

1

WRITING AND HISTORY

n n n

Students struggling over an essay in history—for a book review, a full research paper, an examination, or even a short class assignment—have often told us that they know the subject, but they cannot write about it. In our experience this often means they have a jumble of facts and information in their heads but cannot tell a story about them.

Their complaint represents a discovery: History *does* involve telling a story, and while facts are essential in telling a story, they are not enough. If you know what armies faced each other, at what place, and who emerged victorious, you may not necessarily be able to tell a story about the encounter. Even if you know the names of the opposing commanders, and the various units under their command, it still may not be enough. Stories have tension, and while battles certainly have enough of that, you will need to sketch out the specific elements of that tension before readers will be engaged by your story. Why were the armies engaged against each other? What were their expectations should they emerge victorious? Readers will see the tensions, embrace the accounts of the struggle, and read on to see how it all comes out, not just who won and lost, but the implications of that outcome.

STORIES ABOUT THE PAST INTENDED TO BE TRUE

In writing about history, you tell the story of your thinking about a topic and formulate a central

argument—or *thesis*—to say that things happened in a particular way and not another. You allow for the possibility that if this or this, or that, did not happen, things could have turned out entirely differently. And you explain what resulted from the events unfolding as they did.

Historians are like most people: they want to know what events mean, why they were important to what came afterwards, and why we still talk about them. Like journalists, they ask *who, what, where, when, and why*. Who was responsible? What happened? Where did it happen? When and in what order did things happen? Why did they happen? And historians often ask additional questions, such as: What have other historians said about the event? What mistakes did they make that we can now correct? Historians are curious and relentless questioners, and the questions they ponder arise from any number of sources. All historical writing begins as an effort to answer questions about origins, happenings, and consequences. Historians find a puzzle and try to solve it. When you write for a history course, you must do the same—find a problem that stirs your curiosity and try to solve it. If you don't have a problem, you don't have a historical essay!

Here are the first two paragraphs of an article that appeared in *The American Historical Review*, the leading journal for historians in the United States:

In 1908, an Iranian humanist sounded the bell of doom. Anticipating Iran's "last sigh," this writer—presumably Mu'ayyid al-Islam, the editor of the popular newspaper *Habl al-Matin*—railed against Russia's encroachment on Iran as well as its blatant disregard for human life. For this Iranian, the humanistic entreaties of the so-called "civilized, philanthropic governments" of the West seemed little more than empty words—a point confirmed by Russia's militaristic (and inhumane) drive south of its border. As he remarked, "In this new, bright age of humanism ...in this age in which protection of fellow human beings is considered a requisite of humanity ...our northern neighbor [Russia] has sent a military expedition to our soil without any right or grounds." Territorial threats from Russia, however, were nothing new for Iran. Why then, had Russia's recent advance so alarmed this writer?

The answer lay in the Qajar dynasty's embrace of humanism and patriotic thinking. In this "bright, new age," in which Iran had celebrated nationhood and the rule of law, it expected international recognition of its national sovereignty. Nothing proved more distasteful to this patriot than Russia's sheer disrespect for Iranians and their sacred homeland. The offensive meant that Iran, a country increasingly depicted as "sick" and on the verge of territorial and political demise, had yet to be accepted as a sovereign, "civilized" nation in the commonwealth of humanity. In short, Russia's invasion had flouted Iran's modernist ethos of humanism."¹

The author, Professor Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, was puzzled by the reactions to early twentieth-century Russian imperial ventures in Iran articulated in an Iranian newspaper. After American interventions in the Persian Gulf region in recent decades, the question of Russian incursions a century ago may seem far removed from our concerns about the region. Yet that puzzle interested Professor Kashani-Sabet, and she wrote an essay to solve it.

Solving the puzzles of history involves both science and art. Science is a synonym for knowledge. But knowledge of what? History includes data—evidence, the names of people and places, when things happened, where they happened, bits of information gathered from many sources. It also includes interpretations of historians and others in the past who have written on the topic that the writer decides to treat in an essay. The art of history lies in combining fact and interpretation to tell a story about the past, as Professor Kashani-Sabet did in her article.

Historians believe it is important to distinguish between the true and the false. Thus their stories, as the late Professor J. H. Hexter was fond of saying, are a "patterned, coherent account of the human past intended to be true,"² as distinguished from the fiction of novels and short stories, for example. In the sixteenth century some English writers called history "authentic stories" to distinguish it from fantastic tales about the past. Historians in the Renaissance searched for old documents, studied them to see if they were authentic, weeded out forgeries,

and compared copies to find errors scribes had made in transmitting texts. They also compared different stories told about the same events. These historians tried to tell the truth—as do historians today.

But in the study of history, “truth” is complicated, contradictory, and often obscure. Every historical event happens one time and becomes separated from the present by the steady accumulation of other events happening day by day. We cannot put any incident from the past into a laboratory and make it happen again and again as we might conduct an experiment in chemistry, measuring and calculating to see precisely the relations of cause and effect. Instead, we must rely on evidence from the past such as memories of those who were there and objects from that time to guide us as we tell the story. But all these are mere records, subject to many interpretations and subject also to the tricks memory plays even on eyewitnesses. We can never relive the event exactly as it happened.

