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# MODES OF HISTORICAL WRITING

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Like other writers, historians use the four common modes of expression: (1) *description,* (2) *narration,* (3) *exposition,* and (4) *argument.* Of these, argument is nearly always the most important mode in college classes, but not to the exclusion of the others. In its most basic meaning, though, argument does not suggest a dispute about something. The word originally meant *to prove* or *to assert*. At an earlier time people spoke of the "argument" of a novel, meaning the novel's plot and the view of human nature and possibility that informed the writer's way of presenting the story. Even today, in written prose, argument is a principle of organization that unites facts and observations to present a proposition important to the writer. Instructors will expect you to have a *thesis*, a point of view, a main idea that unites your essay, a proposition you want others to believe. (*Thesis* comes from a Greek word meaning *to set down*.) Your thesis will be the argument, the reason you write the essay, the case you want to prove.

To make your argument convincing, you will need to present evidence supporting your point of view. But we should offer a fundamental caution. A mere collection of facts, specific pieces of information, is not an essay nor would it constitute an argument. The distinguished historian Barbara Tuchman was very clear about the temptations which "facts" offer to all historians:

> To offer a mass of undigested facts, of names not identified and places not located, is of no use to the reader and is simple laziness on the part of the author, or pedantry to show how much he has read. To discard the unnecessary requires courage and also extra work.... The historian is continually being beguiled down fascinating byways and sidetracks. But the art of writing—the test of the artist—is to resist the beguilement and cleave to the subject.[1]

The facts cannot be an end in themselves. They must be carefully selected and woven together in such a way that they support a well-defined point of view that the writer wishes other people to believe. If you take notes on your reading and assemble a vast collection of historical facts about, say, Woodrow Wilson, you don't have an essay. But if you sift through your notes and discover that Wilson often expressed negative attitudes toward black Americans, you begin to have a thesis for an essay, something you want to examine more carefully. Why did Wilson have these attitudes? What did he do in response to them? What consequences did his attitudes and his actions have? It may be that hardly any scholars have considered this aspect of Wilson's career. So when you write your own essay on the subject, you may not be arguing with anyone else. That is, you may not have a disputation or a debate with another historian on the subject. Still, your point of view is an argument.

As you study the modes we describe below, keep in mind that argument, in the sense of developing a thesis, is fundamental to all the modes used in writing history essays. The modes overlap, and you may use all of them in a single essay; certainly we have in our own writing. A descriptive paragraph might give details of a marsh near Boston's Back Bay and the chill of an unusually cold New England spring in 1775. A narrative paragraph may tell how British troops ferried across the Back Bay on the night of April 18, 1775, were required to stand in the marsh with water up to their knees waiting for supplies they did not need before they tramped out to Lexington and Concord. A brief exposition might consider the effects on tempers of soldiers

having to march 12 or 15 miles to Lexington in cold, wet clothes and heavy wet boots. A writer might then argue that the needless delay in the Cambridge marsh robbed the British of the element of surprise and led to their humiliating defeat at the hands of the American minutemen in the battles that began the Revolutionary War.

Although the four modes often overlap, they are distinct; one will usually predominate in a given essay or book. When you write an essay, try to determine which modes will best advance your argument. If you have a clear idea of the mode best suited to your purposes, you make the task easier for you and your readers.

## DESCRIPTION

Description presents an account of sensory experience—the way things look, feel, taste, sound, and smell—as well as more impressionistic descriptions of attitudes and behavior. Popular history includes vivid descriptions, and you can describe people and places with great effect in an essay intended for a college or scholarly audience. No matter how learned or unlearned in the limitless facts of a historical period, everyone has had sensory experiences similar to those of people in the past. Senses are the common denominator in human life. Perhaps as a consequence of reliance on sense experience and observations, readers like concrete details about physical reality in books and articles about history. Details reassure your readers that the world of the past was enough like their own world to imagine it, to place themselves within it (for at least a moment), and to find it familiar and understandable.

Description is useful to kindle the imagination of readers and draw them into the story you wish to tell. Jonathan Spence does exactly that as he begins his study of life in seventeenth-century provincial China, *The Death of Woman Wang:*

> The earthquake struck T'an-ch'eng on July 25, 1668. It was evening, the moon just rising. There was no

> warning, save for a frightening roar that seemed to come from somewhere to the northwest. The buildings in the city began to shake and the trees took up a rhythmical swaying, tossing ever more wildly back and forth until their tips almost touched the ground. Then came one sharp violent jolt that brought down stretches of the city walls and battlements, officials' yamens [or residences], temples, and thousands of private homes. Broad fissures opened up across the streets and underneath the houses. Jets of water spurted into the air to a height of twenty feet or more, and streams of water poured down the roads and flooded the irrigation ditches. Those who tried to remain standing felt as if their feet were round stones spinning out of control and were brought crashing to the ground....
>
> As suddenly as it had come the earthquake departed. The ground was still. The water seeped away, leaving the open fissures edged with mud and fine sand. The ruins rested in layers where they had fallen, like giant sets of steps.2

