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WRITING IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE

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Within our lifetimes, the ways historians work—and write—have changed a great deal. The most significant of these changes, and the most obvious, is the widespread influence of computer technologies and their applications. While you might easily accept these technologies that seem to have always been a part of your life, a historical perspective on such developments is vital. “We should not perpetuate the myth that technology is a benign force,” warns no less an advocate for the present electronic age in education than Vartan Gregorian, President of the Carnegie Corporation. His essential message, “that connectivity does not guarantee communication,” is one you should embrace as a touchstone for your writing.¹

Electronic storage and retrieval of information, an explosion of ideas and knowledge shared on the Internet, capabilities for nearly instantaneous communication over great distances, and a growing sophistication of word-processing tools for writing and editing have made what some believe are fundamental changes in the writing process. One frequent analogy suggests the Internet is the most revolutionary mode of communication since the invention of radio, while another asserts the impact of computers to alter the work of historians may even be greater than the printing press. To be sure, there are cynics, even among historians, who scoff at what they see as a naïve and all too prevalent assumption that everything useful is on the Internet.

However, nearly all historians of our acquaintance do acknowledge the significant impact of the computer and the Internet on the study and writing of history.

A few even agree with the assertion that only when “historians begin to compose visualizations rather than write articles about the past” using their computers will they realize the full potential of electronic technology to transform their work.² Certainly historians have long seen a variety of visual materials—such as graphs, maps, charts, and photographs—as valuable additions to their written accounts. And the variety of electronic means for accessing and presenting them offers opportunities to enhance writing about and understanding of the past. Computers have, as well, greatly enhanced the analysis of historical statistics, including commercial accounts, census data, and voting records. But we are convinced, along with many of our history colleagues, that electronic technologies, for the immediate future at least, remain most significant to the greatest number of historians for their contributions to the process of writing about history.

But if computers have contributed anything new to the nature of history, such change “does not *fundamentally* affect the production of history,” as the noted British historian, Professor Arthur Marwick, recently observed.³ Thoughtful questioning, conscientious research, diligent evaluation, and careful editing all remain essential to historical writing despite the many ways electronic technologies affect each of these processes. We agree with Professor Jeff Jeske: “Writing is not simply a medium; it is a tool of exploration, a voyage of discovery, one that leads not only to new ideas but clearer ideas.”⁴ Electronic technologies are a boon to that journey, though it continues to require the skilled work of all students of history to reach a destination yielding the stories about the past, intended to be true, which are the hallmark of historical writing.

So significant are electronic technologies to writing about history, throughout this book we have mentioned a number of ways computers, and associated electronic and digital innovations, can be of assistance in many of your efforts at writing history essays. Few of these are absolutely essential to your writing, but it would be unwise to ignore them if you have the capacity to put them to work in shaping your accounts about the past. In three broad phases of the writing process—inquiry, research, and revision—computer and Internet skills are particularly valuable. We believe they are worthy of separate consideration here.

INQUIRY

As you begin your writing process, thinking about historical puzzles and asking questions you wish to answer, the electronic world of the Internet can be a valuable tool. Indeed, the vast and still growing potential of the Internet and the World Wide Web may be the easiest means of finding out if what at first seem to be historical puzzles really are worthy of further questioning. You will be able quickly to find an astounding number of Web sites which mention almost any topic. Always remember, however, that anybody with an Internet connection can set up a Web page! As a result Web pages abound from individuals, from enthusiasts for this or that writer or painter or celebrity both living and dead, and from anyone with a particular point of view to promote. Naturally enough, various fanaticisms abound in this virtually uncontrolled electronic environment. If you want to post a Web page and maintain that you were abducted by space aliens who introduced you to Abraham Lincoln in another galaxy, nothing can stop you. Given the variety of American society, you will probably get a following who will tell you about their own conversations with Lincoln in outer space!

A popular twenty-first century source for quick information is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia created in 2001. With entries on more than a million subjects in English (and

perhaps half that number in other languages) written by two hundred thousand or more authors, this seems an ideal place to find something about any historical topic which interests you. Indeed, a recent report suggests it is among the twenty most popular sites on the Internet. Yet you should exercise an abundance of caution about relying too quickly on any Wikipedia article to answer even your initial questions about a topic.

