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TAKING NOTES AND WRITING DRAFTS

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Although every respectable historian knows the importance of gathering information before completing a historical essay, most also know how important it is to begin the writing process as early as possible. In reality, this is a form of practice. Pianists do finger exercises before they play. Baseball players take batting practice before a game. These activities help them limber up for the real thing. Similar exercises will help you prepare to write. Maintaining such a view of the writing process will also help you avoid some common, and often recurring, myths about writing.

One such myth is that writers are inspired, that real writers turn out articles and books and reports with the greatest of ease. Another is that if you must write several drafts of anything, you are not a good writer. Still another is that if you labor to write what you want to say, you will not improve it much if you write a second or even a third draft. We can well attest that none of these is really true in practice. While every writer has a different approach to the process, it is neither quick nor easy for any of them. All writing—if it is done well—is hard work.

For example, few writers manage to write without revising. The almost unanimous testimony of good writers in all disciplines is that writing is always difficult and that they must write several drafts to be satisfied with an essay or a book. The easier writing is to read, the

harder it has been for the writer to produce it. Your final draft must express a clear understanding of your own thoughts. But the way to that understanding may lead through several drafts. Writing, taking notes, rereading, and revising clarifies your thoughts and strengthens your hold on your own ideas. Once you have gone through that process, you have an essay that cannot be blown away by the first person who comes along with a firm opinion.

If you start writing early in the process, the great values of rewriting will be clearer to you. As you take notes during a lecture or discussion, do not let your writing stop there. Afterwards, write a brief summary of the important points made and also jot down any questions that come to mind about what has been said. That process alone may lead you back to update certain sections of your notes. It will likely lead you as well to formulate further ideas about what you have just heard. Such a writing habit may also produce a personal treasure trove of topics for future history essays.

It is also usually good to start writing soon after you get an assignment. Do *not* attempt to make this preliminary writing a complete rough draft. Simply set down your thoughts about the topic you have been given or—drawing upon the collection of potential topics you have already made—brief ideas concerning the topics you might write about in completing the assignment. You can begin by merely jotting a few words or phrases without trying to work them into paragraphs. Gradually, you may continue forming full sentences and disconnected paragraphs that allow you to work out your ideas. They, in turn, will stir your mind to more thoughts.

Inexperienced writers often assume that an accomplished writer simply does all the research first and then writes. On the contrary, most experienced writers find that no matter how much they know about a subject at the start, the act of writing forces them to confront new problems and new questions, gives them new leads, sends them off in search of more information to pursue

those new leads, and eventually takes them to conclusions different from those with which they began. For the experienced writer, the writing proceeds in a process of leaping forward and jumping back, but above all involves some sorts of writing very early and continuing until the essay is completed.

To postpone writing until you have done all the possible research on the subject can be disastrous. Many historians have fallen before the demand they put on themselves to read one more book or article before they could start writing. That was the fate of Frederick Jackson Turner, who, after propounding his "frontier thesis" of American history, was expected to write many important books. He signed several contracts with publishers without being able to produce the books. Historian Richard Hofstadter wrote the following sad words about Turner. They should be stamped in the minds of every historian tempted to put off writing!

> [Turner] became haunted by the suspicion, so clear to his biographer, that he was temperamentally "incapable of the sustained effort necessary to complete a major scholarly volume." "I hate to write," he blurted out to a student in later years, "it is almost impossible for me to do so." But it was a self-description arrived at after long and hard experience. In 1901 when he was forty, Turner had signed contracts for nine books, not one of which was ever to be written and only a few of which were even attempted, and his life was punctuated by an endless correspondence with disappointed publishers. For an academic family, the Turners lived expensively and entertained generously, and the income from any of the textbooks he promised to write would have been welcome, but the carrot of income was no more effective than the stick of duty and ambition. Turner's teaching load at Wisconsin was for a time cut down, in the hope that it would clear the way for his productive powers, but what it produced was only a misunderstanding with university trustees. Turner's reluctance to address himself to substantive history was so overwhelming that A. B. Hart, a martinet of an editor who presided with ruthless energy over the authors of the American Nation series, extracted *Rise of the New West* out of him only by dint of an extraordinary series of nagging letters and bullying telegrams. Hart in the end counted this his supreme editorial achievement. "It ought to be carved on my tombstone that I was the only man in the world that secured what might be called an adequate volume from Turner," he wrote to Max