All these descriptions of the earthquake will resonate with any reader who has likewise lived through such an experience and also with those who understand earthquakes only from seeing images of them and their aftermath on television. The vivid descriptions will make it easy for you to imagine that you are transported to eastern China more than three centuries ago. And by introducing his study with such clear and believable descriptions, Professor Spence has prepared you to trust his analysis of life in a society that is likely far different from any of your experiences. You can often accomplish much the same effect in your essays by careful attention to description.

But never make things up when you describe something. Although some readers may be entertained by flights of fancy in historical writing, historians find them cheap and dishonest, and with good reason. Here are two paragraphs written by the late Paul Murray Kendall in his laudatory biography of Richard III, king of England between 1483 and 1485. They describe actions and emotions during the battle of Barnet on the morning of April 14, 1471, in which Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, fought on the side of his older brother, Edward IV, against an

effort by the Earl of Warwick to overthrow King Edward.

> Suddenly there was a swirl in the mist to the left of and behind the enemy position. A shiver ran down the Lancastrian line. Exeter's men began to give way, stubbornly at first, then faster. Warwick's center must be crumbling. Richard signaled his trumpeters. The call to advance banners rang out. The weary young commander and his weary men surged forward. Then the enemy were in full flight, casting away their weapons as they ran.
>
> Out of the mist loomed the great sun banner of the House of York. A giant figure strode forward. Pushing his visor up, Richard saw that the King was smiling at him in brotherly pride. The right wing, driving westward across the Lancastrian rear, had linked up with Edward's center to bring the battle to an end. It was seven o'clock in the morning; the struggle had lasted almost three hours.3

Kendall's description evokes a vivid image of battle, but his scene is almost entirely made up. The sources for the battle of Barnet are skimpy. It is agreed a mist lay over the ground and that the battle was confused. In the midst of the battle, someone on the Lancastrian side shouted "treason," and others took up the cry. The Lancastrian troops in the middle of the line, thinking one of their leaders on a flank had gone over to the enemy, broke and ran. Their commander, the Earl of Warwick, was killed while trying to catch his horse. But Kendall's description of Richard meeting his brother Edward is all fantasy. No wonder historian Charles Ross, in remarking on Kendall's account of Barnet, comments dryly, "The incautious reader might be forgiven for thinking that the author himself was present at the battle."4

Much worse than Ross's scorn is what such fictional details have done to Kendall's credibility. His book aims at resurrecting the reputation of Richard III from Thomas More and Shakespeare who made him a lying hypocrite and a murderer, guilty of ordering the deaths of the little sons of Edward IV after the King died. To believe such an argument against a predominant historical opinion, you must have confidence in the author. But a book so filled with fictional descriptive detail as Kendall's cannot be taken seriously by dispassionate and thoughtful readers,

and it has been regularly ridiculed since its publication.

It is also important not to allow your descriptions to fall into familiar and accepted patterns of thought in an attempt to invoke what you think your reader might expect. Such an approach also runs the risk of undermining your credibility. Rather, you should tailor your descriptions to paint the mental pictures you intend to be true, based on the best evidence available to you. In the following paragraphs Professor Ken Wolf does this explicitly in describing the army—frequently referred to in much historical literature as a "horde"—of Genghis Khan, the great Mongol leader.

Our word *horde,* taken from the Mongol *ordu*, meaning camp or field army, suggests a huge body of dirty, undisciplined barbarians, drinking mare's blood, shooting on the run, and defeating their enemies by sheer weight of numbers. Such was not the case. Mongol armies under Genghis Khan *never* outnumbered those of their enemies; they were successful due to "splendid organization, discipline, leadership, and morale." We should add skill, for the Mongols were probably the most skilled horse soldiers of the pre-industrial age. They learned to ride their famous ponies at age three, and they began using a bow and arrow at age four or five. The adult Mongol cavalryman could shoot an arrow with deadly accuracy over a hundred yards; he could do this riding full gallop and even, when necessary, retreating and shooting over his shoulder; a high saddle and stirrups (a Mongol invention later adopted in the West) kept him from falling. Mongol armies could ride for days without stopping to cook food. They carried kumis, dried milk curd, cured meant, and water and could eat, drink, and sleep on horseback....

