

Information Fluency in Humanities Writing

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How to Write a Historiographical Essay

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Purpose

- What is historiography?
- What is a historiographical paper?
- Why do we write historiography?

What is Historiography?

- Historiography is the history of the history or the state of the art.
- It is the collective literature on a historical subject.

What is a Historiographical Paper?

- A historiographical paper is an essay that discusses what and how other historians have written about a subject.
- It compares and contrasts the arguments and evidence made in those secondary sources.
- It compiles a survey of the historical questions that professional historians have asked and their conclusions.

Why do we write historiography?

Historical writing reflects the interpretations of the historians working in the field. Writing historiography helps to:

- Identify the historical debates between those historians.
- Identify the historical questions and areas of research that still need to be investigated.

Common Misconceptions of a Historiographical Paper

- It is ***not*** a collective book review of all your sources.
- It is ***not*** a narrative of a historical event.
- It is ***not*** a paper based on original (primary) research.

It ***is*** a literature compilation of the work other historians have produced.

Before You Start Writing

- Choose a broad historical topic
- Determine the feasibility of your topic
 - To do that:
 - Conduct a literature search for secondary sources
 - Check academic databases for publications on the topic
 - Narrow your topic based on the pertinent sources published

Selecting Sources

- Use secondary literature
 - Books written by professional historians. Most often, these will be published by academic (university) presses
 - Historical articles published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals
- Your sources should be in dialogue with each other, meaning their topics should be similar enough that there is something to compare and contrast
- Do ***not*** use:
 - Textbooks, encyclopedias, or on-line reference sources
 - History-themed articles written for a general audience
 - Book reviews

Selecting Sources, Continued

- Things to consider when selecting your sources
 - Look for other historiographical essays on your topic.
 - These will help you identify possible sources and the historical debates.
 - Are the sources you identified a collection of recent and canonical publications?
 - Canonical works are considered classics or standards in the field. Reading other historiographical essays will help you identify those works in the canon.
 - Using recent publications will make your historiographical essay more complete, relevant and useful for other readers.

Content: Introduction

- It should identify your topic and the major debates in the historiography.
- It may introduce the titles and authors assessed in the body of the paper.

An introduction **should not**:

- It should not ask an original research question.
- It should not evaluate the historical quality of the scholarship analyzed in the body of the paper.

Content: Body

- Identify the thesis of each of your sources. It should ***not*** review or simply summarize the source.
- Discuss how each source contributes to the larger debates.
- Identify new debates (if any) proposed by recent publications.
- Compare and contrast the arguments in your sources.
- Your sources will largely dictate the order in which you discuss them. Pay attention to publication date as later works are influenced by previous works even if the authors disagree.

Content: Conclusion

- Your conclusion should evaluate the evolution of the debates in the field based on the works examined.
- Propose new questions for historical research based on gaps in the historiography presented.
 - Those gaps may be:
 - research questions asked in the sources presented that are not fully answered
 - spin-off questions from previous studies not yet addressed
 - research based on evidence never before explored

Checklist

- Is your topic narrow or broad enough that you can find sufficient sources to evaluate?
- Did you examine other historiographical essays on the topic?
- Have you identified canonical works and recent publications?
- Have you identified the major debates in the field?
- Did you avoid reviewing or over summarizing the sources?
- Did your essay create a conversation between the sources?
- Have you presented new research questions?