Like the Internet itself, Wikipedia is open to all who wish to use it. Anyone can write an entry. And anyone else can edit it! This process may lead to collaborative efforts which enhance the accuracy of the entries, as the creators of the site intended. Indeed, some reviews by respected observers have concluded that on many crucial scientific topics the information available on Wikipedia is often more up to date than some print encyclopedias and contains fewer errors. But there is also potential for much mischief. Anyone with an axe to grind on some subject can alter information, and public figures often find that entries made one day about their accomplishments may turn into scandals the next, as opponents edit them in an effort to gain personal or political advantage. Such is the nature of the Internet as a democratic medium of communication. Of course, such electronic vandalism can be corrected, recalling Thomas Jefferson's admonition to his fellow citizens that "eternal vigilance is the price of freedom."

Despite problems such as these associated with open access to the Internet, you should not dismiss the Web as a tool of inquiry. Many valuable and important resources are available on the Web, and they are growing. To help you harness this potential, no doubt you will want to use one of the wide variety of available search engines to connect with Web sites containing some information on topics that interest you. The most popular, and some claim the most effective, is currently Google, at <http://www.google.com>, with a revamped Yahoo search engine, at <http://www.yahoo.com>, not far behind. Both attempt to rank the relevance of the results

concerning your search keywords based on a secret formula, or algorithm, that evaluates how many links each has to other relevant Web sites.

Most search engines also prominently feature those sites whose operators pay to have their addresses advanced ahead of other search results. Sometimes these sponsored results are clearly identified, but not always. In fact, the operating parameters of most online search engines are frequently changing. This approach, some critics claim, creates a caste system in which some Web sites determine the popularity of others dealing with the same topics. This does not diminish the value of the search, but it should serve as warning when you move beyond your initial explorations to more serious research on your topic.

As you continue your initial inquiries, also remember that the advent of reliable electronic communications has made it possible for you to seek help from any number of historians and other scholars. Possibilities for discussion—through news groups, chat rooms, blogs, and instant messaging services—roar across the Internet without pause. Some may be of help to you as you ponder the issues about which you may wish to write. Their informal nature, often including the use of icons which may allow you to include visual clues to what you wish to say, make them attractive electronic places in which to consider questions about a topic. This informality has an important place in encouraging the kinds of questions that you must ask as you begin your writing process. And they may also offer excellent opportunities to begin writing at a time when you may feel bogged down and afflicted by writer's block.

Perhaps of more interest to those seeking answers to historical questions, however, are somewhat more formal discussion lists comprised of people interested in a particular topic to which the list is dedicated. Some, however, remain free-for-all forums where anything sent to the list is immediately resent to all the e-mail boxes registered for the group. Others are presided

over by one or more moderators or editors who ensure that only messages germane to the list topic will be posted. Many in the latter group are of interest to historians, especially those sponsored by the scholarly collective known as H-Net, Humanities and Social Sciences Online. You can find the directory of more than one hundred H-Net discussion networks at <http://www.h-net.org>, where you can also access logs in which previous messages are archived. Although not all of them are strictly devoted to history, most do consider topics that have broad historical dimensions. They range from H-World, devoted to many issues in World History, to H-Quilts, considering the history and making of quilts, to H-Tennessee, with discussions and information mostly about the history and geography of that mid-south state, and many other topics.

All these H-Net discussion networks offer the opportunity to ask questions about many subjects—books and articles, puzzles in evidence, current problems—anything at all relating to the interests the group is intended to serve. Each has its own rules, including ways to join and ways to end your membership. We would offer one note of caution. A potential danger of belonging to several such groups is that your electronic mailbox may fill up quickly, and you might receive a great deal of information you don't want or need. When you join, however, you may be given an opportunity to set your options so that this problem is reduced, often by receiving daily digests of collected messages. Be sure to read the welcome message you first receive to discover how to do this. Such groups do form valuable scholarly communities, and you can tap into them in various ways not only to begin your own inquiries into a potential topic but also to eavesdrop on postings that may later aid you in your research.

H-Net discussions are somewhat more formal than the freewheeling chat rooms and blog sites, yet they still remain informal ways to begin your questioning process. But as you develop

your topic, you may also have opportunities to contact historians directly. When you read a book or article by a living historian, you may be able to reach that person by e-mail with a question and often receive in return a generous reply. The American Historical Association publishes an annual directory of Departments of History that includes a list of individual historians with e-mail addresses for many of them. Still others have e-mail addresses listed on the World Wide Web pages of the universities or other institutions where they are employed. Both of us have received numerous inquiries directly from students and through discussion networks to which we belong, and we have tried to respond whenever we could be of help. You may be fortunate to locate another historian similarly disposed.