> Genghis Khan used a decimal organization. Divisions, or *toumen,* of ten thousand men were divided into regiments of one thousand; these were then subdivided into squads of 100 and patrols, or *arban,* of ten men each. Each unit commander gave strict obedience to his superior, on pain of death. In campaigns, *toumens* could travel in widely separated columns and unite quickly in battle.5

Wolf begins with familiar images, usually conjuring up unpleasant thoughts of little more than groups of wild men. But then he sets about calling those stereotypes into question. He continues with a much more straightforward description of Mongol soldiers, attempting to replace unfortunate images he believes readers may hold with others which he is confident represent something closer to reality. In doing so he is careful to avoid any explicitly evocative language, appealing instead to simple images you might well recognize from your own experiences. And when you finish reading his description of the Mongol cavalrymen you likely will better understand the argument that is the foundation of his essay.

When you write descriptive passages in your essays, always consider the questions below.

**Writer's Checklist**

- 4 Do my descriptions reflect sensory experience?
- 4 Do they bring ordinary, or at least widespread, memories to mind?
- 4 Are the impressions and emotions I evoke common enough to be recognizable?
- 4 Have I based my descriptions on sound evidence?
- 4 Have I avoided stereotypical descriptions in favor of more accurate ones?

## NARRATIVE

As important as both making a point and providing clear descriptions are, narratives tell stories, and stories are the bedrock of history. Without narratives, history would die as a discipline. Narratives tell us what happened, usually following the sequence of events as they happen, one event after the other—just as you tell a story about something that happened to you this morning.

Good narrative history often looks easy to write because it is easy to read. In fact, storytelling is a complicated art. As in description, part of the art lies in a sense of what to include and what to exclude, what to believe and what to reject. Narrative must also take into account contradictions in the evidence and either resolve them or admit frankly that they cannot

be resolved. Who fired the first shot on the morning of April 19, 1775, when British regular soldiers clashed with the minutemen on the Lexington Green in Massachusetts? The incident makes a nice subject for narrative history—but it is not an easy story to write. Sylvanus Wood, one of the minutemen, dictated his account of the battle over fifty years after he fought in it under the command of Captain John Parker. Here is part of what he said:

> Parker led those of us who were equipped to the north end of Lexington Common, near the Bedford Road, and formed us in single file. I was stationed about in the centre of the company. While we were standing, I left my place and went from one end of the company to the other and counted every man who was paraded, and the whole number was thirty-eight and no more....
>
> The British troops approached us rapidly in platoons with a general officer on horseback at their head. The officer came up to within about two rods [a little more than thirty feet] of the centre of the company, where I stood, the first platoon being about three rods distant. They were halted. The officer then swung his sword, and said, "Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, or you are all dead men. Fire!" Some guns were fired by the British at us from the first platoon, but no person was killed or hurt, being probably charged only with powder.
>
> Just at this time, Captain Parker ordered every man to take care of himself. The company immediately dispersed; and while the company was dispersing and leaping over the wall, the second platoon of the British fired and killed some of our men. There was not a gun fired by any of Captain Parker's company, within my knowledge.6

Paul Revere had been captured by the British in the middle of the night before the skirmish. He told the British that 500 men would be waiting for them in Lexington. Lieutenant John Barker of the British Army was with the British regiment called the King's Own. He wrote an account of the battle only a few days afterward, and here is part of what he said:

> About 5 miles on this side of a town called Lexington, which lay in our road, we heard there were some hundreds of people collected together intending to oppose us and stop our going on. At 5 o'clock we arrived there and saw a number of people, I believe between 2 and 300, formed in a common in the middle of the

> town. We still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack tho' without intending to attack them; but on our coming near them they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders rushed in upon them, fired and put 'em to flight. Several of them were killed, we could not tell how many because they were got behind walls and into the woods. We had a man of the 10th Light Infantry wounded, nobody else hurt.7

How many American minutemen waited for the British on the green at Lexington that morning? The writer of a historical narrative must deal with the contradiction. You cannot pretend that the contradiction does not exist. Professor David Hackett Fischer, who has written an excellent book on the battles, did what you should do when you face such a contradiction. He looked for more sources, and he discovered a number of other depositions given by members of the Lexington militia and eyewitnesses. These investigations allowed him to make a sensible inference: Many of the men the British soldiers saw as they advanced on Lexington were spectators, and some other minutemen joined Parker and his band after Sylvanus Wood counted the group. Here is part of Fischer's absorbing narrative. We have left out his numerous footnotes; however, note his careful citation of his sources in the text:

> At the same moment the British officers were studying the militia on the Common in front of them. Paul Revere's warning of 500 men in arms echoed in their ears. As the officers peered through the dim gray light, the spectators to the right and left appeared to be militia too. Captain Parker's small handful of men multiplied in British eyes to hundreds of provincial soldiers. Pitcairn thought that he faced "near 200 of the rebels." Barker reckoned the number at "between two and three hundred."
>
> On the other side, the New England men also inflated the size of the Regular force, which was magnified by the length of its marching formation on the narrow road. As the militia studied the long files of red-coated soldiers, some reckoned the force at between 1200 and 1500 men. In fact there were only about 238 of all ranks in Pitcairn's six companies, plus the mounted men of Mitchell's patrol, and a few supernumeraries.
>
> The Lexington militia began to consult earnestly among themselves. Sylvanus Wood, a Woburn man