The evidence for past events is therefore always incomplete and fragmentary. Many pieces of evidence are lost, and others are often faded and warped. Historians fit the pieces together as carefully as possible, but holes remain in the picture they try to reconstruct. They do their best to fill in the holes with inferences that seem plausible and that fit the available facts. What emerges may closely resemble what happened, but we can never be completely sure that what we know as history is an exact replica of the past. Our knowledge of history is always in flux, and historians are always in dialogue, not only with the primary sources of the events they write about but also with other historians of those events.

WRITING HISTORY AS A WAY OF THINKING

History and writing are inseparable. We cannot know history well unless we write about it. Writing allows us to arrange events and our thoughts, study our work, weed out contradictions,

get names and places right, and question interpretations, our own and those of other historians. In writing we work out the chronological order of events—not a simple task but one indispensable to the historian’s craft. Fluent talkers, on the other hand, can touch on first one idea and then another, sometimes using body language to stress a point. They can overwhelm opposition by charisma or by shouting when their argument is weak. Writers perform a more daring act! They must develop an idea with logic and clarity, knowing that a reader can study their words again and again and discover whether the words add up to a plausible argument, given the evidence available. If writers are illogical, unfair, untruthful, confused, or foolish, their words lie on the page to be attacked by anyone with the care and interest to look. Good talkers can contradict themselves, waffle, and weasel, and on being called to task, can claim that their hearers misunderstood them. Writers, however, must strive to be clear, logical, and fair, or they will be found out.

Good writing goes hand in hand with a sense of human possibility and limitation. Thus historians usually write as if people had the power to choose in the past. The tension between what historical figures did and what they might have done gives history part of its excitement. Herbert Butterfield, a respected philosopher of history, wrote that “history deals with the drama of human life as the affair of individual personalities, possessing self-consciousness, intellect, and freedom.”³ As drama, every part of the past has a unique quality. Every event we study in history existed in its own network of cause and effect, its own set of relations between people and events, its own modes of thought, usually taken for granted by the societies themselves, often assumed to be a divine ordination that could not be changed. A thunderstorm roars over the Kansas prairie today, and the unflappable television meteorologist explains that the storm is the result of a collision between a cold front and a warm front. In ancient Mesopotamia, the

Babylonians heard in the thunder the voice of their god Marduk and thought that he was hurling lightning bolts into the earth. In these and countless other ways, spontaneous responses to many experiences in the past were different from those of the present day. Part of our task as historians is to think our way into the minds of the people who lived in earlier times so we can think about experience as they did.

Yet we can never fully abandon our own perceptions; we cannot recover the past exactly as people then thought of life and the world. Historians must always put something of themselves into the stories they tell; never are they empty vessels through which the records of the past spew forth as if they were an untouched truth about a past. This inevitable insertion of the historian into historical accounts is what J. H. Hexter called an application of “the second record,” encompassing “everything which historians bring to their confrontation with the record of the past.”⁴ While this is an inevitable legacy of the historian’s work, it is one that must always be kept in check lest the stories which emerge lose any semblance of credulity. And that is a crucial test: are the stories, as well as the explanations and analysis they offer, credible?

Sometimes credulity undermines historians’ assumptions, such as long-standing notions that focused historical accounts almost entirely on what men did. If women entered the story, it was because they did things male historians generally expected men to do. They ruled countries, as did Elizabeth I of England; they refined radium, as did Marie Curie in France; they wrote novels, as did Shikibu Murasaki in eleventh-century Japan. Now historians are turning to many other areas of historical interest. A random glance through recent issues of *The American Historical Review* will show, in addition to Professor Kashani-Sabet’s article on Iranian Humanism, discussions such as Catherine Kudlick’s review essay on “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other.’”⁵ And books such as Asunción Lavrin’s, *Women, Feminism, and Social*

Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940,⁶ provide insights into the history of feminism. These are topics that conventional male historians of a century ago dismissed as irrelevant, but that today occupy an honored and fascinating place in serious historical research. In a similar way historians such as John Thornton, in his *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*,⁷ study the role of people of African descent in many societies, while still others write of the history of immigrants, labor history, sexual history, and the history of fashion or sport. All these and more demonstrate interests of historians toiling to uncover as much of the human experience as possible and leading the profession of history itself away from the notion that to understand the past we need only understand the personalities and decisions of a few white male leaders.

Whatever its subject, the study of history is an unending detective story. Historians try to solve puzzles in the evidence and to tell a story that will give order to the confusion of data we inherit from the past. Historians make connections, assign causes, trace defects, make comparisons, uncover patterns, locate dead ends, and find influences that continue through the generations until the present. And in doing so they apply their minds to the sources and their considered judgments to the evidence, writing those stories about the past they intend to be both credible and true.

You, too, encounter history by reading, and by your own writing as well. By reading books and articles you slowly gain some understanding of the shape of the past, the general framework within which events took place. When you study history in college, you also write about the past using the methods of professional historians. Writing helps all of us think about what we know, and of course it helps your instructors see what you know and how you think. In your history courses you may be asked to write brief essays of perhaps only one or two pages, either as

homework assignments or during class, frequently reflecting on some assigned reading. Sometimes your writing will take the form of essay answers to questions on exams. Occasionally you might be asked to review a history book, either one that you select or one that is assigned to you. And often you may also be expected to prepare longer papers that will require you to conduct research in your own college library, perhaps on the Internet, and elsewhere as well.

