

# ON WRITING ESSAYS

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Modules offered by the Department of History require students to do research and writing, either in the form of individual essays or of project work done on a group basis. In addition, final examinations often take the form of essay questions, and involve the same techniques of organization and presentation as a course essay.

Research methods and essay writing are the principal skills you will learn in a history course, and are of great value in the working world. This pamphlet explains how to carry out research projects, organise an essay, and prepare footnotes and a bibliography.

## ***I. RESEARCH***

The first step in doing research is to define a topic based on general information found in textbooks or recommended readings. In most cases a topic chosen in this way will be too broad, and will need to be given a tighter focus as research progresses. Often, too, a topic will be redefined as new information comes to light. This is a normal part of the research process.

Simply put, research is an attempt to find answers to questions. In primary and secondary school, teachers prepare questions for their students, but students at the university level are expected to begin generating questions of their own. There are essentially six questions that can be asked – who, what, when, where, why and how. The first four of these are factual, and the last two analytical. Any piece of research must begin by establishing a set of facts. What happened? Who was involved? Where and when did the events take place? As you read the work of other historians, you will want to pay attention to the way they present factual material, and notice when they are offering interpretations. In this way you will come to understand how historians work, and you may also spot arguments that you can adopt, or possibly oppose, in your own essay.

After assembling factual information, historians go through a number of steps to analyse and interpret their data.

1. They test the evidence (Is it consistent? Is it complete? Is it logical?).
2. They evaluate the reliability of their sources.

These steps are essential, because any analysis or interpretation based on incomplete or inaccurate evidence is likely to be wrong.

3. They look at the way their information fits in, or does not fit in, with existing understandings of an event or a situation.
4. They look for patterns in the data, and make generalizations.
5. Finally, they analyse the evidence by asking why and how certain events took place. They also explore the consequences or implications of events. It is generally at this stage that an argument, or a thesis, begins to emerge.

Your own research and analysis should follow the same steps.

A Note on Bias

The writing of history involves collecting facts, but a collection of facts is not history. Historians interpret a segment of the past, drawing on their general knowledge of the period, their understanding of cause and effect, and whatever other concepts seem relevant. All historical interpretations reflect points of view and ideologies. These may be stated openly, but often they are not. The basic test of a work of history is not whether it is objective or biased, but whether interpretations are adequately supported, and all relevant materials have been examined.

### ***A. Locating Materials***

Textbooks draw together information collected and published by other researchers. To write an essay, it is necessary to move beyond this material and examine monographs, which are specialized studies on a particular topic, and articles in academic journals. LINC provides a starting point for finding sources, but does not include journal articles, and only lists articles published in very recent books. To locate additional materials for your topic, refer to bibliographies, indexes and abstracts; some of these sources are printed, and others can be consulted through electronic media. Printed bibliographies are catalogued under the call letter Z, and many are found in the Central Library's Reference Collection. For non-printed listings, check the CD-ROM collection maintained by the library, or do an on-line search. For material on Asia published after 1971, you can make use of the online version of the *Bibliography of Asian Studies* put out by the American Association of Asian Studies. To access this resource, access the NUS Library through NUSNET, and then select the Digital Library. There you should click on Indexes and Abstracts under Reference Databases, and locate the entry for BAS (Bibliography of Asian Studies) Online. (Items published before 1971 appear in printed editions of the *Bibliography*.)

Information on many topics can be located through a search on the Internet. However, you should bear in mind that most serious research still appears in print form, and that internet sources contain both reliable and unreliable information.

Your first task is to prepare a list of sources (books, articles, on-line sites, and possibly documents or potential interviewees) relevant to the topic you have chosen. (If the list grows too long, it may be a sign that your topic is too broad, and should be defined more carefully.) Once this step is complete, read general surveys that set your topic in a broader context, and then move on to more specialized monographs and journal articles. Book reviews published in academic journals are often helpful at this stage, because they sketch out key ideas and can be helpful in guiding your research.

### ***B. Taking Notes***

Most researchers find it best to use 3" x 5" (or 4" x 6") cards to take notes on their reading; it is not a good practice to jumble your notes together on the front and back sides of sheets of paper, or in an exercise book. Note cards offer a number of benefits. If you ensure that each card records a single point, you can arrange and rearrange them, organizing information according to topic headings. Colour coding can provide a simple retrieval mechanism.