> who joined them, had made a quick count a few minutes earlier and found to his surprise that there were only thirty-eight militia in all. Others were falling into line, but altogether no more than sixty or seventy militia mustered on the Common, perhaps less. One turned to his captain and said, “There are so few of us it is folly to stand here.”8

Fischer continues his absorbing story, working along the way to resolve the contradictions in his sources. By the time his readers get this far they have some understanding of why the British overestimated the patriot force. In a detailed appendix, Fischer explains why he rejects Barker’s number of “about 600” men in the British attacking force: Fischer went to the payroll rosters of the British army to see how many soldiers of the King’s Own were collecting wages for their service. He recognized, as all historians must, that developing a narrative can be a complicated task.

A good narrative begins by establishing some sort of tension, some kind of problem, that later development of the narrative should resolve. The beginning arouses readers’ curiosity. It introduces elements in tension and the rest of the story dwells on resolving or explaining that tension. Do not introduce material into your essay at the beginning if you don’t intend to do something with it later on. A narrative should also have a climax that embodies the meaning the writer wants readers to take from the story. At the climax, everything comes together, and the problem is solved or else explained. Because it gathers up all the threads and joins them to make the writer’s point, the climax comes near the end of the essay, and your readers should feel that you have kept a promise made to them in the beginning. If you cannot find a climactic point in your narrative, you need to reorganize your story.

The story should move along, unburdened by unnecessary details. A good story can be enlivened by apt quotation, as in Fischer’s narrative of the Battle of Lexington. But a principle of style worth remembering is that long block quotations frequently slow down a narrative, as does

the inclusion of too many details. In telling a story, it is usually better to keep quotations short and pointed, and the examples limited, so that they clearly illustrate the events being recounted and readily lead to the conclusion you intend.

In the following narrative concerning the Battle of Adwa, fought in 1896 between Ethiopian forces of Emperor Menilek and Italian armies threatening to bring his country within Italy's northeastern African colonial orbit, Harold G. Marcus is spare in mentioning details and even more parsimonious in his use of quotation. He begins by indicating the plans of the Italian commander, General Oreste Baratieri, establishing an expectation of the outcome. Then he narrates the story of how the battle actually unfolded.

> The general and his army of 8,463 Italians and 10,749 Eriterans [local Africans] held the high ground between Adigrat and Idaga Hamus. Baratieri was prepared to outwit his enemy, whose limited supplies would have forced retirement southward, permitting Baratieri to claim victory and also advance deeper into Tigray....
>
> At 9:00 P.M., on 28 February, the Italians began a forced march to the three hills that dominated the Ethiopian camp, to surprise and challenge Menilek's army. To secure his left Baratieri sent his reserve brigade to an unnamed, nearby fourth hill, but the Ethiopian guide, either through misdirection or sabotage, led the Italians astray. Not only was the left flank uncovered but also a quarter of the Italian force was rendered useless and vulnerable. So, even if Baratieri's army had occupied the high points and deployed in strong defensive positions on the frontal slopes, it was foredoomed to defeat. Indeed, the timing of the Italian attack, as a surprise on early Sunday morning, was all wrong.
>
> At 4:00 A.M., on 1 March, Menilek, [Empress] Taitou, and the rases [chief political and military subordinates of the Emperor] were at mass, which the Orthodox church celebrates early. It was a sad time, since the food situation had forced the emperor to order camp to be struck on 2 March. His relief must have been great when a number of couriers and runners rushed in to report the enemy was approaching in force. The emperor ordered men to arms, and, as the soldiers lined up, priests passed before them hearing confession, granting absolution, and offering blessings. The green, orange, and red flags of Ethiopia were unfurled when the emperor appeared, and the soldiers cheered and cheered. At 5:30 A.M., Menilek's 100,000-

man army moved forward, to confront an Italian force of 14,500 soldiers.

By 9:00 A.M., the outcome was obvious. The Italian center had crumbled, and other units were in danger of being flanked by Ethiopians who had found the gap in Baratieri's defenses. By noon, when retreat sounded, the Italians had paid dearly. Four thousand Europeans and 2,000 Eritreans had died, 1,428 of Baratieri's soldiers had been wounded, and 1,800 prisoners were held by the Ethiopians. All told, the Italian army lost 70 percent of its forces, a disaster for a modern army.