Even though your writing about the past will take a number of forms, some basic principles apply to writing any history essay. Perhaps the most important is that thinking about the past is the key to writing history. Thus, this is a book both about methods of historical study and about methods in writing. It should help you gain some understanding of general problems underlying all historical study, and it should help your writing in all your college or university courses. It should also make you a better detective and a better teller of some of the innumerable stories that taken together make up the study of the past. We will discuss research you can conduct in your own college library or on the Internet and also include a brief section about how to take notes on your reading and research. Our emphasis will be on how to use those notes and your acquired knowledge to do well on research papers, shorter essays, and on examinations you may write in a history course.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR HISTORY ESSAYS

Obviously, history is far more than an assembly of facts about what happened in the past. It is the writer's interpretation of facts that raises questions, provokes curiosity, and makes us ask the questions *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why*. The writer's interpretation should concentrate on a central argument, or *thesis* that binds everything in an essay together. No matter what kind of essay you are writing, once you have developed your thesis that will tie the entire essay together, there are six key principles which can help you in examining your own writing to see if it

conforms to the expectations that readers—including your instructors—bring to their reading of history essays. Don't disappoint them. Guide your own writing by the following standards.

1. Good history essays are sharply focused on a limited topic.

You can develop a thrill of historical discovery *only* if your topic is sufficiently limited to let you study and think about the sources carefully. If you are able to choose your own topic, select one you can manage in the time and space you have available; this is true for writing essay test responses as well papers that allow you more time to develop your thoughts. Sometimes your instructor may assign a topic for your essay. Usually, such prescribed topics are already sharply focused, but even if they are not you can usually find ways to limit the essay you prepare.

Historians often use very specific research to explore broader questions, as you can see in Charles Ambler's essay in *The American Historical Review* on "Popular Films and the Colonial Audience: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia." Professor Ambler begins very specifically:

During the 1940s and 1950s, no visitor to the coppermining cities of the colonial Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in central Africa could escape the visible marks of the impact of American films. In the vast company compounds that housed the African miners and their families on the Copperbelt, groups of African boys, "dressed in home-made paper 'chaps' and cowboy hats, and carrying crudely carved wooden pistols," were a ubiquitous presence running through the streets and alleys in endless games of cowboys and Indians. Others appeared "more sinister, ...with a black mask over the eyes and a wooden dagger in the belt." As they engaged in their mock battles, they could be heard shouting, "Jeke, Jeke," a local corruption of "Jack," the universal term among urban moviegoers in the British central African colonies for the heroes of cowboy films. In the same streets, young men affected styles of dress that plainly showed the influence of westerns and gangster films— ten-gallon hats, kerchiefs, and so forth.

This phenomenon of "Copperbelt Cowboys" and its manifestation in urban areas across much of British-ruled Africa vividly demonstrates the rapid and pervasive penetration of mythic Hollywood screen

imagery into even remote corners of the empire.

Professor Ambler, however, is careful in his next paragraph to make certain his readers appreciate that the specific focus of his essay serves a broader historical purpose, since it “takes up the history of film entertainment in Northern Rhodesia in order to explore the broad question of the transmission and reception of Western mass culture in the context of colonialism.”⁸ This is precisely the sort of technique that you can use to focus your essays. There is a lesson here for any young historian: If you try to do too much, you will not do anything. Often discussing your essays, and especially your longer papers, with your instructor will be a valuable aid in helping you to focus your writing appropriately.

Keeping your focus clear should also lead you to a conclusion which will mirror the points that you made as you began your essay. Once you have introduced the puzzle you wish to consider, you should clearly tell the story that will engage your readers. But writers of history essays should not work toward surprise endings! Inexperienced writers often fall into the temptation to withhold necessary information or otherwise distract readers to prevent them from guessing where the story is going. Such tactics are annoying, and professional historians do not use them. The climax in a history paper is usually a place where the last block of information is fitted in place and the writer’s case is proved as well as his or her knowledge permits. The paper closes shortly after the climax because once the case is proved, a summary of the significance of the events or ideas reflecting how the essay began is all that is necessary.

For example, once Professor Ambler presents the story of cinema and its influence in Northern Rhodesia, he comes to the climax and then quickly finishes by returning to the points he made in the beginning of his essay:

In postcolonial Zambia, the introduction of television and more recently the proliferation of small video dens and individually owned videocassette recorders has effectively pushed the bioscope—formal film showings—

to the margins of entertainment. The current popularity of martial arts and other contemporary action movies has overshadowed the deep affection for the cowboy genre exhibited by several generations of viewers in the industrial towns of the Copperbelt and elsewhere in east, central, and southern Africa. But if the encounter of African audiences with film in the 1940s and 1950s lacked the complexity of the diverse and fragmented circulation of media that is characteristic of Zambia and the rest of southern Africa today, it is apparent that the critical process through which audiences consume visual media developed on a diet of horse operas.⁹

Of course, coordinating the beginning and end of your essay without careful attention to what comes between will not be sufficient to impress your readers. The main quality of any story is that it makes readers relive the experience it describes. A good writer creates the experience of living through events or of living through a step-by-step interpretation of those events. Any good piece of writing leads you through a process of discovery, providing information that lets you follow the writer's lead, finally arriving at the climax where everything comes together. Later on we shall suggest that when you pick up a history book to use in your research, you read the last chapter before you read the entire book. In a good essay or book about history, you can know how the story comes out and still appreciate the art of the historian in getting to that conclusion. Readers not only want to know how things come out but also how they happen.

