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WRITING CONVENTIONS AND STYLE

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Historians are a broad community, and like most communities they have their conventions, their ways of doing things. Among historians, writing conventions are perhaps most important. These are neither laws nor strict rules, and sometimes they are not logical. Rather they are simply customary. These conventions also change from age to age and differ from region to region. Still historians depend on conventions and find them necessary. Members of the community notice when the conventions are challenged. If you depart from the conventions, you run the risk of not being taken seriously. Your readers may even turn hostile toward what you write because you seem to insult them by refusing to live up to their expectations. It makes no sense for a writer to irritate readers. It's hard enough to get them to pay attention to you without putting more obstacles in their way!

At the same time, all writers express themselves in their own style, and every historian offers an individual approach to the past. Certainly style in writing varies from writer to writer, and general agreement on style is hard to come by. Some historians are vivid and dramatic; others are content to be more prosaic. Yet within the historical community substance is always to be prized over what Peter Gay describes as "a historian's emotional style" in writing about the past. "Instructive as the historian's selection of expressive techniques and unconscious coloring

of narrative may be,” Gay concludes that each historian’s “habit of doing research and offering proof” is a better guide to a historian’s “professional style.” Gay acknowledges, however, that all these elements of style are “also proof of [the historian’s] unconquerable subjectivity.”¹

No writer can please everybody. Shape your own style by making it as readable as you can, trying at the same time to avoid monotony of expression. Always remember that readers will bring to your work a set of expectations based upon their sense of common conventions in historical writing. A good style combines readability and variety without running ahead of the evidence supporting it. Certainly a brief chapter cannot tell you everything you need to know about style. But since beginning writers often lack confidence in their own writing, we encourage you to seek advice. For many years, American college students have benefited from the suggestions of William Strunk and E. B. White in *The Elements of Style*, now in its fourth edition.² We recommend their advice to you.

In addition, we want to share a few principles drawn from research on readability and the common practice of many mature writers, including numbers of historians. These are not meant to restrict your efforts to adopt a personal style of writing; rather they are guidelines based on much experience. Pay attention to them, and to the suggestions and expectations of your instructor.

SIMPLE AND DIRECT WRITING

Some of the best advice about writing is summarized in the title of a book on the subject: *Simple and Direct*, by the respected American historian, Jacques Barzun. Of course, writing well is not always that simple, even if you follow the all too common advice to “write as we speak. That is absurd,” as Barzun plainly writes:

Most speaking is not plain or direct, but vague, clumsy, confused, and wordy. This last fault appears in every

transcript from taped conversation, which is why we say “*reduce to writing*.” What is meant by the advice to write as we speak is to write *as we might* speak if we spoke extremely well. This means that good writing should not sound stuffy, pompous, highfalutin, totally unlike ourselves, but rather, well—“simple & direct.”³ In addition to the sensible advice that you read your essay carefully—even reading it aloud to be sure you have written what you intended—there are several key areas to keep in mind as you draft your essay. Following these conventions will help you develop a personal writing style which will serve you, and your readers, well.

Write in coherent paragraphs.

Paragraphs are groups of sentences bound together by a controlling idea and intended to help readability. Indentations break the monotony of long columns of type. They help readers follow the text with greater ease, providing special help when they lift their eyes from the page and must find their place again. Paragraphs signal a slight change in subject from what has gone before and announce that the paragraph to follow will develop a thought that can usually be summarized in a simple statement. A good rule of thumb is to have one or two indentations on every typed manuscript page. It is only a rule of thumb—not a command. And for historical writing it is also a good idea to avoid the one- or two-sentence paragraph common in journalism.

All paragraphs are built on the first sentence, and the succeeding sentences in the paragraph should run in a natural flow from it. In any good paragraph you can draw lines between connectors, sometimes a word in one sentence that is repeated in the next. The connectors tie your sentences together—and therefore link your thoughts. You can often test paragraph coherence by seeing if every sentence has connectors that join its thought in some way to the previous sentence all the way back to the first sentence in the paragraph. Other paragraphs may be more like lists of more or less interchangeable items that support the general statement made in the first sentence. Of course, all paragraphs do not fall neatly into these two categories. But in

all good paragraphs and essays (or chapters of books), patterns of repetition hold all prose together. Short-term memories require this kind of repetition so that readers are continually reminded of what has gone on before. Each sentence both repeats something from previous sentences—a word, a synonym, or an idea—while adding something new to the information the readers already possess.