> Farrand; and Farrand, one of Turner's closest friends who watched his agonized efforts to produce his last unfinished volume in the splendid setting provided by the Huntington Library, sadly concluded that he would not have finished it had he lived forever.
>
> Over the years Turner had built up a staggering variety of psychological and mechanical devices, familiar to all observers of academia, to stand between himself and the finished task. There was, for example, a kind of perfectionism, which sent him off looking for one more curious fact or decisive bit of evidence, and impelled the elaborate rewriting of drafts that had already been rewritten. There were the hopelessly optimistic plans for what he would do in the next two or twelve or eighteen months, whose inevitable nonfulfillment brought new lapses into paralyzing despair. There was an undisciplined curiosity, an insatiable, restless interest in *everything*, without a correspondingly lively determination to consummate anything; a flitting from one subject to another, a yielding to the momentary pleasures of research as a way of getting further from the discipline of writing. ("I have a lot of fun exploring, getting lost and getting back, and telling my companions about it," he said, but "telling" here did not mean writing.) There was over-research and over-preparation with the consequent inability to sort out the important from the trivial—a small mountain of notes, for example, gathered for a trifling projected children's book of 25,000 words on George Rogers Clark. There were, for all the unwritten books, thirty-four large file drawers bulging with notes on every aspect of American history. There were elaborate maps, drawn to correlate certain forces at work in American politics. There were scrapbooks, and hours spent filling them in....There were, of course, long letters of explanation to publishers, and other letters setting forth new plans for books. There was indeed an entire set of letters to Henry Holt and Company, examining various possible titles for the last unfinishable volume—letters that the exasperated publishers finally cut off by suggesting that the matter might well wait until the book itself became a reality.1

Turner's life helps illustrate our fundamental belief about writing: at some point you have to settle down and do it, and doing it takes a kind of courage that every historian must summon up if he or she is to do the job.

Recording Information and Ideas

As we have suggested, you should approach writing as an ongoing process. Begin by actively

listening and taking notes during class meetings. Listen carefully for important concepts, taking cues from repeated phrases, enumerated lists, and items presented in writing. Use quotations marks for key ideas stated briefly, but you should not try to take down every word. Instead always make an effort to focus on what is most important. After class, try to summarize what you heard and consolidate your understanding of the most important concepts. Write down any questions you have about the information; many instructors will entertain—in later classes or during individual consultations—your questions and attempt to help you understand more clearly what they want you to know. Write down those answers as well! This active note-taking process will be a great help as you study for tests and especially when you begin preparation for essay examinations.

Note-taking from your reading and research, however, will be even easier. As you are reading, you can go back and reread, concentrating on what was not clear to you at first. Always work on identifying the major points, separating them from supporting arguments and subsidiary evidence. Take extra care to use quotation marks for any direct statements you want to remember, but keep even those to a minimum. Always try to summarize in your own words. As an example, consider this brief passage from the well-regarded book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History,* by Sidney Mintz:

> When it was first introduced into Europe around 1100 A.D., sugar was grouped with spices—pepper, nutmeg, mace, ginger, cardamom, coriander, galingale (related to ginger), saffron, and the like. Most of these were rare and expensive tropical (and exotic) imports, used sparingly by those who could afford them at all. In the modern world, sweetness is not a "spice taste," but is counterposed to other tastes of all kinds (bitter as in "bittersweet," sour as in "sweet and sour," piquant as in "hot sausage" and "sweet sausage"), so that today it is difficult to view sugar as a condiment or spice. But long before most north Europeans came to know of it, sugar was consumed in large quantities as a medicine and spice in the eastern Mediterranean, in Egypt, and

across North Africa. Its medical utility had already been firmly established by physicians of the time—including Islamized Jews, Persians, and Nestorian Christians, working across the Islamic world from India to Spain—and it entered slowly into European medical practice via Arab pharmacology.

