

The Research Paper

A Brief Overview of the Research Paper in History/Humanities

Your purpose in writing a research paper in history is to analyze primary and secondary sources and to answer a research question. The answer to this question should be expressed as an argumentative thesis statement. The research paper parallels the writing in professional scholarly history books and articles; the writing is thesis-driven and seeks to prove a point. It is important for you to show *why* the topic matters, and how it relates to the time period under discussion, rather than why it should matter *now*; the writer should keep the focus of the paper within a historical context, and consider the question, “*Why did this topic matter to people at that time?*”

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Audience

Your audience is your professor and classmates and perhaps a broader audience of historians or publishers.

Writing Process Tips

Start the process early! It usually takes longer to gather and effectively analyze information which is necessary before you even write the paper.

Develop a particular historical research question early in your research process.

Example: *Were all Roman gladiators slaves? Was the American Revolution a war of independence or a revolution?* Your professor can help you develop a question that is answerable within the time and space that you have. For example, examining whether World War I directly led to World War II is an interesting historical question, but it is too big to answer in a 10-page research paper. Ask your professor for help in narrowing your research question as early as possible.

Be thesis-driven! Your answer to the example question above is the argument or thesis at the beginning of your paper; the rest of the paper should address that thesis.

Your thesis is a brief statement that explains why you believe this argument to be true. Your thesis should also refer to the scholarly sources—both primary and secondary—that you will use in the paper to support your thesis.

Example: When analyzing primary and secondary sources, you may find that historian A has a more accurate argument regarding an issue than historian B. Your thesis should state your position regarding this discrepancy and mention the relevant evidence you will use throughout the rest of the paper to support this argument.

Need help writing a thesis? See the handout on thesis statements at our website: <http://www.gvsu.edu/wc>.

Include all points that you will make in your paper in your first paragraph. A reader should be able to outline the rest of your paper just from the thesis; if the reader cannot, then your thesis needs to be elaborated. For a larger paper, you may not be able to lay out all points in the introduction. Rather, you can set up the argument that will later be developed.

Make an outline in order to get your ideas in chronological order, as doing so will help you to prevent errors in argument. Most importantly, one idea should flow from another with smooth transitions of thought.

Avoid lengthy descriptions or summary of documents. It is always best to find a quote that illustrates the point that you want to make.

Proofread, revise, and edit. How credible is an argument made within a paper riddled with grammatical/mechanical errors? Edit beyond relying on spell check—computers just aren't as capable as the human mind.

Research Paper Organization

Introduction: Setting and Thesis

Your introduction should describe the historical research question that you posed. This should also include a description of the historical context of your topic: Where is the topic in space and time? Who are the main players? It is important to set up this context at the beginning of the paper so readers will see the relevance of the information presented throughout the rest of the paper.

Your introduction should include a thesis (or argument).

Body Paragraphs

The body is essentially the meat of your research paper. While the introduction should have set up the thesis and mentioned the sources you address in your paper, the body is where you strive to prove your argument by describing, analyzing, and integrating evidence provided by those sources.

Generally each body paragraph should include:

- A topic or **summary sentence**.
- Some **context** that leads into the source(s) written about.
- A **discussion** of the source
- **Analysis** of the “who/what/when/where/why” of the evidence that is linked to the paper’s overall argument.

Conclusion

A conclusion should:

- **Summarize** what was proven in the paper.
- **Show** the connections you made across the research you did.
- **Explain** “why does this matter?” or “what did people of that historical period learn from this?”
- **Satisfy** the introduction. Consider these questions: Do my introduction and conclusion tie together? Do I have to add to/subtract from my introduction to make my paper a more coherent whole?

Sample Thesis Statement Set-Ups *

[*Something*] [*does something*] because/in order to [*reason(s)*].

- “Prior to the 1950s, scholars like W. W. Tarn blindly regarded figures like King Alexander of Macedon as the ‘Great,’ because of the tendency to see history as driven by powerful personalities.”

Because [*reason(s)*], [*something*] [*does something*].

- “Because of the terrible costs of ‘cults of personality’ in totalitarian states, by the 1950s scholars began to question ideas popularized by scholars like W. W. Tarn that King Alexander of Macedon should be regarded as the ‘Great.’”

Although [*opposing evidence*], [*reasons*] show [*Something*] [*does something*].