In sharp contrast, Menilek's forces suffered an estimated 4,000–7,000 killed and perhaps as many as 10,000 wounded, which made for an acceptably low loss ratio. The Italian enemy had been destroyed, whereas the Ethiopian army remained in being, strengthened by the weapons and matériel abandoned on the field. The victory was unequivocally Ethiopian.

In telling the story of this imperial encounter, Marcus poses a problem and then narrates the story to its unexpected conclusion. Although there are many other sources available concerning the conflict at Adwa, including Italian official records, letters and diaries of soldiers, not to mention oral testimonies collected from some of the participants, Marcus wisely elects not to infuse his narrative with too much of this potentially extraneous information. He uses just enough evidence—primarily the numbers of soldiers engaged in the battle and the numbers of casualties—in a way that lends credibility to his account. And thus you are disposed to believe him when he later goes on to conclude that Menilek's victory at the Battle of Adwa did "guarantee Ethiopia another generation and one-half of virtually unchallenged independence; it gave the country a status similar to that of Afghanistan, Persia, Japan, and Thailand as accepted anomalies in the imperialist world order."9 And you can see how his battle narrative supports the essential argument he makes in his book.

Of course, in your research you might just as well consult some of the numerous published (and perhaps, if your college or university has its own archive, also unpublished) collections of letters, as well as journals and collected papers. They offer similar opportunities for narrative

writing about other stories concerning the past. Not just battles, but also the lives of individuals, and even the explanations they offer for the circumstances of their existence, can become fascinating subjects for your history essays. Whatever sources you use, be sure to pose the questions below to yourself when you write historical narrative.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Why am I telling this story?
- 4 What happened, why, and when did it begin and end?
- 4 Who were the major characters in the drama?
- 4 What details must I tell, and what can I leave out?
- 4 What is the climax of the story?
- 4 What does the story mean?

## EXPOSITION

Expositions explain and analyze—philosophical ideas, the causes of events, the significance of decisions, the motives of participants, the working of an organization, the ideology of a political party. Any time you set out to explain cause and effect, or the meaning of an event or an idea, you write in the expository mode. Of course, exposition may coexist in an essay with other modes. The narrator who tells *what* happened usually devotes some paragraphs to telling *why* it happened—and so goes into expository writing. Some historical essays are fairly evenly balanced between narrative and exposition, telling both what happened and why, explaining the significance of the story. Many historical essays are primarily expositions, especially those that break down and analyze a text or event to tell readers what it means—even as the author narrates what happened that makes the explanation necessary.

Often acknowledged as an outstanding example of historical writing, Garrett Mattingly's *The Armada,* includes a remarkable exposition on "The Ominous Year" when the Spanish King

Philip II sent his famous Armada against the English crown:

> As the Year 1587 drew to a close, a shudder of apprehension ran across western Europe. In part it was a perfectly rational apprehension....
>
> It had been discerned over a century before, perhaps many centuries before, and as 1588 approached, the awful rumor of impending disaster spread throughout western Europe. Basically the prophecy of doom depended on the numerology of the Revelation of John, clarified (if that is the right word) by hints in Daniel xii, and reinforced by a bloodcurdling passage in Isaiah. To those who had sufficiently studied the question there seemed to be no doubt that all history since the first year of Our Lord was divided into a series of cycles, complicated permutations of multiples of ten, and seven, each cycle terminated by some gigantic event, and the whole series closing with awful finality in 1588....
>
> Spread from one end of Europe to the other, the prophecies about 1588 were differently received and differently interpreted according the country.10

In his full essay on the omens concerning the year 1588, Professor Mattingly draws together many strands of evidence from both religious and secular thought to analyze the mood in the capitals of Europe, making many inferences while also leaving open many unanswered questions. That is as it should be in a skillful exposition, and there are many other examples in historical writing. Look for them, especially in the textbooks you are assigned to read for your courses.

In college essays about history, exposition usually plays an important role. You may, for example, write to answer this question: What did the founding fathers mean by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? That amendment reads, “A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” The essay you write in response would be an exposition. But it would probably include some narratives, perhaps the situation in 1789 when the Constitution was ratified, the situation today, or the decisions of courts in the past on cases brought under the Second

Amendment.

There are many other possibilities that you might choose. The study of the influence of one thinker on another ("A comparison between Thomas More's *Utopia* and Nicolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*"), or of one set of ideas on a historical process ("The view of human nature expressed in the *Federalist Papers*"), can make a good expository essay. You may even analyze the significance of some technological invention ("The Role of Steamboats in the European Colonization of Africa"). All these subjects require analysis of texts, of events, or both. To write a good history essay on any of these topics you must explain things, relate various texts to one another, make inferences, and perhaps ask some questions that no one can answer. But that difficulty does not stop the historian from trying to answer the questions.

