
The Importance and Challenges of Excellent Historical Writing

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At every stage in the career of a historian, writing is an essential skill that must be acquired, nurtured and mastered. History students write essays, reviews, research papers, dissertations and theses in order to earn grades, course credits and degrees, and the production of scholarly books and articles as well as conference presentations and instructional materials are essential to the academic career that often follows. For all of these documents and others, an extremely high standard of writing is required of historians.

Historical facts and artefacts may be fascinating to specialists, but it is rarely enough simply to present or describe them in text. Instead, they require detailed explanation and thoughtful interpretation if they are to reveal the fascinating realities of the past that make historical writing so interesting. Most historical studies therefore combine a sophisticated scholarly narrative or argument with a detailed presentation of the factual evidence that supports that argument, and this constitutes a challenging combination that demands both subtlety and precision from the author. Your prose must communicate your research processes and

overall argument to your anticipated readers with accuracy and precision. Ideally, it should also express your intellectual confidence if it is to inspire in readers the necessary confidence in you as a writer and scholar, and this includes the acquisitions editors to whom you submit your writing for publication. It goes without saying that your spelling, punctuation and grammar must be absolutely correct, and all publisher guidelines must be carefully observed.

Advanced historical research tends to be qualitative research, sometimes interwoven with aspects of quantitative research, and this means that an author reporting the results of his or her work must analyse the data collected and determine what is significant and meaningful in order to establish important themes, patterns and categories. These processes tend to be complicated, convoluted and in many cases unique, so they must be thoroughly explained and logically justified for readers. Unfamiliar, archaic and specialised terminology must always be defined when introduced and used with precision and consistency throughout a document. In most cases an audience of both specialist historians and lay readers should be anticipated, so language that is as simple as possible, short sentences in the active voice and finely focussed paragraphs are usually best, though they can be difficult to achieve when the material discussed is complex. Careful organisation via a structure consisting of engaging and informative headings, appropriate divisions and subdivisions, and smooth transitions between ideas and procedures is necessary to represent and communicate to readers the progression as well as the subtle twists and turns of the historian's argument.

Historical writing tends to make extensive use of sources, including rather obscure primary sources, and citations and references sometimes number in the hundreds within a single document, yet every one of them must be recorded thoroughly, accurately and usually in the format indicated in the author instructions provided by a publisher. Quotations can be frequent in historical writing, and each one must be not only reproduced faithfully, translated accurately (if necessary) and acknowledged appropriately, but also clearly introduced and discussed in your text so that readers understand your reason for quoting it, and your argument as a whole is successfully developed through its use. Finally, the dates so frequent in historical writing must be accurate in all cases and used with consistency, and it is best if whatever dating conventions you adopt for your document are explained for readers.

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