Important Disciplinary Conventions

Be respectful of your subject, and avoid generalities. Groups are made of individual people, so “do not assume that everyone who lived in the past believed the same things or behaved the same way” (42).

Avoid anachronism. Anachronistic statements are ones that are not fitting to their historical context. For example, words commonly used to describe racial groups in the past may not be considered acceptable now. Make sure that you do not casually assume the language of a historical source.

Be aware of your own biases. For example, “reproaching sixteenth-century men for being ‘selfish and chauvinistic’ might forcefully express...a student’s sense of indignation about what appears to modern eyes as unjust, but it is not a useful approach for the historian” (43). Try to understand people from the past in their own contexts.

Approaching the Assignment

Looking over the assignment, see if you can find key verbs that “will let you know how your instructor expects you to approach the essay” (40). Examples of key verbs: compare, assess, summarize, interpret

What sources can you use? What sources should you not use?

Read each source you’ll use carefully and critically. Underline, highlight, and make notes. Make sure you have a clear understanding of them before you start writing.

Developing a Thesis

Will every history paper have one? While every history paper may not require an opinion, all papers require a clear “main point.”

Continued on the reverse side...

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A thesis is NOT:

- a topic, which is the subject that you have been assigned
- a question (in fact, it should answer a question)
- a statement of fact
- a statement of opinion (without sufficient evidence)

A strong thesis for a history paper "reflects what you have concluded about the topic of your paper, based on a critical analysis and interpretation of the source materials you have examined" (Rompolla 44).

Students sometimes wonder, "What do I have to say?" about a historic event or source. It is good to remember that professional historians often disagree on issues, and there is likely no one "right" interpretation. Just make sure that:

- Any assertions you make are backed up with evidence from sources
- Opposing viewpoints are recognized and responded to

By deciding the order in which you will present your assertions, evidence to support them, and opposing points, you are constructing your argument.

Connecting Your Thoughts

For readers to be able to follow your argument and examples, your paragraphs need to be well connected. Use connecting words that express particular relationships:

- To compare: also, similarly, likewise
- To contrast: one the one hand/on the other hand, although, conversely, nevertheless, despite, on the contrary, still, yet, regardless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, whereas, however, in spite of
- To add or intensify: also, in addition, moreover, too
- To show sequence: first, next, last, finally, subsequently, later, ultimately
- To indicate an example: for example, for instance, specifically
- To indicate cause and effect relationship: consequently, as a result, because, accordingly, thus, since, therefore, so

Concluding the Paper

Your concluding paragraph/s should:

- Not bring the paper to an abrupt halt
- "Bring the paper full circle" by restating the thesis and key points
- Not introduce new ideas

Additionally, it is often a good idea to articulate why your discussion, which the reader has followed, is important. This gives the reader a sense of why your paper is meaningful and avoids the common pitfall of a conclusion that simply re-states the paper's introduction.

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