By 1707, Eunice was reported to be "unwilling to return." And the Indians—including, one would presume, her new family—"would as soon part with their hearts" as with this successfully "planted" child.⁵¹

7.G. Choose Your Own Beginning and End

The past is interconnected across chronological and geographical boundaries, but every narrative must have a beginning and an end. You will find it challenging to decide when to start and stop your story. Hibbert begins his story of the 1857 rebellion with a description of a typical working day for Sir Thomas Metcalfe, British representative to the king of Delhi.

He returned from his office at half past two for dinner at three. After dinner he sat reading for a time before going down to the billiard-room. A game of billiards was followed by two hours spent on the terrace contemplating the river. Then it was time for a light supper and an evening hookah. Immediately the clock struck eight, he stood up and went to bed,

undoing his neckcloth and throwing it, together with his well-tailored coat, on to the floor to be picked up by the appropriate servant. If this or any other servant did not perform his duties to the master's entire satisfaction, Sir Thomas would send for a pair of white kid gloves which were presented to him on a silver salver. These he would draw on with becoming dignity, then firmly pinch the culprit's ear.⁵²

Hibbert is not just telling a story about an indolent, autocratic colonial official. Hibbert uses the beginning to set the scene for a larger story about how Indians rebelled against British authority, how British forces crushed the rebels after great loss of life, and how this experience transformed South Asia and the British Empire.

Hibbert sets the opening scene in Delhi because his narrative will reach its climax when the British recapture the city. His narrative ends when the British banish the king of Delhi:

The trial lasted more than two months; but the verdict was never in doubt. On 29 March he was found guilty on all charges and later sentenced to be transported for life to Rangoon. He left Delhi in October accompanied by Jawan Bakht, another young son whom he had had by a concubine, and by a most unwilling Zinat Mahal who, by now "quite tired of him," described him as "troublesome, nasty, cross old fellow." He died on 7 November 1862 in Rangoon where the descendants of his son, Jawan Bakht, are still living today.⁵³

Hibbert concludes his narrative at this point for a number of reasons. The rebellion ended in many different ways for many different people, but for Hibbert, the exile of the king of Delhi represents the end of the rebellion. One of the causes of the rebellion had been a dispute over who would succeed the king of Delhi. Much of the rebellion had taken place in and around Delhi. The exile of the king draws several strands of the story to a close, while Hibbert mentions the descendants of the king as a way of emphasizing the enduring legacy of the rebellion. Follow Hibbert's example when you conclude a historical narrative: choose a beginning and an ending that suit your story and your argument.



WRITING SENTENCES IN HISTORY

Historians share a common goal with all writers: to communicate ideas effectively. Historians differ from other writers on some of the conventions for achieving this goal. This causes some confusion among writers who hail from other disciplines, but even so, no historical convention is arbitrary; all of them help historians to represent the past as accurately as possible. While you are writing and revising, use these conventions to your advantage.

8.A. Choose Verbs That Are Precise

Verbs form the heart of every sentence because they convey the action. Every writer should select precise verbs and avoid vague ones, and this principle is decidedly true for historians.

What is a vague verb? For starters, verbs of being are vague, but as you can see, sometimes it is difficult to avoid them. The order of ideas in the sentence may dictate that you use "is," "are," or another form of the verb "to be." Still, beginning writers tend to overuse verbs of being, a problem that drains the color out of their writing. Why write "Queen Victoria was regnant for sixty-four years" when you can write "Queen Victoria reigned for sixty-four years"? If you find yourself writing with a verb of being, look for a noun or an adjective that has a precise verb counterpart.