As you begin such electronic discussions, remember the opportunity to connect does not ensure that you will be able to communicate. For example, the informality encouraged in chat rooms or as you exchange instant messages may not be the best way to encourage a serious reply. The great disadvantage of forming a habit of informal chat is that it can, if you are not cautious, lead to habits of writing that may be considered sloppy and ill-considered to serious readers. We recommend that you take advantage of the spell-checking features embedded in many e-mail programs as you finish writing any message, although you should recognize their limitations. Be sure to reread carefully what you plan to send, making sure you have been clear and will not be misunderstood. Such caution seems to some a betrayal of the open and democratic nature of the Internet that has been an important characteristic of this medium. It may be. However, the reality of written communication—even as viewed on a computer screen—is that adherence to common conventions of writing, including punctuation, capitalization, and basic grammar, remains of great value. And it is more likely to elicit a reply.

If your inquiries lead to fruitful responses from scholars, or if you have found encouraging

information through your own searches on the Web or by reading discussion lists, be sure to take notes on what you have discovered. At this point you may be jotting ideas down on paper, but take care to organize them so they won't get away from you. A better solution is to take notes using your computer! We strongly recommend that you begin keeping electronic files with notes even at this early stage. That may be especially valuable later so that you do not have to retrace your initial inquiries as you undertake further research. Almost any word-processing program can be used for note-taking and then be of enormous value in organizing your notes as you begin to write a draft of your essay.

Do take care—as you should in all note-taking endeavors—in selecting keywords and using them in your note files. You can later locate all of the references you have found on a particular subject by using the search or FIND function on your word-processing program to locate those keywords. Many such programs will also allow you to shift your notes into the electronic file in which you are writing your essay; simply block and copy text from your note files, then open your essay file and paste the information there. Be sure to indicate clearly [perhaps in square brackets] location information, particularly Web links or page numbers, as you write your notes into a computer file. For some Web sites, you must indicate clearly the precise and complete URL for the particular source you have found, as well as any search terms you have used to locate specific information.

While you may use most word-processing programs to accomplish such tasks, there are a number of specific note-taking programs that you might wish to use instead. A program we find particularly useful is Scribe, created by Elena Razlogova of George Mason University's Center for History and the New Media. It is available as a free download from the World Wide Web at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/scribe> in a compressed file format. You will need to use a file

decompression program to activate the Scribe program and its attachments before you can begin work; there is a link to a recommended program on the Web site. With Scribe, you can create virtual note cards with detailed location information, very long notes and separate personal comments, plus the capacity to use a large number of keywords. You can export footnotes and bibliography entries, formatted to match *The Chicago Manual of Style* suggestions which historians usually use. It does take a little time to study the instructions and master Scribe features and operations, although if you anticipate using it for several projects we think it will be well worth your time and effort.

Whether you use a specialized note-taking or database program, or merely take notes with your word-processing program, be sure to save your notes as you work and especially as you finish each research or writing session, no matter how short. Some programs automatically create back-up files, but we encourage you to make others. Take advantage of the easy means electronic media provides to save your work. Keep several copies using your computer hard drive as well as additional copies in other formats. For as long as we have been writing, we have heard disheartening experiences almost every year of tribulations students and colleagues have undergone because they have lost all their research due to one sort of disaster or another. We have not wanted to join them! In preparing each edition of this book, for example, we have kept copies of every chapter in a separate file, and have four or more copies of each—on our computer hard drives, floppy disks, compressed “zip” disks, CD-ROMs created with our computers, and USB drives (also known as memory sticks or flash drives) as well as printed paper versions. You should do so, too, even with the notes from your first inquiries into potential topics, and continue as you proceed with more intensive research.

RESEARCH

Once you have completed notes from your inquiries, you can continue the writing process by narrowing your list of possible topics. And then you can turn your efforts to careful research for the essay you intend to write. In connecting with potential sources for your topic, you will also find electronic technologies of great assistance. However, don't make the Web sites and discussion lists you have used in your initial inquiries your first choices for your research. Make it a habit to look first at the resources of your university or college library. You will find not only catalogs, most now offered in electronic and online formats, but also collections of reference materials as well as links to proprietary search and information resources to which you would likely not otherwise have access.