As a spice sugar was prized among the wealthy and powerful of western Europe, at least from the Crusades onward. By "spice" is meant here that class of "aromatic vegetable productions," to quote Webster's definition, "used in cooking to season food and flavor sauces, pickles, etc." We are accustomed not to thinking of sugar as spice, but, rather, to thinking of "sugar *and* spice." This habit of mind attests to the significant changes in the use and meanings of sugar, in the relationship between sugar and spices, and in the place of sweetness in western food systems that have occurred since 1100.2

Here are some notes taken after reading this passage:

--sugar introduced to Europe ca. 1100 AD, grouped with spices--rare & expensive tropical imports, used sparingly by those who could afford them

--now sweetness not a "spice taste," but compared to other tastes--"bittersweet," "sweet and sour," or "hot sausage" & "sweet sausage"

--before Europeans knew of sugar consumed as medicine and spice in eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, & North Africa

--physicians--Islamized Jews, Persians, and Nestorian Christians in Islamic world from India to Spain--used sugar as medicine, slowly came to European medical practice via Arab pharmacology

--as spice, sugar prized by wealthy and powerful of western Europe since Crusades

--Webster's dictionary: "spice" "aromatic vegetable productions used in cooking to season food and flavor sauces, pickles, etc."

--we think of sugar not as spice, but of "sugar *and* spice"

--shows significant changes in use and meaning of sugar, in relationship between sugar and spices, and in place of sweetness in western food systems since 1100

These notes, however, would be of limited value. They are nearly 60 percent as long as the original excerpt and little more than sequential listing of what appeared there; the note-taker does not appear to have thought carefully about the reading. Moreover, these notes often repeat

words and phrases, sometimes pieced together in the same or a similar order, directly from the original but without the benefit of quotation marks. Using these notes in the preparation of an essay could easily lead you to being accused of plagiarism, an unpardonable sin for any writer. Much better if you tried to read the original passage, summarize its main points, and at the same time indicate in your notes—by using quotation marks—any key quotations that you might later use in your essay. Now consider this example of notes made after reading, and then rereading, the same passage from Professor Mintz's book:

> Mintz, *Sweetness*, pp. 79–80
>
> Sugar long seen as medicine by Muslim, Jewish, and Nestorian physicians in Islamic lands; became known in Europe after Crusades (ca. 1100) as a spice and was regarded just as valuable. Hard for moderns to see it that way: "We are accustomed not to thinking of sugar as spice, but, rather, to thinking of 'sugar *and* spice'." (80) Changing perceptions of sweetness also seen in contrast to other tastes: "bittersweet" and "sweet and sour."

Notice how this second set of notes attempts to capture both the historical sequence of events *and* the main idea of the original passage. These notes also indicate clearly, in an abbreviated reference, the source of all the information and, more specifically, the exact reference for the quotation. Taking notes such as these from the very beginning of your research will not only help you with information for your essay; doing so will also be an early start on the writing process. And you may well benefit from taking notes such as these as you read required texts in your history classes as well, not just for essay examinations, but also in being better prepared for lectures and class discussions.

As you read background information for any essay, you should certainly keep brief notes with location information, including URLs for Web sources and page numbers for books and articles. You may not write extensive notes at this stage, but the location details will help you

find the information again should you need it. Write down questions about what you read, much as you would when you take notes during your classes. (We often scribble notes and questions in the margins of our own books. But never, NEVER write in a library book, or any book you have borrowed.) There are many ways to keep such notes. For years we recommended that our students take notes on 3 × 5 cards or keep a separate notebook for each project. Either are easy to carry in a briefcase or book bag, and we found them more convenient than loose tablets of paper. In recent years we have come to rely more and more on our computers for note-taking as well as writing.

Whatever format you select, the main point is to take notes even as you begin your investigations. Ask yourself questions (and as a part of your initial writing, while they are still fresh in your mind, jot down a few possible—yet plausible answers). Put down significant phrases. Note places where your sources disagree. Pay attention to what one historian notices and another ignores. Make notes of your own opinions about both the historians and the material. Even in the early stages of your research, important ideas may pop into your head. Write them down and then test them with further study. You may discover that further research confirms that some of your first impressions are gems!

You should keep a working bibliography in your notes from these beginning stages of your research. Take special care to include the essential elements of information for each reference you consult, recorded on a separate card or entry. Each such entry should include all of the following: *authorship* (and also the names of editors and/or translators); the *title* (or titles, in the case of an article in a book or journal); the *location* where you found the information (including the publisher and the place of publication or, in the case of Internet information, the URL, and—when appropriate—volume and page numbers); and the *date*(*s*) of publication and/or access. It is

not necessary to follow the conventions for note or bibliographic formats as you begin, but it is very important to be sure you include all the essential details. For example, you might consult:

Adams, Ephraim Douglass. *The Power of Ideals in American History*. AMS Press, New York, 1969.