One important category of expository writing, especially in college courses, is the historiographic essay. These "histories of histories," as they are sometimes called, can be very important in helping students understand the evidence and arguments historians have used when considering a particular topic or some corollary of it. Students are often asked to write such essays, though we have found that many of our students frequently find such an exercise very difficult. Perhaps this is because they prefer to stick to the facts, and treating ideas themselves as facts in such an essay sometimes seems overwhelming. But you should not be fearful of such an effort. If you approach it as simply another form of historical analysis, it won't be as difficult as you may at first imagine.

There are many examples of historiographic essays in a wide variety of historical journals; you would do well to look for them and familiarize yourself with this common form of historical writing. Many contain detailed analyses which cannot be usefully illustrated in a short excerpt, but this selection from a recent essay by David Brion Davis will give you some idea of how to

approach a historiographic expositions:

> During the past thirty years, our understanding of American slavery has been extraordinarily enriched by numerous studies that fall in the...category of rigorous and sustained comparison. One thinks particularly of the work of Carl Degler comparing slavery and race relations in Brazil and the United States; George M. Fredrickson's two volumes on white supremacy and its consequences in the United States and South Africa; and Peter Kolchin's comparison and analysis of American slavery and Russian serfdom, a project that greatly broadened and enriched his subsequent survey of American slavery from 1619 to 1877. Mention should also be made of more specialized studies, such as those by Shearer Davis Bowman on U.S. planters and Prussian Junkers, by Eugene D. Genovese and Michael Craton on slave rebellions, and by Richard S. Dunn on two specific plantations in Virginia and Jamaica. While the comparative method *can* lead to mechanical listings of similarities and differences, it would clearly be useful to have more comparative studies on such specific subjects as domestic servants, slave artisans, and slaves in urban and manufacturing jobs. Peter Kolchin has candidly pointed to the severe problems comparative history faces, problems that help to explain the somewhat limited number of such full-length studies; yet I think that the cumulative benefit of comparative work can be seen in the global awareness of historians such as Thomas Holt, when writing on Jamaica; Rebecca Scott, when writing on Brazil and Cuba; Frederick Cooper, when writing on East Africa; and Seymour Drescher, when writing on British abolitionism and other subjects—to say nothing of the omnipresent economic historian Stanley L. Engerman, whose work on various forms of unfree labor could hardly be broader in perspective.
>
> But while careful, empirical comparison is indispensable, especially in alerting us to the importance of such matters as the demography and sex ratios of slave societies, the differences in slave communities, and the social implications of resident as opposed to absentee planters, much recent research has also underscored the importance of "the Big Picture"—the interrelationships that constituted an Atlantic Slave System as well as the place of such racial slavery in the evolution of the Western and modern worlds.11

Of course, Davis brings the experience of a distinguished career in writing about slavery to his historiographic exposition. Yet the works he mentions would be easily accessible to a student searching for histories written on the subject of slavery, and the categories he uses to group the

studies would be readily observable to anyone who read them carefully. Professor Davis continues with consideration of numerous other works on the subject of his essay, "Slavery from Broader Perspectives," but he might just as well have analyzed and compared the arguments in the twenty books and articles he mentions. The latter effort would, as well, have resulted in a thoughtful historiographic essay, and one within the scope of many undergraduates of our acquaintance. By applying your mind to careful research and thoughtful reading you could also create a similarly substantial exposition about how historians have, over time, written about slavery—or almost any other serious subject.

When you decide to write an exposition on a particular subject in one of your essays, be sure to reflect on these questions:

**Writer's Checklist**

4 Why is this explanation necessary?

4 Have I provided a context for this analysis?

4 Have I clearly identified the crucial causes and/or significance?

4 Are my inferences credible and plausible?

4 Have I clarified essential terms and the meaning of what I am explaining?

## ARGUMENT

Historians and others use argument in their writing to take a position on a controversial subject. As we suggested at the start of this chapter, it can be said that every essay contains an argument since every essay is built around a proposition that the writer wants us to believe. Yet in common usage, an argument is part of a debate, a dialogue between opposing views—sometimes many opposing views. Arguments include exposition, for they must explain the writer's point of view. An argument also seeks to prove that other points of view are wrong.

Arguments are most interesting when the issues are important and all sides are fair to each

other. The questions that create good arguments arise naturally as historians do research, weigh evidence, and make judgments that may not persuade others. Was Christianity, as Edward Gibbon held in the eighteenth century, a major cause for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire? Did Al Smith lose the presidential election of 1928 to Herbert Hoover because he was a Catholic? Was British insensitivity to the dietary rules of their subjects a principal cause of the Indian Mutiny? Have the poor of Cuba been better or worse off under the communist dictatorship of Fidel Castro than they were under Fulgencia Batista, the dictator Castro replaced?