Although libraries use a variety of systems to present their catalogs for research, most have similar features. Online catalogs have become the most common and usually allow you to search for materials by *author* and *title* as well as by *subject* or *keyword*. Keep in mind that for a library catalog, the subject usually refers to a uniform set of subject headings created by the Library of Congress. You will have to enter these exactly for a subject search to be successful. Your library may have a collection of bound volumes containing all these subject headings, listed alphabetically. But it will likely be easier to choose the *long* or *full* catalog record of a work you have already identified to see what some appropriate subject headings for your topic may be. Easier still, you can search most library catalogs by *keyword*, usually a name or topic of particular interest to you. And most often you can also refine that search by either including or excluding other particular terms or specifying that a particular phrase should appear exactly as you have given it. Most catalogs have easy links to instructions to help you make such advanced searches. The results, however, will be only to materials that have been preselected for inclusion in your library. In some libraries, those offerings may be extensive, but in others they may not be

nearly so voluminous.

Do not limit your initial search for material to just what is easily at hand. One expansive resource that may be available to you is WorldCat, a worldwide union catalog of holdings in about nine thousand libraries associated with the Ohio-based Online Computer Library Center. This is sometimes available for student access through member college libraries, although not all associated institutions subscribe for such widespread access. Nonetheless, a number of commercial associates—including some Internet search engines—do draw entries from the vast WorldCat database; information about these and an explanation of how you might use the service in this way is available at <http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/open/default.htm>. Another, alternative resource, readily available on the Internet for several years now, is an integrated online catalog of almost 12 million bibliographic records from the Library of Congress; you can access it at <http://catalog.loc.gov>. The time you spend looking at either of these catalogs and studying their online directions and user assistance pages will surely be rewarded, sometimes with many more materials than you imagined existed!

You may also be able, either through your own institution's library or on the Internet, to find catalogs of other educational, public, or specialized libraries which you might also search for information relevant to your topic. If you find materials in a nearby library, you may be able to look at them there, or even in some cases to borrow materials much as you would in your own college library. But if that is not possible, consider making an *interlibrary loan* request for an article or book that seems to be in the collections of another library. Because Internet connectivity has made this process much easier and more widely available, you should certainly ask at your local library if it might be possible for you to make such a request. Don't be surprised if the result—especially for journal articles—is an electronic file to read in your library, or on

your own computer. Still, all this takes time, even with the nearly instantaneous exchange of messages the Internet seems to promise. We have found that our students often underestimate the amount of time, and work, involved in the research process. In both general terms, and also against the possibility that you might need to await delivery of some materials, we strongly encourage you to begin research for your essay as early as possible.

Other valuable electronic research assistance can be found through JSTOR, The Scholarly Journal Archive, and Project Muse. Both provide full-text electronic access to scholarly journals in a variety of fields, including history. Project Muse has a database of mostly recent articles from about 300 journals, while the JSTOR database contains the full run of issues up to five years before the present for more than 150 specialized journals in history and other fields. Using either database, you can search the entire text of all the articles in the available journals by keyword or author. And you can electronically receive copies of individual articles you wish to read for your research. (JSTOR articles will be sent as portable document files, known as PDFs; to read them, you will need to have the Adobe Acrobat Reader installed on the computer you are using. This is available free at <http://www.adobe.com>. Many university and college libraries subscribe to either or both JSTOR and Project Muse, and you should inquire if they are available to you. Most libraries do provide access to other electronic databases that can be searched for article titles, although few of these provide more than abstracts of content. Nonetheless, you should ask about these as well. With results from them in hand, you will be able to look for original printed articles concerning your subject in a library, or request them through an interlibrary loan service.

Many other primary and secondary sources for writing about history may also be found in abundance on the World Wide Web, some in less than obvious places. One historian recently

confessed—if that is the correct word—to using the online auction site eBay as a location for research. Interested in popular expressions of northern sentiment during the Civil War, Jonathan White found several significant items for his research offered for sale by the “entrepreneurial junk collectors” among eBay dealers. White had not found these cards, covers, and broadsides through any database or Internet search, concluding that eBay offered “scholars a unique opportunity to consult or use items that they otherwise would never have discovered even after spending months searching through a multitude of library catalogs.”⁵ For some topics you might also find this to be true.