This information will need to be reorganized when you write in a conventional bibliographic or other reference format, but the first principle you should always remember for any note-taking effort is a simple one: *Be sure to record exactly where you got your information.*

If you make sure to record all the bibliographic details as you start with any source, you can later refer in your notes simply to the author, a shortened title, and the relevant page (and volume) numbers. If you were using Adams's *The Power of Ideals in American History* as a source in research about the origins of manifest destiny, as did Penny Sonnenburg for her student essay in Appendix A, you might write "Adams, *Ideals,* 67" (to indicate *Ideals* as the essence of the source title and 67 to indicate the page number). Since you must be able to refer accurately to your sources when you write, you must also do so when you take notes. You will save yourself much grief if you keep track of your sources carefully while you do your research!

The second principle for good note-taking is to avoid copying too much direct quotation in your notes. Writing down the quotation takes time, and you can easily make errors in transcribing it. You save time—and sometimes create your best writing—if you exercise your mind by summarizing or paraphrasing rather than merely copying direct quotation. You may wish to photocopy some pages relevant to your work if you must return the book before you write the paper. But as a warning, do not be tempted to simply stash the copies in a folder with all your other research. Instead, persevere and make notes while the purpose of the source is still fresh in your mind. Writing down ideas in your own words from the beginning is especially valuable as it opens your mind to the possibilities of how you might present the information

when you begin to write your essay. And be especially careful when attempting to paraphrase that you do not slip into copying the original with only minor changes involving just a word or two.

As you read Adams's *The Power of Ideals in American History,* you might make a note summarizing some of his views like this:

Adams, *Ideals,* 67 **origins**

provides background knowledge to understand the true beginnings of manifest destiny, not just in American history.

Notice the inclusion of a separate topic heading in the upper-right corner; this is especially helpful if you are using note cards, or in the margins of separate notebook. You can use such headings as you would keywords in computerized notes to find materials on particular aspects of your subject. When you begin writing your complete essay, you can return to the original source (or your photocopies) for additional details and quote exactly if that seems necessary.

But you might avoid that additional effort by keeping in mind the third principle for note-taking, which is to take special care in making copies of direct quotations. *Always* place direct quotations within quotation marks in your notes and review the quotation for accuracy once you have written it down. The eye and the hand can slip while you are looking first at your source and then at your notebook, card, or computer screen. It may help to put a check or asterisk (*) by the quotation to tell yourself that you have reviewed it for accuracy once you have written it down.

Here is a sample note of a direct quotation for an essay concerning manifest destiny, discussing the idea's historical beginnings:

Barker, *Traditions,* 312 **natural law/destiny**

* The large and somewhat general expression "became a tradition of human civility which runs

> continuously from the Stoic teachers of the Porch to the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789."

This quotation may seem a particularly apt explanation of natural law, although the words themselves may reflect historical writing of more than a half-century ago than it is to a direct quote addressing manifest destiny itself. Try to take such matters into consideration and use direct quotations only sparingly in your notes.

This may be easier if you also practice the fourth principle of note-taking, which is to make your own comments as you read and make notes. Commenting requires you to reflect on what you read, making you an active rather than a passive reader. *But be sure to distinguish between the notes that are your own thoughts and notes that are direct quotations or summaries of your sources*. We often put an arrow before our own thoughts whether we are using cards, a notebook, or our computers. The arrow lets us know that these thoughts are ours. If you do not take care in distinguishing your thoughts from the thoughts of your source, you may be accused of plagiarism, a very serious matter and one from which few authors can easily recover.

Here is an example of how you might write a note about your own thoughts on the origins of manifest destiny:

> **chosen people**
>
> ! the belief in manifest destiny has mostly appeared to be a uniquely American characteristic, but further research on other countries and their "chosen people" concepts leads to belief that the concept of manifest destiny predated not only United States history, but in some cases even also predated United States existence as a country

The purpose of such a note is to keep your mind active as you read. Again, notice the inclusion of a topic heading which will lead you back to your own ideas as well as other information in your notes on the same topic; this will also help shape ideas for the essay that you

will write.

