

Narrative vs. analysis

Many potentially strong student papers are torpedoed by their lack of a point. I do not necessarily believe that you must outline your thesis or argument in the first paragraph, but I do believe that one should at least be able to identify the paper's purpose. The purpose must also go beyond describing how a series of events transpired. Often the "no point problem" is sourced in too much narrative description and not enough analysis. Finding the right balance between narrative and analysis can be tricky. Too much narrative results in papers that read like long summaries of books and events. Yet too much analysis can be a problem too if not substantiated by solid historical evidence. The best solution is to write a research question for yourself to guide you through the research process, and to gradually refine that question as your research goes further in-depth (you may only be able to do this after some investigative work into an area that interests you). Ask yourself if your research question is analytical enough. Research questions phrased as "What is...?" or "Describe..." will lead to overly descriptive, meandering, and perhaps even pointless papers. Research questions phrased as "Why...?" "To what effect..." or "What factors contributed to...?" should, if done properly, lead to informative and analytical papers.

Treat sources critically

When a detective gathers evidence to recreate a crime he/she does not take at face value all first-hand accounts by witnesses, testimony by experts, and evidence left at the scene. In studying history, neither should you. First-hand accounts of historical events should be weighed in their proper context, accounting for the motive and perspective of the author. Historical scholarship should be weighed against opposing views and assessed for what is convincing or unconvincing in the argument based on the historical evidence. Historical documents and artifacts – letters, diaries, appeals, decrees, legislation, music, film, literature etc. – should be placed in their proper historical context. Muster all your detective skills and powers of critical analysis to solve your research question.

Common writing errors to avoid

- Inconsistency in tense or incorrect tense (when relating historical events use past tense, when relating a historian's opinion of those events use present tense).
- Inconsistency with capitals, or incorrect capitals. If you're not sure, look it up, and most importantly, be consistent.
- Avoid unspecific language. This, these, the, it, something, many, few, etc. are constantly overused. Be specific!
- Avoid words such as truly, certainly, obviously etc. to describe phenomena which are by no means true, certain or obvious.
- Never, ever, ever, use informal abbreviations such as, don't, aren't, won't, didn't (unless you are quoting someone directly, of course).
- There's a difference between its and it's
- There's a difference between affect and effect
- There's a difference between then and than

Common stylistic problems to avoid

- Avoid colloquialisms (such as: “the bottom line,” and “hits home”). Don’t write the way you speak (or for that matter, the way journalists report)
- In general, student papers tend to be far too informal in language and tone. Your example to follow should be historical not journalistic writing
- Use passive voice sparingly
- Avoid unverifiable blanket statements such as: “Early modern English women loved their children greatly.” It’s always better to be cautious than to make unsupported generalizations
- Do not use ambiguous dating such as “Middle Ages” **instead** of more specific dating. It is appropriate to use phrases which indicate a general time period, but don’t forget to first clearly define the period in question
- When writing a history paper, there’s really no excuse for leaving out dates
- Always title your paper

Know when to quote and how to note

- Your sources for all evidence beyond the realm of common knowledge should always be properly cited:
 - The source which informed you that Toronto is Ontario’s capital need not be cited. The source which informed you that x number of people died of influenza in Toronto in 1917 must absolutely be cited
- Avoid quoting for the purpose of relaying fact:
 - Simon Rabinovitch says, “the Toronto Maple Leafs play hockey in the Air Canada Centre” is a silly quotation. According to Simon Rabinovitch, “the Leafs should trade Mats Sundin because of his poor leadership” is an appropriate, if out of date, quotation
- Properly introduce all quotes, so the reader knows who/what you are quoting
- Sources require page numbers
- Use a citation style-guide (Chicago is the most commonly used for historical papers), and be consistent¹

Last but not least...

- Don’t forget, sloppy papers are annoying to read, so... **EDIT! EDIT! EDIT!**

¹ See examples on the next page in footnotes 2-11 from *The Chicago Manual of Style* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 603-4.

The complete *Chicago Manual of Style* 15th ed. is available online through chicagomanualofstyle.org. You can also view the “Boston University Department of History Writing Guide” online at http://www.bu.edu/history/writing_guide.html

Footnotes

I have skipped a line between each example in order to make them easier to read. In a paper, however, you would not skip lines between footnotes. The body of your paper should be double-spaced in 12 font, the footnotes should be single-spaced in 10 font (most commonly in Times New Roman).

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² Samuel A. Morley, *Poverty and Inequality in Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 24-5.

³ Regina M. Schwartz, “Nationals and Nationalism: Adultery in the House of David,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1992): 131-32.

⁴ Ernest Kaiser, “The Literature of Harlem,” in *Harlem: A Community in Transition*, ed. J. H. Clarke (New York: Citadel Press, 1964).

⁵ François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 368.

⁶ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and the Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England (1628-86)*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1853-54), 1:126 (hereafter cited as *Mass. Records*).

⁷ Morley, *Poverty and Inequality*, 43. [This is an example of a second (non-consecutive) reference]

⁸ Schwartz, “Nationals and Nationalism,” 138. [This is also an example of a second (non-consecutive) reference]

⁹ *Mass. Records*, 2:330. [This is also an example of a second (non-consecutive) reference, this time using the abbreviation indicated in the first reference].

¹⁰ *Ibid.* [Used to indicate that the reference is identical to the **previous** note]

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 145, [Indicates that the reference is to the same work, different page number, as the **previous** note].