Although unorthodox, White’s approach does offer a reminder that the nature of the World Wide Web is such that literally anybody can create a Web page and post literally anything for the entire world (at least potentially) to see. Many scholars applaud these developments as a further democratization of information. Certainly the role of a careful, and perhaps sometimes overcautious, journal or book editor is bypassed in the case of some Web sites. So, too, is the role of the friendly librarian, though many are willing to point questioning students to valuable Web sites as well as more traditional reference materials.

There are many listings, even entire books, of important or especially valuable URLs for college history students. These are designed to help you in making the necessary evaluations of Web sites as a part of your research process. In this *Short Guide* we cannot mention many, but here are several we have found to be especially helpful to students, not least because they all feature primary source documents for open public use.

1. *The Library of Congress*

<http://www.loc.gov>

In addition to its library catalog, The Library of Congress Web site is particularly

significant for the large collection of primary sources on U.S. history available in its American Memory collection. And the more recently added Global Gateway provides a growing collection of materials and information concerning world history, including some primary source materials drawn from the library's collections. Both can be easily be accessed from links on the main site.

2. *World History Matters*

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorymatters>

Sponsored by the Center for History and the New Media, this relatively new site is devoted not only to source materials but also to effective teaching and learning about history of, and throughout, the world. One exciting feature presents thoughtful, scholarly reviews of more than 200 primary source archives placed online in many other countries.

3. *Internet Archive of Texts and Documents*

<http://history.hanover.edu/texts.html>

Originally conceived as a broad collection of both primary and secondary historical sources, the Hanover Historical Texts Project was cut back in scope after July 2000, with fewer entries than were once available. However, this new archive does include a link to the greater number of documents in the original Project files and numerous other Web sites containing historical sources. It is particularly strong for European History.

4. *Historical Text Archive*

<http://historicaltextarchive.com/>

First created at Mississippi State University, this archive moved twice in less than a decade. It continues to offer a superb collection of articles and books as well as more than 5,000 links to related material in many fields of history—as well as advertising

logos, which became necessary to ensure its continued support.

All of these appear to be stable sites which you can depend on if you make citations to sources you find there. But the experience of the last two offers an important caveat about using the World Wide Web for historical research. Web sites are changing all the time, and almost any list of excellent Web resources may quickly become obsolete. Of course, everyone knows that books, too, disappear, not least by extensive use. And archives may be destroyed in catastrophic events such as fire or through neglect. But somehow the transitory nature of the World Wide Web often looms larger in historians' minds. The Web is not yet a substitute for a good library. Do not let this concern lead you to avoid using it entirely. Use the Web cautiously. Take full advantage of the powers of available search engines to locate potential materials. Keep good records of what you find. And always go back to any site at least one additional time to be sure you have recorded the URL and other information correctly. Also learn to recognize that some problems in locating—and relocating—Web materials may be caused not at the source of the Web site but somewhere in the chain of transmission to the computer you are using.

Strictly speaking, Internet (and other electronic) sources are not different from other primary and secondary sources. They do not really constitute a separate category of historical materials. You should certainly be skeptical about what you find, as you would when considering any historical source. In the case of World Wide Web materials, though, the role of historical evaluation has passed from such designated mediators as editors and librarians directly to the researcher and writer. In short, it is *your* responsibility to assess the value of the materials you locate on the Internet. Quite likely your instructor will expect you to “be more cautious and evaluative in an electronic environment”⁶ as you prepare your history essays. This is not unreasonable. Nor is it extraordinary for any research you might do before writing a history

essay.

If you begin the process of gathering information for your essay by establishing clear questions you wish to answer, you will be well on the way to an evaluation strategy once you turn to sources you find on the World Wide Web. Similarly, if you have done a little background work ahead of time, you will have a better basis of information to use in assessing what you find on the Web. Once you locate any potential source on the Internet, you need to explore the full site of which it is a part. Most high quality and reliable sites have easy navigation tools, not only on their home page but also on subsidiary pages as well. Try using these to see what else is available. Is it consistent with the specific information you have found? Or do the internal links take you to only marginally related material? If so, why?