Organizing Your Essay

Taking notes that focus on both information and ideas—including your *own* ideas—will help you begin putting your mind to work organizing your essay. Having spent some time refining your subject, gathering a bibliography, doing spot reading, and taking notes, you should feel more confident about your knowledge. You will have left the somewhat flat and limited accounts of the encyclopedias and other reference books, and you will have started looking at specialized books and articles as well primary sources related to your topic. You should have asked questions along the way, writing them down in your notes. You will have noticed patterns or repeated ideas in your research, and you should have jotted down some of your own ideas as well. In these ways, your note-taking process should have helped you find interesting approaches to your topic.

Sometimes a pattern occurs in a consistent response to certain subjects. For example, the notion of manifest destiny was prevalent and commonly used outside the United States. Which nations also employed and extensively used this notion? How far back can one logically trace the idea of manifest destiny? You may have started with the resolve to write an essay about manifest destiny. If you were lucky, you thought of a limited topic right away, one you might do in ten or fifteen pages. Perhaps, however, you were not been able to limit your topic enough. Make a list of interesting topics or problems relating to manifest destiny. Keep working at it until you arrive at something manageable. The following notes illustrate this attempt to produce both something interesting and something you can do in the time and space available.

> "Manifest Destiny and its importance in world history."
>
> --Too vague. Not focused enough with too many subtopics.

“Manifest Destiny and its influence in European history.”

--a narrower focus, yet still encompasses much.

--European history covers too large a span to incorporate into a paper of this size.

“Manifest Destiny: The American Dream of Expansionism”

--too narrow does not recognize motivation for the topic, ignores the true question of its origins.

For this last topic, the temptation might be to go from manifest destiny to the American ideology of expansionism. Then you need to ask questions like these: Do I want this paper to be about the various stages of American expansion? Does this topic completely overlook the world influence of manifest destiny? Has my initial research been directed more at a global overview? In essence, What do I want to prove by writing this essay? What are other historical explanations of manifest destiny? As you ask yourself these questions, look back over your research notes and see if you can detect a pattern. Slowly an idea emerges and you add to your list of potential topics.

“Manifest Destiny: A Requirement for all Nations.”

--widespread evidence of this, but still a narrow focus.

--considerable primary source information in newspaper articles, plus Internet sources provide translated material.

Now you have a starting point, a provisional title. Remember, though, you can change anything at this stage, and your changes may be sweeping. While you use it, the provisional title will give direction to your work. That sense of direction will help you work faster and more efficiently because it helps organize your thoughts, making you evaluate information you have collected so you can make proper use of it. If you have done your research well, you cannot use all the information you have collected in your notes. Good writing is done out of an abundance of knowledge. The provisional title will act as a filter in your mind, holding and organizing things you should keep for your essay and letting information go that will not contribute to your

argument.

Once you arrive at a topic, focus your reading. If you plan to write about the origins of manifest destiny, limit yourself to reading historians' explanations of the concept and philosophical works which underlay the concept. You may be so interested in manifest destiny that you decide to continue to seek more information about the use of the idea in American history to justify taking Mexican land with an eye even further south. Good! But while you are working on this essay, limit your reading to information that helps you to your goal. Maintaining that discipline will help you avoid the problems that plagued the famous historian Frederick Jackson Turner! We would also encourage you to write at least a brief outline to help organize your ideas and your evidence.

Some writers sit down and start hammering on the keyboard without any clear idea of the steps they will take in developing their argument. Others worry about the details of formal outlining—Roman numerals, large and small, and the placement of each point or subpoint within the outline—just as they might have been taught early in school. But either approach may distract you from the essential task, appearing to be just another insurmountable obstacle to hinder you from writing. Instead, focus on organizing your thoughts. Most people find it more efficient to shape their ideas in some way before they begin to write a draft, and we have found that to be true in our writing. We encourage you to do the same, even for short essays and before you starting writing your answers for an essay examination. You can at least jot down a list of points you want to cover—a list that can be much more flexible than a detailed outline.