- “Although W. W. Tarn’s conception of King Alexander of Macedon as the ‘Great’ remains popular, since the 1950s a growing number of scholars have shown that his reign had disastrous consequences for the lives of millions of people throughout Eurasia.”

*From Dennis D. Jerz, “Thesis Statements: How to Write Them”
<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/academic/thesis.htm>.

A conclusion should *not*:

- Simply summarize the paper.
- Ask further questions.
- Make vague connections to how the issues apply to today's world; rather, the conclusion should focus on what you think in relation to the issue you wrote about.

Your body paragraphs are where you will prove your argument by describing, analyzing, and integrating evidence from your sources.

Tips for Writing in the Style of a Historian

Be Clear about Chronology

Make sure that A leads to B leads to C.

Example: Don't make it look as if the U.S. entered WWII, and once there was a national announcement that the U.S. was participating in WWII, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Instead, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), and after that, the U.S. announced its participation in WWII (December 8, 1941).

In addition:

- Provide dates to clarify when events occurred.
- Make “flashbacks” noticeable to readers. Shifts in time should be very clear by explicit presentation of dates.

For more help writing introductions and conclusions, see out handout at <http://www.gvsu.edu/wc>.

Address Insights Rather than Feelings

Show intuitive thoughts/critical thinking insights without spending time expressing emotions. The paper's purpose is to prove an argument—and this is achieved through evidence and analysis in historical writing, not through emotional venting.

Example: If I wanted to make a statement that Hitler did not brainwash everyone into committing brutalities during the Holocaust, but that many perpetrators had pre-existing prejudices against Jews, I should state that belief without throwing in my personal emotions (“I can't believe how cruel people were towards the Jews even before they were thrown into camps; I can't imagine what kind of people must have been living in Germany at that time! We've come a long way from such inhumane discriminatory behavior, thankfully.”) Instead, the paper might address the issue of why the past was different and which factors might have led historical actors to behave in ways that differ from present day expectations.

Wikipedia and other web-based or print encyclopedias are not good evidence: They can be used to get ideas flowing, but should not be used as supportive sources.

Take Notice of Voice/Tone

Write in a formal, academic voice:

- Avoid passive voice as much as possible. Phrases like “it was done” don't explain who did what, and why. For more help identifying passive voice—and advice in recasting it to be active—see our handout at <http://www.gvsu.edu/wc>.
- Use “I” sparingly, and only when referencing your own ideas. Readers will assume the paper is your argument; you don't need to write “I think” or “I believe” repeatedly.

- Avoid “you,” as it is not formal enough—and it can be somewhat confusing. Who is “you”? The reader? The people in the historical period of which you’re writing? Americans today?

Format Accurately

Use Chicago Style in formatting your report and document sources. Chicago Style requires footnotes and a bibliography page. Cover pages and other elements depend on your professor’s preferences.

Section headings are fine, but should not replace transitions between ideas.

Use Quotations Properly

Give context when incorporating research. From what document does the information come? Who is speaking/writing? Does the writer exhibit bias? What makes the source reputable? How is the quotation related to your paragraph?

Avoid piling sources into a given paragraph; it is usually better to address no more than two pieces of evidence in a given paragraph, because your sources should support your ideas or argument.

Prompts for Writing Consultations

- What is the paper’s thesis? Could the thesis be cleared up/more concise/interesting?
- Does the introduction set up the historical context of the situation?
- Is there sufficient primary and secondary evidence provided?
- Starting with the thesis, outline the paper’s argument. Does the argument or the paper fit the outlined points or is revision needed?
- Does the argument miss something it should cover, or mention anything that isn’t necessary or beneficial?
- Does the argument anticipate and refute counterarguments?
- Does the writer include too many biased views/emotional responses to evidence-based declarations?
- Is chronology apparent throughout the paper?
- Did the student effectively implement the components of the introduction/body/conclusion?
- Do the ideas and arguments smoothly transition from one to another throughout the paper? If not, how could those arguments be tied together more clearly and link back to the overall argument?
- Do the introduction and conclusions agree or has the argument shifted or changed during the paper?

Tip: Use the search function in Word to find places where you used “you,” then try to revise those sentences.

For help with Chicago Style see the [*Chicago Manual of Style*](#) available in the library and the [*Fred Meijer Center for Writing*](#)—or see these useful online resources:
<http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc>.
<http://libguides.gvsu.edu/citations?>