If you start from a home page, such as that for the Library of Congress, try the various main links that you see. Discover what types of information you may find using several of them, then use the BACK feature on your web browser if you are unable to find a HOME link on one of the pages. Start your exploration again. Should you begin on what appears to be a subsidiary page, by all means look for the home page. If there is no HOME link available, try following back the URL given on your web browser for the site you have found. Use just the letters and other characters beginning on the left of your browser's location bar up until the first single slash (/) as a separate URL. This may not always be successful, although it will frequently take you to the home or foundation site where the materials you have located reside.

Once you get to the home page, you will have to start asking questions again. Who created and/or maintains this site? What organization, if any, sponsors this work? Do they have any particular interests in the content? Or, are there no sponsors? Is this the work of a single enthusiast? Certainly individuals may create such Web materials for many scholarly or

nonpartisan purposes. You may need to use the historian's skill of inference to answer some of these questions, at least in part. But if you are unable to locate any information about the sponsor or creator of a Web page, that should give you pause. Remember the high value historians place on skepticism in evaluation of their sources!

In this spirit, we also caution against an uncritical acceptance of historical documents, including photographs, which you might find on the Internet. Sadly, the creators of some Web sites have been known to alter even well-known historical documents (perhaps most frequently by omitting select portions of the text) in an effort to use the altered versions in support of a particular cause. And digital technologies have made adjustments in photographs far easier than it was in Stalin's day, when government officials of the Soviet Union disappeared from official photos of the national leadership after one purge or another. This example also suggests that you should look carefully at when the site was created. Even historians want to know if the information they are using reflects the most recent research. Consequently, many Web sites with historical information will clearly indicate—on the Web site itself—the dates of their most recent revisions or upgrades.

Although such explorations of a Web site might seem tedious, you might find a gem of information tucked away in an unexpected place. We have experienced such serendipity more than once! And in any case, by taking this approach to exploring a Web site you can more readily begin the process of using the historian's critical method. First, ask yourself: Is what I have found *plausible*? The more fantastic the information and explanations you are offered seem to be, the more likely they will simply be fantasy. Once past that examination, consider if the Web site should be regarded as *trustworthy*. What is it about the site that inspires your trust?

Next, you will want to think about the *accuracy* of the information you have found on the

Web site. Although some historical information is almost timeless, you may make a start in thinking about accuracy by your discovery of when the site was created and how recently it may have been updated. Do not despair or reject the information out of hand if you cannot readily find its most recently modified date. You can look for other indicators of accuracy. Read carefully to see if there are lots of categorical assertions. Claims of *completely*, *never*, or *always*—as opposed to, say, *nearly*, *seldom*, or *usually*—can also be indicators that the authors may not have explored all the ramifications of the topic. Also look for the qualities of impartiality and balance in the writing. Has the author taken other opinions into account?

Finally, as you would for any source, you should look for *corroboration* in other sources, not just on the Web but in reference works and other—often printed—sources. While it is not necessary to reject information that you may not be able to affirm through other sources, you will certainly need to treat it more cautiously in what you write. The story—complete with compelling photographs—of “Boilerplate,” a nineteenth-century mechanical man, is a case in point. Created by comic-book artist Paul Guinan as a means of illustrating the possibilities of contemporary graphic art and storytelling, Boilerplate is *almost* believable. Certainly this source has featured in any number of high school and even college history essays. Not only doctored photographs, but also fictitious bibliographic references—mixed among real articles and links to legitimate Web sites—add to the ruse. To his credit, when the deception became public knowledge Guinan included those accounts debunking his historical “joke” among the items in the “Boilerplate News & Notes” section of his Web page.⁷ But the entire effort points again to the care you must take in corroborating electronic sources you unearth in your research.

As you use all of these means to assess your research, and especially the information you find on the World Wide Web, remember that you are in essence practicing the essential

evaluative skills necessary for being a historian. No matter whether your sources are primary or secondary, oral or written, found on the Web, on a CD-ROM, or in a print medium—the essence of the historian’s critical method remains the same. Making a conscious effort to apply it to your electronic research work will also help you to improve the writing in your completed history essay.

REVISION

When you move from the notes taken during your research to writing a draft of your essay, the electronic environment does pose special hazards if you are not cautious. 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 in your notes—and then in your essay. If you use this technique in note-taking, you will need to be certain you insert quotation marks and also mark those notes as quotations. Failing to do so could lead to careless insertion of some material you have copied directly into your essay. And even if you are simply careless and have no intent to deceive anyone, you will be guilty of plagiarism. Remember: it is *your* responsibility to avoid such errors.