2. History essays should have a clearly stated argument.

Historians write essays to interpret something they want readers to know about the past. They provide data—information from their sources—and their argument about what the evidence means. Here “argument” here does not mean angry, insulting debate as though anyone who disagrees with you is a fool. Rather, it is the main thing the writer wants to tell readers, the reason for writing the essay. It is the *thesis* of the essay, the proposition that the writer wants readers to accept. A good historical essay quietly expresses the thrill of a writer's discovery. You cannot have that thrill yourself or convey it to others if you do nothing but repeat what others

have said about your topic. Don't be content with telling a story others have told hundreds of time, the sort of story you might copy out of an encyclopedia whose aim is to give you nothing but the facts. Find something puzzling in the evidence, and try to solve the puzzle or to explain why it is a puzzle. Ask a question and try to answer it. But get to the point straightaway.

A good essay sets the scene quickly, reveals a tension to be resolved, and sets out in the direction of a solution. Some writers take so long to introduce their essays that readers lose interest before they get to the writer's real beginning. Some writers shovel out piles of background information or long accounts of previous scholarship in a somewhat frantic effort to prove that the writer has studied the issue. Or they may give some sort of moral justification for the topic, implying something like this: "I am writing this paper to make a better world and to prove that I am on the right side." The best writers have something to say and start saying it quickly. Readers should know your general subject in the first paragraph, and by the next paragraph they should usually know why you have written your essay and the argument you wish to make.

Consider the opening paragraphs of Professor Leora Auslander's essay in a recent issue of *The American Historical Review*. She quickly makes clear the problem she sees in the usual practice of historians, and then moves directly to her thesis:

Historians are, by profession, suspicious of things. Words are our stock-in-trade. This is not to say, of course, that historians have never had recourse to non-linguistic sources. From the use of archaeological evidence in the nineteenth century to Marc Bloch's brilliant notion that the intricacies of medieval landholding patterns could be deciphered by observing the interwar French countryside from a small plane, historians have looked beyond the holdings of archives and libraries. Scholars of the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds, and of science and technology—those whose written sources are limited or whose very object is material—have pushed the evidentiary boundaries the furthest, although some modernists and social and cultural historians

have also used visual, material, and musical sources. Despite these initiatives, however, most historians view words as the most trustworthy as well as the most informative sources; everything else is merely illustrative or supplementary.

I will argue here, by contrast, that expanding the range of our canonical sources will provide better answers to familiar historical questions as well as change the very nature of the questions we are able to pose and the kind of knowledge we are able to acquire about the past. Each form of human expression has its unique attributes and capacities; limiting our evidentiary base to one of them—linguistic—renders us unable to grasp important dimensions of human experience, and our explanations of major historical problems are thereby impoverished. Within the category of the extralinguistic, I will make an argument for the utility and importance of material culture in particular.¹⁰

Her second paragraph begins with her thesis which she then explains by outlining some of the argument she will make in her essay.

Make careful note of this example. Once you have begun your essay, don't digress. Stick to the point. Be sure everything in your essay serves your main purpose, and be sure your readers understand the connection to your main purpose of everything you include. Don't imagine that you have to put everything you know into one essay. An essay makes a point. It is not an excuse to pour out facts as if you were dumping the contents of a can onto a tabletop. As Auslander writes in her conclusion, historians must have a commitment "to the goal of understanding, interpreting, and perhaps even explaining the world beyond the text or the object."¹¹ And as her essay demonstrates, even as historians look for "extralinguistic" evidence they must *write* clearly about their conclusions.

3. History essays are built, step by step, on carefully acknowledged evidence.

You must also give readers reasons to believe your story. Your readers must accept you as an authority for the essay you present to them. You cannot write history off the top of your head, and you cannot parade your opinions unless you support them. Writing about history is much

like proving a case in a court of law. A good lawyer does not stand before a jury and say, “My friends, I firmly believe my client is innocent and so you should as well.” The jury will not believe her unless she can produce some evidence. So it is with the historical essay. Your readers are judge and jury. You assume the role of the lawyer in arguing your case. It is all very good if your readers think you are sincere or high-minded or even eloquent. It is much more important that you convince them that you are right. To do that you must command your evidence, present it clearly and carefully, and fully acknowledge where you have found it.

But what is evidence? The issue is complicated. Evidence is detailed factual information from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are texts nearest to any subject of investigation. Secondary sources are always written *about* primary sources. For example, primary sources for an essay about the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata early in this century would be letters, speeches, and other writings of Zapata himself, and perhaps also objects he owned or created. Secondary sources would be books and articles by scholars such as John Womack and Samuel Brunk who have made careers of studying Zapata’s movement and his assassination. Always keep in mind that good essays and papers are based on primary sources; so for such a topic you would consider not only the works Professors Womack and Brunk, but if at all possible those of Zapata himself.

In writing a research essay, you must sift through all the available sources, both primary and secondary, decide what is reliable and what not, what is useful and what not, and how you will use these sources in your work. And in writing shorter essays, such as those on exams, you must keep in mind what evidence you have learned about and mention it. When you make a generalization, immediately support it by quoting, summarizing, or otherwise referring to a source. Generalizations are unconvincing without the help of specific information to give them

content.