You can rearrange items on your list as your intuition suggests better forms of organization. Never be afraid to change a list or outline once you have begun. No matter how clearly you think you see your project in outline before you, write a draft! Writing may change your ideas. Be

ready to follow your mind in its adventures with the evidence. Remember that you are taking your readers on a journey, not a laborious recitation of loosely related facts and information organized to read like an essay. You might create a rough outline something like this for a longer essay on the origins of manifest destiny:

> Argument: John O'Sullivan's editorial about mani-
>
> fest destiny leads one to believe that it was an American concept to rationalize the expansionist movement that was sweeping the United States during the hotly debated annexation of Texas. But other nations before the United States embraced the notion in their own expansionist movements.
>
> 1. John O'Sullivan's editorial itself is indicative of the selected people of the United States
> 2. Perspectives and explanation of natural law/right and how it can be related to manifest destiny
> 3. Early historian's viewpoints on the importance of using similar ideas in solidifying nationalism
> 4. Anglo-Saxon ideas of manifest destiny as essential for national survival
> 5. Global analogies
> 6. Early national precedents in the United States (up to 1840)
> 7. "Manifest Destiny" term popularized, 1840s
> 8. Extension to sea power and the Pacific Basin

A list outline such as this one avoids a proliferation of numbers and letters for headings and subheadings. You may add subheadings if you want, but you may not need them. Determining the sequence of your thoughts is most important and likely sufficient. Having made a list outline, such as this, you can more confidently write a first draft. In this case, you would have decided to shape an analytical essay looking at manifest destiny from a more global perspective. You will explain the origins of the concept, shape a narrative of its articulation and use, introduce explanations of other concepts relating to it, and explain why it is important to attempt to overlook limitations on the subject. Along the way you will explain who wrote about these concepts. And you can then actually begin writing your essay. Penny Sonnenburg used just such

a process—of taking notes and writing drafts—in creating her essay, which you can read in Appendix A.

Writer's Checklist

4 Have I recorded complete information about each of the sources I consult?

4 Do I use my own words to summarize or paraphrase information I find?

4 Am I careful to record all appropriate keywords in my notes?

4 Have I taken special care, and used quotation marks, in recording any direct quotations?

4 Are my own ideas a part of my notes on the subject?

4 Have I looked for patterns, even unexpected ones, in the evidence?

4 Have I written out my ideas for potential topics and titles for my essay?

4 Once focused on a topic, have I created a list outline to sequence my thoughts?

WRITING AND REVISING DRAFTS

Leave yourself time enough to work on several drafts of your paper. If you start writing a major essay following this outline the day before it is due, stay up all night to finish that first draft, and hand it in without having time to revise it, you do an injustice to yourself and your instructor. You may get by, but you may not be proud of your work, and the instructor will probably be bored with it. A hard-pressed instructor, sitting up for hours and hours reading and marking papers from everyone in the class (and yes, we have actually done this!), deserves your best effort.

Note that we are not saying you should avoid staying up all night long working on your paper before you hand it in. Many writers discover that they get an adrenaline flow from working steadily at a final draft for hours and hours before they give it up, and they may stay up all night because they are excited about their work and cannot leave it. We understand that feeling from our own writing adventures. Hearing the birds begin to sing outside at first light

before dawn after working at our yellow pads or keyboard all night long is an experience we have both shared, and we have liked it. That kind of night comes when we have worked hard for a long time, perhaps for years, and feel in command of what we are doing and want to drive on to the end.

But no writer can produce consistently good work by waiting until the last minute to begin. Discipline yourself. If you have difficulty starting to write, make a concerted effort to actually write for some short period of time, even ten or fifteen minutes. Then stop, consult your notes, take a break. But come back as soon as you can; reread what you have written. Often reading over your work will stimulate further thought—and writing! Although you may not go very fast at first, try not to become discouraged. After a night's sleep, begin again. The most important task in writing your first draft is to actually write it! Get a beginning, a middle, and an end down on paper or on your computer. Write more than you need to write at first. If your assignment is to write fifteen pages, make your first draft twenty pages. Pack in information. Use a few select quotations. Ruminate about what you are describing. Ask yourself the familiar questions about your paper—Who? What? When? Where? Why? and also How?—and try to answer them.

When you get your first draft into being, several things happen. You feel an immense relief. An unwritten assignment is more formidable than one you have written—even in a rough draft. You have some idea now what you can say in the space you have available. You have some idea of the major questions you want to address. You know some areas of weakness where you have to do further research. You can see which of your conclusions seem fairly certain and which seem shaky. You can see if you have an idea that binds all your data together into a thesis, a controlling argument that resolves or defines some puzzle that you find in your sources. You can now revise and in the process eliminate the extra words and sentences you packed into your first

draft.