Attending to such issues as you begin drafting your essay will also keep you focused on the possibilities for continual revision. Writers have long made revisions even on their first drafts. Manuscripts of many well known nineteenth-century authors reveal such tinkering with their work—crossing out passages, adding others, writing new text in the margins, until the manuscripts were nearly impossible to read. Then they had to start again on a fresh piece of paper! But no matter how messy, they saved the originals (as their archived papers attest) so they might go back and look again at their initial writing efforts.

Word-processing programs have, of course, made that process easier, although with one

potential disadvantage. Often the original inspirations are gone, erased from the screen and replaced by a new version. We have found this to be a particular problem in our writing, and have taken to saving several versions of electronic drafts. Sometimes we open a new window on our computers and work separately on what seems to be a troublesome passage. Then we save that as a separate file so we can go back and look at it again. With the vast digital storage capacity of modern electronic devices, we can save many of these, but we are careful to give each a distinct filename. And we are grateful that our computers date and time each saved file so we are able, if necessary, to reconstruct the sequence of our thoughts. We believe the potentials of our electronic writing tools—even more than the quick availability of information on the Internet—mark perhaps the greatest contributions of our electronic age to the writing of historians.

Certainly you are familiar with the word-processing process. But in our experience, students often do not appreciate—or in any case do not fully utilize—many features of electronic writing programs to revise and improve what they write. Yet no such program, no matter how advanced or up-to-date, will be helpful until you learn how to use it effectively. Many colleges and universities have adopted particular word-processing programs as a standard for their campuses and frequently provide technical assistance in using them. Take advantage of such help! Rather than an indication of your ignorance, doing so is a signal of your intent to improve your writing. Recent editions of word-processing programs often have very useful HELP menus or utilities included. Take advantage of them as well, both to learn how the program works and to refresh your memory about features you infrequently utilize.

But it is unlikely you will need to learn all the features before you begin to write. At a minimum, though, you will want to know how to use **bold** or *italic* text, set margins, change

fonts, insert special characters (such as the currency symbols £, ¥, and €), add page numbers, and, of course, insert footnotes (and endnotes). We have appreciated the ease with which our word processors allow us to change our citations from footnotes to endnotes and back again. You will too, if you first used one format and then discover your instructor would prefer another. We have found, however, that occasionally the automatic formatting of footnotes (much more so than endnotes) may result in awkward placement of references. You may need to manually alter the number of lines of text on a page to adjust the placement of the notes. If you do not immediately have someone who can assist you in mastering these functions, you may not need an expansive (and all too frequently expensive!) reference manual for the program you are using. First, ask a fellow student or your instructor, then try the program's HELP features or a campus computer help service. The time you spend will be well rewarded with an essay that looks and reads as you really want it to.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of using a computer and a word-processing program for writing is the capacity to readily make changes to the text of your essay, not only as you begin to write a draft but also when you return to make corrections after final proofreading. You can block and copy whole sections of what you have written and move them as you write and rewrite. And you can easily correct errors you have made typing or in writing your text. Frequently the newer programs will do some of this automatically, or almost automatically, for you. Take care when using such features. The programs are often designed to make such changes with minimal, if any, input from the writer. Remember: you are responsible for what you write. So be certain that any such changes reflect what *you* want to say. If you can set which items may be autocorrected, do so. If you cannot, you may wish to turn off any autocorrect functions. In any case, always read over the final text of your essay and edit it yet again yourself before you

submit it to your instructor.

Similarly, the word-processing programs we use—and likely yours as well—are invaluable for checking our spelling, but only against the words stored in their memories. If you can add words to the spell-checker, by all means do so; that way terms that may be particular to your topic will not be marked as misspelled. But be careful when you enter those words, making sure the spelling you wish to use is the one you actually save. We always read what we have written on the screen and study each of the errors identified by the program; we urge you to do the same. Most often we correct those the computer has spotted. But we also know that in the binary logic of the computer some mistakes are not readily identified. For example, if you refer to a particular *sight* where you have found valuable sources for your essay, that will not be marked as misspelled, even though your instructor may wonder why you were searching for something you could see out your window rather than on a Web *site*. There are many other examples. Therefore, after re-reading our essays and making revisions on our computer screens, we have come back to the practice of also printing out a manuscript, going over it carefully with pen or pencil, and only then inserting final corrections and revisions in the computer. You may wish to consider this approach as well. But above all, you must take special care to read your work over multiple times.