Evidence is everywhere. The letters and papers of men and women, famous and obscure, make fascinating records of their times, and many collections of such evidence have been published from the classical age to the present. Letters and journals make fascinating reading, especially if they cover long periods of time, and they are gold mines for the historian. You can pick a subject and follow the writer's thoughts on it, or about events related to the subject, and have an excellent paper for a college history course. Similarly, newspapers (many are preserved in microform or digital formats) often provide exceptional insights into the past which may stimulate your curiosity and help you formulate the sorts of puzzles that make for good historical essays. They may also provide significant details to supplement the other sources available to you.

Sources of local history abound in courthouses, diaries, letters, tax records, city directories, and myriad other records. These sources can provide details, often small ones, which can make the past come alive in a moment. And never forget the power of the interview in writing about history. If you write about any historical event of the past fifty or sixty years, often with a little effort you can find somebody who participated in it. Participants frequently may be delighted to share their stories with you. And their stories can illuminate major social movements in the country as a whole. You may also find transcripts of previous interviews in local history publications, newspapers, or archive collections. But always remember that participants can get things wrong, either in their interviews or in what they might have written about their experiences. Human beings forget, or they tell the story in such a way to exalt themselves, and sometimes they simply lie. The historian is always skeptical enough to check out the stories, even from eyewitnesses. In doing so, you frequently will confirm that secondary sources are also

essential. You should always consult books and articles written by historians about the subject you write about yourself. These books and articles will help you learn how to think about history, and they will provide much information that you can use.

Historians and their readers love evidence. They love telling details. They love old things. They immerse themselves in evidence—both primary and secondary sources—see its patterns, and write about them. Trying to write a good history essay without evidence is like trying to ride up a mountain on a bicycle without wheels. So historians fit their evidence together to create a story—an explanation, an argument—and they document their sources by means of footnotes, endnotes, or attributions written into the text. Even as you write, however, remember you will only gain authority for your own work if you demonstrate that you are familiar with *both* the primary sources and the work of others who have studied the same material. But the confidence you develop by providing evidence for your points is only as good as the confidence your readers have in how you obtained it. If you make a careless summary of your evidence or simply get it wrong, you lose the respect of knowledgeable readers. The recent experience of one historian, Michael Bellesiles, is very instructive for any young historian.

Almost immediately after its publication in 2000, Professor Bellesiles's book, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, was widely praised and his thesis, that the American "gun culture" was a post-Civil War development, enmeshed him in political arguments with many who believe the importance of gun ownership in America is older than the Constitution. In the midst of that controversy, historians began to examine his use of evidence only to find much to question: inaccurate citations to archival holdings, misreading of documents, generalizations based on limited sampling of court records, and sloppy recording of his data. Although Professor Bellesiles made several statements in his defense, none proved

sufficient to quiet the outcry, and trustees of the prestigious Bancroft Prize for historical writing withdrew the award they had originally given to him for the book.¹²

Bellesiles's sad experience should be instructive. Be certain that you take careful note of the sources you consult. It is important that you be clear about what you learned from which source, and that you quote correctly any material you copy directly from those sources. This is true not only for the notes you make from written sources, but also for those you obtain from increasingly widely available electronic resources. Both require special care.

While documenting your sources is very important in historical writing, it is widely accepted that you do not have to document matters of common knowledge. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. Zora Neale Hurston wrote the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Pieces of information such as these are common knowledge. They are not disputed, are known to anyone who knows anything about these subjects, and can easily be verified. You may find that some ideas you get on your own about such subjects are not precisely the same as those you read in secondary sources. You should then document those secondary sources and, either in a footnote or in the body of your text, point out the similarities and the differences between those sources and what you have written.

4. History essays must represent your own original work.

Plagiarism—presenting the thoughts or words of others as your own—is the ultimate dishonesty in writing. In recent years, several well known historians, including Doris Kearns Goodwin and the late Stephen Ambrose, have been forced to admit that due to their personal inattention, portions of several of their books were copied from the work of other writers. Claims of simple carelessness or exuberance in telling a story, such as those made by Professor

Ambrose, are simply insufficient. Readers naturally expected better from him, and they will of you as well. Frequently authors who are challenged in court by those whose work they have appropriated and presented as their own face costly and embarrassing results. And in any case, such thefts of intellectual property are seldom forgotten.

The case of Alex Haley is a famous example. Haley claimed that his book *Roots* came from his investigation into the history of his own ancestors who came as slaves from Africa. The book was made into a television miniseries that gripped millions of Americans when it was aired over twelve nights in 1977; its success also seemed to reinvigorate the study of African American history throughout the United States. Haley, however, was charged with plagiarism and paid \$650,000 in civil damages to the writer whose work he had copied. Further investigations by historians revealed that he had made up much of his evidence, and when he died in 1992, his reputation among scholars was in ruins. Leading historians usually dismiss his work, and even the small memorial to Haley in Knoxville, Tennessee—near his hometown—ignores any claims he might have been a historian. Instead, an inscription describes him only as a “journalist and novelist who shaped the contemporary African American consciousness.” His sad example, and that of other historians since, should be a warning to all writers: acknowledge and document your sources with care!