A good set of note cards also facilitates the task of footnoting and preparing the bibliography. For Bibliographic cards, copy complete details for each source you use to avoid the frustration of having to chase down a source at the last minute to complete your citations. For note cards, be certain that you fully understand the ideas you are paraphrasing, and that you have included enough information to reconstruct the point the author made. Record any quotations carefully.

A well-designed set of cards might look like this:

NOTE CARD

Trade and the Chinese State
Ng, <u>Trade and Society</u>
Ch 5 Socio-Political Environment, pp. 184-93 State and Trade
Late Ming govt could not enforce restrictions against going to sea; Fukienese built trade with Nanyang & Japan (p. 184) --govt restrictions based on security needs, not economic issues (p. 186) --section discusses govt efforts to control trade, especially the rice trade (pp. 188-90)
Ref: Govt trade regulations; Rice trade, Nanyang trade

BIBLIOGRAPHIC (SOURCE) CARD

HC428	Ng Chin-keong
Amo.N	
	<u>Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast, 1683-1735</u>
	Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983

## II WRITING

### A. Planning and Organization

After completing the research, reread your notes with the essay topic in mind. Your task now is to construct a narrative account of a series of events, and through an analysis of this material to develop a theme or argument, that is, a statement making some point about your topic. “Indonesian nationalism in the 1930s” is a topic; “Indonesian nationalism was ineffective during the 1930s because of intense government surveillance and repression, and because of disagreements within the movement over tactics and goals” is a thematic statement. As indicated above, it is often useful to look at the facts you have collected and ask “why” and “how” questions when you are trying to work out a theme for your essay.

Developing a theme is the most difficult part of writing an essay, but once it has been done, the rest of the job should be easy. A good thematic statement maps out a series of points to be discussed in an essay. In the example above, the writer has charted a course, saying that the essay will cover government responses to nationalist activity, and the internal conflicts that beset the nationalist cause. The conclusion should re-state the argument, and explain how the evidence presented supports it.

History essays normally follow either a chronological or a topical scheme of organization, or some combination of the two. It is useful to prepare an outline to help you organize your ideas and consider alternative approaches to writing the essay. Look at your outline to see if all necessary issues have been addressed, and whether the discussion moves along

logically, step by step. Also ask yourself whether you are including unnecessary details. You will usually need to discard some material, not because it is inaccurate but because it is irrelevant to the theme you are developing. Most word processors will automatically generate an outline in the following format, and will re-number as you shift information around.

- I. First Main Heading
    - a. First Sub-heading
    - b. Second Sub-heading
      - i. First Point of Detail
      - ii. Second Point of Detail
    - c. Third Sub-heading
      - i. First Point of Detail
      - ii. Second Point of Detail
  - II. Second Main Heading
    - a. First Sub-heading
    - b. Second Sub-heading
  - III. Third Main Heading
- And so on.

Each Main Heading should represent a topic or an argument on its own. For Indonesian nationalism, you might want to deal with the topic chronologically, and make each Main Heading define a certain time period. Alternatively, you might want to approach the subject topically, using one Main Heading to describe nationalist groups, a second to describe Dutch government policies, and a third to explain significant events. If your purpose is to show how the nationalist movement changed over time, you should choose the first approach. If your purpose is to compare and contrast the ideas of the Dutch and of the local nationalists, you might prefer the second approach. Or you might find a way to combine the two.

Your outline is a tool, and can be used in various ways. For example, you might note down in the margins the sources you want to use for each part of the outline, possibly with specific page references. This means extra work when you are preparing the outline, but will make it easier to write the essay because you will know where to look for information on each point.

Once the outline is ready, you should prepare an index card for each heading and sub-heading, and write down what each section is supposed to say. Arrange your note cards according to these categories, and you are ready to begin writing.

Generally, an essay should be about 1,200-1,500 words in length, excluding footnotes and bibliography. However, your lecturer may set a different word limit, so please note the instructions you are given, and if in doubt, ask.