The writing of history abounds with arguments about what happened and why. They arise because the evidence can be interpreted in different ways according to the assumptions of the historians themselves. Sometimes such arguments go on for years, then they die down and smolder awhile, only to flame up again. Did President Harry S. Truman drop atom bombs on Japan because he feared an invasion of the Japanese home islands by American troops would result in a million American casualties? Or did he know that the Japanese were already defeated and eager to surrender, and did he drop the bombs because he wanted to demonstrate the weapon to the dangerous Russians who, he recognized, would be the major foes to the United States after the war? The controversy over these questions raged for a time in the 1960s, died down, and have received attention again more recently.

In any important historical issue, you will find disagreement among historians. The disagreements are valuable in that they discourage becoming frozen in an intolerance of opposition, and debates may make actually encourage toleration in the present. The disagreements also help readers see the sources in a different light. Disagreements thrive in book reviews. A historian who disagrees with another may make a counterargument to a book the reviewer thinks is incorrect. Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,*

published in 1860, has provoked a virtual library of response: reviews, articles, and even books arguing that he was right or wrong in his interpretation of the Renaissance—or arguing that he was partly right and partly wrong. Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis concerning the role of the frontier in U.S. history has been similarly provocative.

Stay tuned to your own thoughts when you read sources. Where do arguments seem weak? Where do you feel uneasy about your own arguments? Can you see another conclusion in the evidence? Often good argument is a matter of common sense: Can you believe that something might have happened the way a writer tells you it happened? Many people who hated Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that he knew about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 before it happened but kept it secret because he wanted the United States to go to war. Such a conspiracy would have involved dozens if not thousands of people—those who had broken the Japanese secret code for sending messages to the military and diplomats, those who monitored Japanese broadcasts, those who translated them and took the translations to the White House and the State Department, and the officials to whom they all reported. Is it plausible that such a vast conspiracy could have taken place without anyone ever stepping forward to talk about it, especially since any such report could have earned millions of dollars in book contracts? Experience with human beings and their apparently uncontrollable yearning to tell secrets would seem to indicate that the answer to such a question would be no.

Good arguments, though, are founded on skepticism. Come to history as a doubter. Study the evidence over and over. Read what other historians have said. See what the sources say. Listen to your own uneasiness. Do not take anything for granted. And when you decide to argue, be as careful—and as civil—as possible. If you follow some simple suggestions you can enhance your ability to make convincing arguments. Consider them carefully and keep them in mind as

you write and when you read the arguments of others.

Always state your argument concisely and as early and quickly as possible in your essay. You will help yourself in making an argument if you state your premises early, shortly after telling us what your argument is going to be. *Premises* are assumptions on which your arguments are based. In writing about history, you may assume that some sources are reliable and some are not, and you will base your argument accordingly. You must then explain why you think one source is more reliable than another. Having done so, you can move toward your argument based on the premise of reliability.

When you make an assertion essential to your case, always provide some examples as evidence. A general statement followed by concrete reference to the evidence provides readers reason to believe you. Here are excerpts of three paragraphs from a recent article arguing that ideas and images of eastern China and Manchuria helped fuel twentieth-century Japanese imperialism. Thomas David DuBois makes the case that these ideas had a long history in Japanese ethnographic studies.

> The interest shown by Japanese scholars in the villages of Manchuria is at least partially a legacy of native ethnography as it appeared in Japan. During the Edo period (1603–1867), travelers and scholars wrote accounts of Japanese local customs, both for the popular book trade and with the aim of rediscovering a lost Japanese spirit, as with the work of the nativist scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). While much of his early work was episodic, a few attempts were made to systematically collect information on local customs, rites of passage, and annual festivals throughout the nation, and some employed surprisingly advanced methods, such as the 1813 distribution of questionnaires on local customs to each province, which demonstrated an embryonic attempt to integrate the local into a transcendent whole. Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a number of influences drove this interest in local customs to focus specifically on village society. First, many of the cultural reform initiatives of the early Meiji, specifically the eradication of popular "old customs" (*kyūkan*) and Buddhist practice, and establishment of an orthodoxy of Shintō ritual, required

> action at the village level.... Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the backlash against local Buddhism and the initial enthusiasm for Shintō orthodoxy and for Western modernism had begun to subside. However, researchers retained an interest in village customs, inspired now by the disciplinary mission of "salvage anthropology," and a common fixation on discovering the true and transcendent essence of Japan in its remote and unsullied countryside.
>
> These ideas coalesced and matured in the work of Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the scholar most often credited with the foundation of ethnography as an academic discipline in Japan.... For Yanagita, the material and psychological life of the village, rather than that of region or family, was the cellular component of the national spirit of Japan, and as such the study of village religion would be foundational to any ethnographic project.
>
> Yanagita and his style of ethnography...profoundly influenced a generation of scholars, including Ōmachi Tokuzō (1901–1970), who conducted field research in Manchukuo under the auspices of the Japanese military through the war years.[12]

Here is a standard pattern in historical writing, one that you can find in many articles from leading historical journals. Follow it whenever you can. The writer makes a general statement: "The interest shown by Japanese scholars in the villages of Manchuria is at least partially a legacy of native ethnography as it appeared in Japan." Then he offers a summary of the evidence (with a very brief exposition of the views he mentions). A reader will be inclined to believe the general statement because the author has provided specific evidence for it.