Your efforts to avoid plagiarism should begin even as you are taking notes from your sources. Take special care to record most of your notes in your own words. And *always* put material you copy directly from your sources in quotation marks in your notes. If you later use that information word for word in your essay as you found it in the sources—even if it is only a short phrase or brief sentence—put it in quotation marks in your essay as well, and make a clear citation to the source you are quoting. Also keep in mind that no matter how you keep notes,

electronic research and writing advances come with associated dangers. In particular, the ease of “block and click” operations used to capture and move electronic text from one file (or even a Web page) to another can be a temptation for including large segments of a source directly in your notes. If you use this technique, be certain to use quotation marks and also mark those notes as quotations. Failing to do so could lead to careless copying of some material directly into your essay where it might appear as if it were your own work. If you are careless, you will be guilty of plagiarism. Remember: it is *your* responsibility to avoid such errors.

Lest you slip into careless habits in using electronic—or any other—sources, you should be aware of the greatly increased use of Turnitin and similar services which allow you and your instructors to check the originality of your essays. Some colleges and universities use the service as a matter of campus policy, but it is also available for use by individual instructors. Even if you do not submit your essay through a Turnitin interface, your papers may be submitted directly by your instructor. Your work will be compared with most of the public Internet content, many subscription based content providers (including writing for payment sites), as well as previous papers submitted to Turnitin. And there is also a considerable database of print sources used in making the comparisons as well. Reports on these comparisons—including side by side contrasts with the originals—are generated for your instructors and sometimes for you as well. Thus, Turnitin provides a resource for the speedy checking of your work for originality. Understanding the availability of such a service should serve as an encouragement for your careful efforts at original writing.

Our best advice is that to avoid being charged with plagiarism you should always make certain that your essays are your own work and that you always give credit for ideas you get from someone else, even if you paraphrase or express those ideas in your own words. Take the

advice of Professor Peter Hoffer to paraphrase only “with great care ...to avoid falling into plagiarism”:

Paraphrasing lends itself to a wide range of errors. In particular, a paraphrase ...[made] in the course of research, may be mistaken by the author for his or her own idea or language and reappear in the author’s piece without any attribution. Mosaic paraphrases patching together quotations from a variety of secondary sources, and close paraphrases, wherein the author changes a word or two and reuses a passage from another author without quotations marks, also constitute plagiarism.

In print, all paraphrases, no matter how long or how many works are paraphrased, must be followed by citations to the sources that are as clear and precise as those provided for a direct quotation.¹³

The process of paraphrasing and summarizing, however, is sometimes hard to grasp. The following example may help you see how to do so in your own research and writing, thus avoiding the problem of plagiarism. Here is a paragraph from a recent book by world historian Jerry Bentley:

Beginning in the fifteenth century, and continuing to some extent to the present day, new configurations of technology and new patterns of disease favored Europeans in their dealings with nonwestern peoples. The technology in question was not absolutely new, nor was it always European in origin. Much of it traced ultimately to Tang and Song inventions: gunpowder, the compass, the stern-post rudder, and other elements of nautical technology all came ultimately from China. Other items also came from eastern parts, most notably the lanteen sail, which originated in the Indian Ocean and came to the Mediterranean through the agency of Arab merchants and mariners. The Europeans borrowed much of their naval and military technology, but they refined, accumulated, and combined it to the point that they at least matched and most often exceeded the technological development of other peoples. When the Europeans ventured into the Atlantic Ocean in the fifteenth century, they not only possessed highly maneuverable vessels and the instruments necessary to chart their courses (at least approximately) and return safely but also drew upon an arsenal of powerful weapons that dismembered and profoundly disoriented people who had not before encountered such destructive machinery. Sophisticated naval and military technologies by no means provided Europeans with the means to dominate all the peoples they encountered—certainly not before the development of the steamboat and

advanced weapons in the nineteenth century—but they underwrote western hegemony in the world over a very long term.¹⁴

And here is a way you might summarize this passage, using your own words as you might when paraphrasing:

Jerry Bentley makes a strong case that European imperialism rested on technology. Most of the key inventions, in military and naval equipment, were borrowed and then both modified and enhanced by European craftsmen. These developments gave them a clear advantage over other peoples they encountered and then conquered.

These ideas clearly come from Bentley's book, even though you do not directly quote him. In making such a summary you *must* make a citation to Bentley's work saying, in effect, "This is where I got these ideas." Citations of this sort will usually be much more common in your essays than ones documenting a direct quotation. That is, you will paraphrase or summarize much more frequently than you quote directly. Be certain that you do so with care!

While the issue of plagiarism may seem little more than a theoretical or moral dilemma facing a writer of history, it is a serious matter in practice. Keep in mind that at colleges and universities the penalties for plagiarism are severe. In many universities plagiarists are summoned before a disciplinary board, and sometimes expelled for one or more terms of study, and the plagiarism usually is recorded permanently on their academic records.

5. History essays reflect the dispassionate thoughts of the author.

While you should take great care to acknowledge what previous historians have written about a topic, do not disappoint your readers by telling them only what other people have said about your subject. Try to show them that by reading your work, they will learn something new or see old knowledge in a new light, one that you have shed on the subject by your own study and thinking.