Every essay should have an introduction, a main text, and a conclusion. The introduction is the place to state your theme, and to explain your aims and approach in writing the essay. In the main text you should systematically develop the theme, providing evidence and using footnotes to show where you obtained your information. The conclusion is a place to restate your theme, summarize your main points, and show how you have supported your argument. The conclusion should not offer new information.

Planning an essay takes time, and if you plunge into writing without adequate preparation, you are likely to produce a poor essay. The time you spend will be wasted, for you will not get the benefit to be gained by doing the exercise properly.

## B. Style

There are many ways to write history. Older works are often written in a literary style, richly laden with classical allusions and elegant turns of phrase. In the latter part of the twentieth century, history writing has moved toward a presentation that is clear and direct, modelled more on the social sciences than on the arts.

Subject to any special instructions from your lecturer, you may write either in a literary way, telling your story and then drawing your conclusions, or in an analytical style, stating your proposition (your “theme” or “argument”), and then providing evidence in support of it. You should be aware, however, that the analytical style is preferred in business and administration.

Good writing is a matter of presenting information and explaining ideas in a clear and simple way. The following points will help you write effectively.

1. Every word should serve a purpose, and you should avoid meaningless and unnecessary words. If in doubt about a word, read your sentence without it and see if the meaning changes.
2. Write simple, direct sentences, and avoid flowery language. The majority of your sentences should follow the pattern of subject, verb, object.<sup>1</sup>
3. Paragraphing is an important part of writing effectively. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that states what it is about, and should develop a single idea. Moreover, each paragraph should evolve out of the one preceding it, and flow smoothly into the one that follows.
4. Avoid use of the passive voice; sentences written in the active voice have more force, and are easier to write and understand. For example, "Zheng He visited Malacca" is a much stronger sentence than "Malacca was visited by Zheng He", while the sentence "Germany was defeated in the Second World War" leaves unanswered the crucial question: "By whom?"
5. Since essays in history are about the past, they are normally written in the past tense, and most historians favour the third person.
6. Never use abbreviations or symbols that are not in the Oxford Dictionary. In particular, avoid careless or lazy usages such as "C19" for "nineteenth century", "biblio" for bibliography, and "ē" for "the". Slang is also unacceptable.
7. You should not state all of your thought processes. Rather than writing, "Having considered all the above factors, we can safely draw the following conclusions", simply say, "In conclusion, ..." Also, while you may, and should, state your own opinions, it is not necessary to write "I think" or "In my opinion" when you do so. Anything in the essay not attributed to another author is understood to have originated with you.
8. Quotations should be used sparingly, according to the following guidelines. For additional information on the use of other peoples' writing, see the final section, which contains information about plagiarism.
  - a. You may quote from documents to provide firm evidence for a point you wish to make.
  - b. You may quote the language used by a historical figure to give an impression of the sort of person he or she was, or the mood of a particular occasion.
  - c. In general, you should avoid quoting the work of other historians; an essay is an exercise in learning to write, not to copy.
  - d. Quotations should fit smoothly and grammatically into your own writing. Short quotations should be set off with inverted commas. A quotation that is several lines long should be set in from the left and right margins without inverted commas, and printed with single spacing.

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<sup>1</sup> For tips on style, refer to Sir Ernest Gower, *The Complete Plain Words* Rev. edn. Ed. Sir Bruce Fraser. (London: HMSO, 1973).

- e. For all quotations it should be clear who made the statement [for example, "According to the Dutch historian Cees Fasseur, ..."], and the source where it is found must be indicated in a footnote.

### **C. Rewriting and revising**

It is essential to leave time to revise and rewrite your work. If you write your essay the night (or the hour) before it is due, the quality will certainly suffer. Good writers revise their work several times, producing several drafts in the process of checking for style, grammar, spelling, and content.

### **D. Format and Layout**

Essays must be prepared using a word processing program, and printed out for submission. The first page should indicate the title, your name, your year of study, and the course number. Leave wide margins to give your tutor space to write comments.

## **FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC ENTRIES**

The examples given below follow models found in Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations* [LB2369 Tur]. For further information and additional examples, refer to this source.