Revision proceeds in various ways. If you write with a word-processing program, you can bring your paper up on the screen and start working back through it, inserting, deleting, and changing around the order of the paper. Many writers prefer to print out a draft and go over it with a pen or pencil, making changes that they then type into the draft on the computer. Some behavioral research has shown that the longer people work with computers, the more they tend to do their revising directly from the screen without printing out. You have to use the method, or combination of methods, that suits you best.

Perhaps the important part of the task is to read your work with a self-critical eye. You can cultivate a good sense of revision by reading your own work again and again. Be sure you consider, or reconsider, some of the steps you have already used in the process. As you read, ask yourself questions related to the six basic principles for writing a good history essay:

1. Is my essay sharply focused on a limited topic?
2. Does it have a clearly stated argument?
3. Is it built, step by step, on carefully acknowledged evidence?
4. Does it represent my own original work?
5. Does it reflect my own dispassionate thoughts?
6. Is it clearly written with an intended audience in mind?

Consider each question carefully as you read your draft. Reading aloud helps. You can sometimes pick out rough places in your prose because they make you stumble in reading them. Reading aloud with inflection and expression will help you catch places where you may be misleading or confusing.

Professional writers often have others read their work and make suggestions. Get help from

friends—as we have for every edition of this book. Do not ask them, "What do you think of my essay?" They will tell you it is good. Ask them instead, "What do you think I am saying in this paper?" You will sometimes be surprised by what comes out—and you will get some ideas for revision. Also ask them what you might do to improve your writing so that the essential points you want to make would be clear to them.

Some of you may also be involved in a peer editing process in which students comment on drafts of each others' essays. Your college or university may encourage such collaborations, and/or your instructor may encourage you to do so. Or you may wish to form your own group—a kind of writing club—in which you will all help each other in revising your essays. There are also a number of explanations and guides to the process of peer editing, and many are available online. One that our students have found helpful is in the *Guilford Writing Manual,* prepared for students at Guilford College by Professor Jeff Jeske. Our students have retrieved it at http://www.guilford.edu/writing_manual/ by selecting "Peer Editing" from the menu. In addition, the ten questions in the Writer's Checklist for Peer Editing at the end of this chapter offer an effective approach you can use in the process.

If you do take advantage of this frequently effective approach in your revisions, keep in mind that the purpose is to help one another, not to demonstrate how much more you may think you know about writing—or the topic of the essay—than the author. Remember—a critical eye in the revision process is not just about making criticisms! As Professor Jeske cautions:

> It is worth remembering that a major goal of peer editing is to enable writers to make effective revising decisions. Praise alone will not help; when it appears unalloyed, it suggests that the editor has not invested the necessary effort, not thought deeply about the paper's effects and the way the prose could be improved.
>
> Nevertheless, the tone of the editorial response should be positive. Don't merely point out what's wrong. Identify the things that the author has done well: this way the author will know what to continue to

do....

The collective goal is that we all improve—and, as this happens, that we develop a positive attitude toward the activity in which we are engaged.3

You will likely find that helping others with their writing will also sharpen your ability to improve your own drafts as you reread and revise them.

For most writers, the process of improving drafts goes on until the last minute. Writing and revising drafts will help you focus on all parts of your work more clearly. It will help you see your thinking, your research, your factual knowledge, your expression, and the shape of your ideas. Very often as you write and rewrite drafts of your essay, you will realize that your thought is flabby or you may suddenly think of contrary arguments you have not thought of before. You can then revise to take these contrary arguments into account. Reading your work over and over again, and taking advantage of comments from others, will help you track your own ideas so that they might flow from one to another without leaving gaps that might hinder readers from making the connections you want them to make.

Writer's Checklist for Peer Editing

4 Does the essay stick to the topic and also deal with all the essential issues?

4 Are the purpose—and the thesis—of the essay clear?

4 Is evidence used effectively and documented clearly?

4 Is the tone consistent and evenhanded?

4 Are the author's views clearly evident, yet fairly presented?

4 Is the writing clear, avoiding needless repetition?

4 Are words used appropriately, avoiding clichés and needless verbiage?

4 Is the essay organized clearly so that a reader can follow the argument?

4 Do the conclusions mirror the opening in some way?

4 What is the greatest strength of this essay?

1 Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 115–117.

2 Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in World History* (New York: Viking, 1985): 79–80.

3 Jeff Jeske, “Peer-Editing,” in *Guilford Writing Manual,* http://www.guilford.edu/services/index.cfm?ID=700003980, (n.d., accessed 30 April 2006).