Other word-processing innovations may not be as useful to you in the writing process. Among these, grammar checking functions are one of those which can be both helpful and also mystifying. When we have changed a word from singular to plural and forgotten to change the corresponding verb, the program usually marks the error, and we appreciate that. But sometimes whole phrases are noted as problematic which, on close examination, seem to be exactly as we intended and easily read. Also the thesaurus on our word processors frequently offers only

limited options for potential synonyms. We still prefer a printed version, especially the new *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* which is particularly valuable for identifying subtle differences in word usage and meanings.⁸ But our least favorite word-processing innovation is the autosummarizing option that seldom achieves anything like the “executive summary” it promises. We never use this option, preferring to make our own summaries of what we have written, and urge you to do the same.

Recent upgrades in word-processing programs may also facilitate revisions through peer-editing and similar processes. These editing functions, sometimes called “track changes” features, permit several people to read the same document file and to suggest deletions, insertions, and comments—each using distinctive colors that identify their recommendations. As the author, you may want to ask several friends to read a computer file with your essay and make electronic editorial suggestions. If they do so sequentially, each adding new advice, you can come back to your essay in a single file with a variety of comments and ideas for improving what you have written. Most such programs then allow you to accept or reject each of those changes and incorporate decisions about them into your final document. This sort of collaborative writing and revision process does take some getting used to, but has the advantage of easily consolidating comments and making it relatively easy to incorporate them into your final draft. It is a useful writing innovation that we encourage you to explore.

Finally, we again want to urge you to make back-up copies of your work at each stage in the writing process—from your initial inquiries, through your research, and also in writing both drafts and your final essay—to make back-up copies of your work. Make multiple electronic copies of your essay, and print a paper copy as well. Too often students have come to us ash-faced, reporting they have lost, erased, or destroyed the only disk on which they saved their

essay. While we can and do sympathize, and grieve with them, there is seldom much we can do to help. Remember: it is up to you to prevent losing your hard work!

Without question, all the processes we discuss in this book related to writing about history have been modified and even improved with advances in electronic technologies. Use them if you can. But as you do so, carefully ask yourself questions below.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Have I used electronic technologies to assist in my writing rather than as an end in itself?
- 4 Did I carefully consider the parameters of each Web search I used to find information?
- 4 Have I tried using the Internet to ask questions of historians and others about my topic?
- 4 Have I used online library catalogs and other electronic databases to find sources on my topic?
- 4 Have I been skeptical of the electronic sources I found and applied the historian's critical method in evaluating them?
- 4 Are my electronic notes and drafts saved in multiple files and kept in separate locations?
- 4 Have I been very careful to identify any quotations I have taken directly from my electronic sources?
- 4 Am I cautious in relying on my word processor in making editorial changes to my essay?

1 Vartan Gregorian, "Grounding Technology in Both Science and Significance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 December 2005, B 4-5.

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2 David J. Staley, *Computers, Visualization, and History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 4-5.

3 Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2001), 146.

4 Jeff Jeske, "Why Write," *Guilford Writing Manual*, <http://www.guilford.edu/services/index.cfm?ID=700002920>, (n.d.; accessed 1 May 2006).

Inquiry

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Research

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5 Jonathan W. White, "An Unlikely Database: Using the Internet Creatively in Historical Research," *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 44, no. 3 (March 2006): 53.

Research

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Research

6 Deborah Lines Anderson, "Heuristics for the Educational Use and Evaluation of Electronic Information," in *History.edu: Essays on Teaching with Technology*, ed. Dennis A. Trickle and Scott M. Merriman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 135.

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Research

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7 Paul Guinan, *Boilerplate: The Mechanical Marvel of the Nineteenth Century*, <http://www.bigredhair.com/boilerplate>, updated August 2003 (accessed 15 April 2006); the deception is discussed in "The Art of the Hoax," *U. S. News & World Report*, special issue, 26 August–2 September 2002.

Revision

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Revision

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8 Christine A. Lindberg, comp., *The Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Revision