One of the saddest things we have found about teaching is the conviction of too many of our students that they have nothing fresh and interesting to say about their topics. They don't trust themselves. They cannot express a thought unless they have read it somewhere else. One reason for this lack of confidence is that some students insist on writing about large, general topics that other people have written about hundreds of times. Only a little searching in almost any college or university library will turn up evidence of topics that have seldom been written about. If you take the time to look, you too can turn up new information and shape history essays with new and original insights.

You may not find new facts, but you can think carefully about the facts at your disposal and come up with something fresh and interesting. You can see new relationships. You can see causes and effects and connections that others have missed. You may reflect on motives and influences. You may spot places where some sources are silent. You can present your own conclusions, based on the evidence you have accumulated, which have the weight of authority behind them.

Some students go to the library looking for information on a broad subject like the beginnings of the Civil War and take a piece of information here and another piece there. They stick it all together without contributing anything of their own except manual dexterity. They retell a story that has been told thousands of times, and they do not present a thought that they have not read elsewhere. Why not instead read the speech Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi made in the United States Senate as he resigned to become president of the Confederacy? You might explain in an essay his justification for secession—and see if you think he left something out. Then you have a thoughtful paper. Do not be happy until you shape a story that cannot be read in any encyclopedia or textbook in the field.

Offering your own original ideas does not mean that you should choke your prose with your own emotions. Historians identify with the people and the times they write about, and often in studying history emotions are aroused. In writing about the past, you judge people and decide whether they were good or bad. The best way to convey these judgments is to tell what these people did or said. You don't have to prove that you are on the side of the angels. You should trust your readers. If characters you describe did terrible things, readers can see the evil if you give them the details. If characters did noble things, your readers can tell that, too, without any emotional insistence on your part.

Describing the British retreat from Concord and Lexington on April 19, 1775, historian Louis Birnbaum simply narrates the story:

The mood of the British soldiers was murderous. They surged around houses along the route, instantly killing anyone found inside. Some of the regulars looted whatever they could find, and some were killed while looting by Minutemen who had concealed themselves in the houses. Houses with fires in the hearth were burned down simply by spreading the embers about. Generally, those homes without fires on the hearth escaped destruction because it was too time-consuming to start a fire with steel and flint. As the column approached Menotomy, the 23rd Regiment was relieved of rear-guard duty by the marine battalion. Colonial fire reached a bloody crescendo in Menotomy, and again British troops rushed house after house, killing everyone found inside, including an invalid named Jason Russell.¹⁵

The author could have said, "The criminal and bloodthirsty British soldiers acted horribly in what they did to those poor, innocent people, and those wicked British soldiers killed in the act of looting houses got what they deserved." But readers don't need such coercive comments, and they often resent them. If you present the details, you can trust your readers to have the reactions you expect. You waste time and seem a little foolish if you preach at them.

Good historians try to tell the truth about what happened. If you study any issue long

enough and carefully enough, you will form opinions about it. You will think you know why something happened, or you will suppose that you understand someone. And you may develop strong personal views about the personalities or the outcome. Yet the evidence in history seldom stacks up entirely on one side of an issue, especially in the more interesting problems about the past. Different parts of the evidence can often contradict each other; using your own judgment about it all means that you must face such contradictions squarely. If you do not, knowledgeable readers may decide that you are careless, incompetent, or even dishonest. History is not a seamless garment. Knowledge of the past—or of almost anything else—has bumps and rips and blank spots that remain even when historians have done their best to put together a coherent account of it.

It is also true that different historians interpret the same data in different ways. So it is not unusual to find new and different interpretations of the past, sometimes including new evidence and sometimes rethinking what the well-known evidence means. This *revisionism* is hardly the dangerous approach to the past that is occasionally denounced in the press; rather, it is the normal work of writing history. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob—the first two elected presidents of the American Historical Association—have noted that historians “do not so much revise historical knowledge as they reinvest it with contemporary interest.”¹⁶ But they do so with care and consideration of other points of view. Consider this opening paragraph by Camilla Townsend in her recent *American Historical Review* article, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico”:

In 1552, Francisco López de Gómara, who had been chaplain and secretary to Hernando Cortés while he lived out his old age in Spain, published an account of the conquest of Mexico. López de Gómara himself had never been to the New World, but he could envision it nonetheless. “Many [Indians] came to gape at the strange men, now so famous, and at their attire, arms and horses, and they said, ‘These men are gods!’” The chaplain

was one of the first to claim in print that the Mexicans had believed the conquistadors to be divine. Among the welter of statements made in the Old World about the inhabitants of the New, this one found particular resonance. It was repeated with enthusiasm, and soon a specific version gained credence: the Mexicans had apparently believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl, who long ago had disappeared in the east, promising to return from that direction on a certain date. In an extraordinary coincidence, Cortés appeared off the coast in that very year and was mistaken for Quetzalcoatl by the devout Indians. Today, most educated persons in the United States, Europe, and Latin America are fully versed in this account, as readers of this piece can undoubtedly affirm. In fact, however, there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl's return from the east ever existed before the conquest. A number of scholars of early Mexico are aware of this, but few others are. The cherished narrative is alive and well, and in urgent need of critical attention.¹⁷

Professor Townsend's approach illustrates the very reasonable way historians bring new ideas of their own into an essay. You can do the same. You do not weaken your argument by recognizing different views. On the contrary, you strengthen your case by showing readers that you know what others have said, even if their opinions contradict your own. Readers will believe you if you deal with contrary opinions honestly, but they will scorn your work if you pretend that contradictions don't exist. This advice translates into a simple principle: Be honest, not arrogant. Nothing turns readers off so quickly as to suppose that the writer is not being fair.