### **Footnotes**

Footnotes (or endnotes) are required for all essays submitted in history courses. They are used to indicate the sources of factual information that is not common knowledge, and also of interpretations adapted from other writers. A statement without a footnote is understood to be your own opinion. Every quotation, every paraphrase of a quotation and any opinion or judgement that distinctly belongs to another writer must be footnoted. When in doubt, include a footnote. The best way to avoid plagiarism (see below) is to prepare a complete set of footnotes.

Footnotes sometimes provide explanatory material, or elaborate on points made in the main text. For example, a footnote to an article about a Thai politician named Phra Sarasas reads: "There appears to be no biography of Phra Sarasas in Thai, English, French, or Japanese, although scattered passing references to him can be found in all of these languages..."<sup>2</sup> Notes of this sort are sometimes useful (as in this case), but should be kept to a minimum.

Place footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page or at the end of the essay (endnotes), and follow the models given below. Essays submitted to the History Department should not use the social science style of notation, in which authors' names are placed in the text in brackets and complete references are in the Bibliography.

- (1) **First reference to a book:** full name of author(s) in normal order, *Title of the Book* (Place [A City, not a country] of publication, Publisher, Year of publication), page(s).

Hal Hill, *The Indonesian Economy since 1966: Southeast Asia's Emerging Giant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 177.

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin A. Batson, "Phra Sarasas: Rebel with Many Causes", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27 (March 1996), p. 150 n. 2.

- (2) **First reference to a journal article:** full name of author(s) in normal order, "Title of Article", *Title of Journal*, volume, number (month and year), page(s) cited.

Hiroshi Shimizu, "The Japanese Fisheries Based in Singapore, 1892-1945", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30,2 (September 1997), p. 339.

- (3) **First reference to an article in a book:** full name of author(s) in normal order, "title of article", in *book title*, edited by [editor's name] (place of publication: publisher, year), page(s).

Henk Maier, "Maelstrom and Electricity: Modernity in the Indies", in "*Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*", ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), p. 186.

- (4) **Use of Ibid.** If a footnote refers to precisely the same source as the one preceding it, use *Ibid.* (or, if reference is to the same source but a different page, *Ibid.*, p. \_\_.) instead of repeating the author and title. *Ibid.* stands for the Latin word *ibidem* ("in the same place"), and should not be italicised.

- (5) **Subsequent reference to a book or article** cited in an earlier footnote, but not the immediately preceding one: surname of the author(s) and a shortened title. *Op. cit.* (*opere citato*, work cited) and *loc. cit.* (*loco citato*, in the place cited) should **not** be used. The abbreviated title must make sense: *The Making* is not acceptable for *The Making of Modern South-East Asia*. The following are suitable abbreviated titles for the publications shown above:

Hill, *The Indonesian Economy*, p. 282 n. 29.

Shimizu, "Japanese Fisheries ", pp. 338-39.

Maier, "Modernity in the Indies", pp. 188, 194-95.

- (6) **Reference to a source or document quoted by another historian or found in a collection of documents:** cite both sources. For example,

Translation of the Takuapa inscription by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri in his "Takuapa and its Tamil Inscription", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22,2 (1949), p. 29, cited in Jan Wisseman Christie, "Tamil-Language Inscriptions in Southeast Asia and China", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29,2 (September 1998), p. 251.

Owen Rutter, *The Pagans of North Borneo* (London: Hutchinson, 1929), p. 32, cited in Anthony Reid, "Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28,1 (March 1997), p. 122.

- (7) **Citation of internet material:** There is no universal standard for citing material obtained from the Internet. For a set of guidelines, refer to the following web site:

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/about/citation/>.

### ***The Bibliography***

Books and articles consulted while doing research should be listed in a Bibliography at the end of an essay, with entries arranged in alphabetical order by the family name (surname) of the author. (For Chinese and Japanese names, it is important to determine whether the author's name is written in traditional style, surname first, or has been Westernised, with the surname last. Malay names do not have surnames, and a name like Ahmad bin Ibrahim [Ahmad son of Ibrahim] should be listed under Ahmad.)

In long bibliographies the list may be divided by category (such as books, articles, printed documents, and so on), but this is not necessary for the short bibliographies that accompany course essays. A bibliography should include all sources actually used to write the essay. It should not be an exhaustive list of sources on the topic, nor should it be padded to impress your lecturer; every source listed in the bibliography must appear in at least one footnote.