Also, always give the fairest possible treatment to those against whom you may be arguing. Never distort the work of someone who disagrees with your position. Such distortions are cowardly and unfair, and if you are found out, readers will reject you and your work, the good part along with the bad. Treat your adversaries as erring friends, not as foes to be slain, and you will always be more convincing to the great mass of readers who want writers to be fair and benign in argument. The most effective scholarly arguments are carried on courteously and

without bitterness or anger. When you argue, you would do well to remember the admonition of the Prophet Isaiah: “In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”

Likewise, always admit weakness in your argument and acknowledge those facts that opponents might raise against your position. If you deny obvious truths about the subject of your argument, knowledgeable readers will see what you are doing and will lose confidence in your sense of fairness. Most arguments have a weak point somewhere. Otherwise there would be no argument. If you admit the places where your argument is weak and consider counterarguments fairly, giving your reasons for rejecting them, you will build confidence in your judgments among readers. You may concede that some evidence stands against your proposition. But you may then argue either that evidence is not as important or as trustworthy as the evidence you adduce for your point of view, or that the contrary evidence has been misinterpreted. In either case you acknowledge that you know about the contrary facts, and you rob your foes of seeming to catch you in ignorance.

Always stay on the subject of your argument throughout your essay. If you do not, your argument could be submerged in meaningless detail. Inexperienced writers sometimes try to throw everything they know into an essay as if it were a soup—the more ingredients the better. They have worked hard to gather the information. They find their sources interesting. They want readers to see how much work they have done, how much they know. So they pad essays with much information irrelevant to the topic at hand. Sometimes they begin with pages and pages of background information and get into their argument only after they have bewildered readers with a story that does not need to be told.

Most importantly, you should take the advice of Barbara Tuchman we quoted at the beginning of this chapter and resist being “beguiled down fascinating byways and sidetracks”

only marginally related to your topic. Get to your point. Trust your readers. Moreover, trust yourself. Make your arguments economical. Do as much as you can in as few words as possible. As you follow these suggestions for writing an essay espousing your point of view on a historical subject, here are some questions to ask yourself about an argument you have advanced.

Writer's Checklist

4 Is this subject worth arguing about?

4 Have I gathered enough evidence and used it accurately to make my argument?

4 Do I represent the opposing views in ways that are fair?

4 Have I developed my argument logically?

4 Have I tried to prove too much?

Thinking about these four basic modes of writing will help you define more precisely your reason for writing an essay. Too frequently in history courses, students start writing without having any idea of the point they finally want to make about a topic. The instructor says, "Write a ten-page paper," and the student thinks only, "I must fill up ten pages." Well, you can fill up ten pages by copying the telephone book, but that would not be a good paper in a history course. Or you may have an essay question on an exam, but merely writing all you can remember about the course would not likely result in a reasonable essay. Thinking about the modes will clarify your writing task. It will also help your readers understand your purposes quickly. One of the hardest tasks an instructor faces is to read four or five pages into an essay before beginning to understand what the topic is. Help your hardworking instructor—and thereby help yourself—by writing essays in which your command of the modes of writing will make your purposes clear.



1 Barbara Tuchman, "In Search of History," in *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 18. This is actually the text of a 1963 address Tuchman gave at Radcliffe College.

*Description*



2 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Viking Press: 1978), 1–2.



3 Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard the Third* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 97.

4 Charles Ross, *Richard III* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 21.



5 Ken Wolf, "Genghis Khan: Incomparable Nomad Conqueror," in *Personalities and Problems: Interpretive Essays in World Civilizations,* 2d ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill College, 1999), 1:91–92; we have omitted Wolf's footnotes.



6 Quoted in *The Spirit of Seventy-Six,* eds. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 82–83.



7 Quoted in *The Spirit of Seventy-Six,* 70–71.



8 David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 188–189.



9 Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia,* updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 98–100.



10 Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 172, 175, 177.



11 David Brion Davis, "*AHR Forum:* Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives," *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 453–454; we have omitted Professor Davis's footnotes, which include complete citations to the

many works he mentions.



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*Argument*

12 Thomas David DuBois, “Local Religion and the Imperial Imaginary: The Development of Japanese Ethnography in Occupied Manchuria,” *The American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 58–59. We have omitted Professor DuBois’s footnotes and citations of his sources.

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