6. History essays are clearly written with an intended audience in mind.

Readers are also turned off if they are distracted by asking questions like these as they read: "Is that word spelled correctly?" "Why is a comma missing here?" "Does this word fit the context?" Reading—like writing—is hard work, especially when the material is dense or complicated, as it often is in history courses. Readers want to pay attention to what a writer says. A careless attitude towards the conventions—among them common practices of grammar and punctuation—may not bother writers because they think they know what they want to say. But it

throws readers off.

Students who complain when instructors enforce the conventions do themselves a great disservice. In the world beyond college, few things about your writing will be more harshly judged than careless disregard for the conventions. Most everyone would like to believe their ideas are so compelling that no one can resist them, no matter how sloppily they write. Readers you seek to impress in a job application, a report, or a letter will judge otherwise. But merely reading over our suggestions, or listening to others from your instructors, is not enough. You must actively apply them and others, such as those in Bryan A. Garner's excellent essay in the new, fifteenth edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.¹⁸

In part, this means you should respect the audience for whom you are writing. Different essays are intended for different audiences; always consider what your intended audience already knows. Just as you convey to your readers an "implied author" in what you write, you should also write with an implied reader in mind, someone you think may read your work. For most history courses, you should write for your instructor and other students who are interested in your topic but may not be specialists in the field. Define important terms. Give enough information to provide a context for your essay. Say something about your sources, but do not get lost in background information that your readers know already. The best you can do is to imagine yourself as a reader and consider the sort of thing you might read and believe, and write accordingly.

It is not always an easy task. The main principle is that you must always be making decisions about what you need to tell your readers and what you think they know already. For example, if you write an interpretation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* of 1965, you will bore readers and even offend them if you write as if they have never heard of

Dr. King. In the same way, you don't inform your readers that Shakespeare was an English playwright or that Nelson Mandela was the first black president of South Africa.

We tell our students that they should write their essays so that if a friend or spouse picked one up, they could read it with the same understanding and pleasure they might find in an article in a serious magazine. The essay should be complete in itself. The important terms should be defined. Everyone quoted or mentioned in the essay should be identified—unless someone is well known to the general public. All the necessary information should be included. Try to imagine a friend picking up an essay and not being able to stop until he or she has finished the piece. And it is always a good idea to have some other person read your work and try to say back to you what he or she thinks you have said; they might also be able to suggest improvements in your writing!

Having someone read your essay and make comments on it, however, does not change your own responsibility for proofreading your essay carefully. Read it over and over to find misspelled words, lapses in grammar, typos, and places where you have inadvertently left out a word (a common error in these days of writing with the computer). Use the spell-checker (and grammar-checker) on your word-processing program. But remember! The computer cannot replace the brain, although it will often help you ask questions about your writing before your readers do.

These principles for a good essay should serve you well. Keep them in mind as you write your own history essays. This summary checklist below will help you focus on them as you do.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Have I narrowed my topic sufficiently?
- 4 Do the first and last sections of my essay mirror each other?
- 4 Do I have a clearly stated argument?

- 4 Are my own ideas on the subject clear?
- 4 Is the evidence on which I based my essay clear?
- 4 Is the essay my own, original work?
- 4 Are my paraphrases in my own words?
- 4 Have I documented my sources?
- 4 Have I written dispassionately?
- 4 Have I acknowledged other views?
- 4 Have I written clearly, using common conventions of written English?
- 4 Have I kept my intended audience in mind?

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Stories About the Past Intended to Be True

1 Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Hallmarks of Humanism: Hygiene and Love of Homeland in Qajar Iran," *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 1171. We have omitted Professor Kashani-Sabet's footnotes.

2 J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 5.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Writing History as a Way of Thinking

3 Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Scribner's, 1950), 26.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

4 Hexter, *History Primer*, 79.

5 Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 763–793.

Writing History as a Way of Thinking

6 Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

7 John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Basic Principles for History Essays

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

8 Charles Ambler, "Popular Films and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia," *The American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 81–82. We have omitted Professor Ambler's citations of his sources.

Basic Principles for History Essays

9 Ambler, "Popular Films and Colonial Audiences," 105.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Basic Principles for History Essays

10 Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review*, 110 (2005): 1015.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

11 Auslander, 1045.

Basic Principles for History Essays

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Basic Principles for History Essays

12 Several perspectives on this controversy may be found in a "Forum: Historians and Guns," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (2002): 203–268.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Basic Principles for History Essays

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

13 Peter Charles Hoffer, "Reflections on Plagiarism—Part 1: 'A Guide for the Perplexed,'" *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 42, 2 (February 2004): 19.

Basic Principles for History Essays

14 Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 183.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

Basic Principles for History Essays

15 Louis Bimbaum, *Red Dawn at Lexington* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 184.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

16 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton,

1994), 265.

Basic Principles for History Essays

17 Camila Townsend, "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico," *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 659.

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*

18 Bryan A. Garner, "Grammar and Usage," in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed., 145–237 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Basic Principles for History Essays

CHAPTER 1 n *Writing and History*