In preparing bibliographical entries, the following details should be given:

***For books:*** Author's name (family name first). *Title of book*. Place of publication (the city, not the country): Publisher, Year of publication.

Hill, Hal. *The Indonesian Economy since 1966*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

***For articles in journals:*** Author's name (family name first). "Title of article", *Name of Journal*, volume (year): inclusive pages.

Shimizu, Hiroshi. "The Japanese Fisheries Based in Singapore, 1892-1945", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30 (September 1997): 324-344.

***For articles in an edited volume:*** Author's name (family name first), "Title of article", in *Title of book*, inclusive page numbers. Edited by [Name of Editor(s)], Place of publication: publisher, year.

Maier, Henk. "Maelstrom and Electricity: Modernity in the Indies". In *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, pp. 181-197. Edited by Henk Schulte Nordholt. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997.

### ***E. Plagiarism***

Students all over the world look at professional writing and think, "I can't produce anything as good as this". They are absolutely right! However, if they then decide to borrow a sentence or a phrase to improve their own work, but fail to place it in inverted commas and provide a footnote, they have committed plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of using another person's words or ideas as your own. It is theft of intellectual property.

You are not expected to write as well as professional historians, whose work has often been improved by professional editing. In fact, if your essay is too well written, with flawless grammar and elegantly phrasing, it is generally a clear indication that you have copied the material. Your task is to learn how to write, and you can only accomplish that by doing your best to state ideas in your own words, and profiting from your mistakes. Get in the habit of paraphrasing material as you take notes from the readings so that you do not have the original wording in front of you when you write, and try to express your ideas in language that is clear, simple and direct.

The following example shows two ways of paraphrasing an extract from a secondary source. The first follows the original much too closely, while the second is a good summary of the central ideas of the passage.

*Original*

Wilson took personal responsibility for the conduct of the important diplomacy of the United States chiefly because he believed that it was wise, right, and necessary for him to do so. Believing as he did that the people had temporarily vested their sovereignty in foreign affairs in him, he could not delegate responsibility in this field to any individual. His scholarly training and self-disciplined habits of work made him so much more efficient than his advisers that he must have thought that the most economical way of doing important diplomatic business was for him to do it himself. Experience in dealing with subordinates who sometimes tried to defeat his purposes also led him to conclude that it was the safest method, for he, and not his subordinates, bore the responsibility to the American people and to history for the consequences of his policies.

*Paraphrase 1*

Wilson took personal responsibility **for conducting diplomacy because** he believed it was right for him to do so. Believing that the people had vested their sovereignty in foreign affairs in him, he could not delegate this responsibility. His scholarly training and self-discipline made him more efficient than his advisers. He thought that the most economical way of doing important business was to do it himself. Experience in dealing with subordinates who sometimes tried to defeat his purposes led him to conclude that it was the safest method **because he bore responsibility** to the American people for the consequences.

*Paraphrase 2*

Wilson felt personally responsible for major diplomacy because he believed that the voters had entrusted him with such matters. He was also more capable than his advisers in this area. He, and not his advisers, was responsible to the people.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the material in paraphrase 1 needs to be placed inside inverted commas, and the passage follows the original much too closely.

The internet and web have created new opportunities for students to commit plagiarism, because essays on a wide range of topics are available on web sites. The internet also makes it easy for lecturers to detect plagiarism, for search engines now exist that will locate any piece of text on the internet. Students who take essays from the internet are frequently caught.

To avoid being accused of plagiarism, you must place all quoted material inside inverted commas (or for long quotes indent the passage as a block quote) **and** indicate the source you used with a footnote. If you fail to use inverted commas, you will be penalized even if you show the source in a footnote. If you fail to indicate the source of quoted material, you will be penalized even if you set the passage off with inverted commas.

The Department of History and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences consider plagiarism a serious and punishable offence. Any student who commits plagiarism will receive a failing grade on the submission, and may face more severe penalties.

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<sup>3</sup> These examples are taken from Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History* (New York: St. Martins, 1987), pp. 77-78. The original text is found in J. Joseph Hutchmaker and Warren I. Sussman, eds., *Wilson's Diplomacy: An International Symposium* (Cambridge, MA: Schenckman, 1973), p. 13.