Look for the connectors in this paragraph from a recent article in *The American Historical Review*, in which historian Lizabeth Cohen discusses the development of shopping malls and the role of real estate developers in creating them.

While bringing many of the best qualities of urban life to the suburbs, these new “shopping towns,” as [Victor] Gruen called them, also sought to overcome the “anarchy and ugliness” characteristic of many American cities. A centrally owned and managed Garden State Plaza or Bergen Mall, it was argued, offered an alternative model to the inefficiencies, visual chaos, and provinciality of traditional downtown districts. A centralized administration made possible the perfect mix and “scientific” placement of stores, meeting customers’ diverse needs and maximizing store owners’ profits. Management kept control visually by standardizing all architectural and graphic design and politically by requiring all tenants to participate in the tenants’ association. Common complaints of downtown shoppers were directly addressed: parking was plentiful, safety was ensured by hired security guards, delivery tunnels and loading courts kept truck traffic away from shoppers, canopied walks and air-conditioned stores made shopping comfortable year ’round, piped-in background music replaced the cacophony of the street. The preponderance of chains and franchises over local stores, required by big investors such as insurance companies, brought shoppers the latest national trends in products and merchandising techniques. B. Earl Puckett, Allied Stores’ board chair, boasted that Paramus’s model shopping centers were making it “one of the first preplanned major cities in America.” What made this new market structure so unique and appealing to businessmen like Puckett was that it encouraged social innovation while maximizing profit.⁴

As we have said, the paragraph is a flexible form, and these suggestions about its structure are not rigid rules. But if you think of them when you write, you will develop greater coherence

to your thought, and you can develop a feel for what should be in a paragraph and what not.

Keep sentences manageable.

Your sentences, too, should always focus on the most important idea you want to make in that statement. Try not to entangle your sentences with other information you cannot readily develop or that is not related directly to some previous information in your essay. One way to keep sentences manageable is to avoid multiplying dependent clauses that act as adjectives or adverbs and modify other elements in a sentence. While they are necessary to writing, most readable writing does not use a dependent clause in every sentence. A sentence may have one or two dependent clauses. But a couple of sentences that come after it may have no dependent clauses at all—as in this paragraph from Margaret Darrow’s article concerning the self-denial apparent in the writing of French battlefield nurses in World War I.

In the end the nurses’ memoirs, like the commentaries, left intact the incongruity, even the opposition, of women and war. Targets of as much criticism as praise, nurses in their memoirs absolved themselves of the charge of pursuing feminine emancipation, solidarity, and values at the expense of masculine suffering by subordinating their wartime experience to the soldier’s story. Rather than script a role for the volunteer nurse alongside the soldier in the War Myth, even the grimmest and most “realistic” of the nurses’ memoirs placed the wounded soldier on a pedestal and the nurse, head bowed, at his feet, her emotional suffering a tribute to his sacrifice. In their personal accounts, France’s nurse memoirists helped erase their own experiences from the public memory of the war. Their works did not reshape the War Myth to include women; instead they commemorated World War I as the trench-fighters’ war and confirmed the essence of the war experience as masculinity.⁵

We are not suggesting that you should avoid dependent clauses altogether, but we are saying that you should not make them so numerous they cause you to lose control of your sentences and make your prose difficult to read. Do avoid writing in the short, choppy sentences of a first-grade reader about Dick and Jane. But you will help keep your thinking clear if in

writing sentences you think first of the subject, then of what you want to say about it. Our natural way of composing sentences, whether we speak or write, is to name a subject and then to make a statement about it. Sometimes inexperienced writers are paralyzed by the thought that they begin too many sentences with the subject. They feel a laudable desire to vary their sentences by changing the beginnings and adding explanatory phrases. Yet it seldom improves your writing to bury your real subject in a dependent clause. Indeed, most readable writers use dependent clauses only once or twice in every three or four sentences. The main action of your sentence should be in the main clause. In that clause you should identify the subject and the action or activity involving your subject, which usually means keeping subjects as close to their verbs as possible.

As with most writing conventions, this is not an absolute requirement. Every writer sometimes puts a word or a phrase or even a clause between a subject and a verb. But take care not to overdo it. Here is a fine, readable paragraph by historians Oscar and Lilian Handlin, from their book, *Liberty in Expansion*; note the close relation between subjects and verbs in the sentences—even in the dependent clauses.

The healing image meant much to a government, not all of whose statesmen were pure of heart and noble of impulse. On January 30, 1798, the House of Representatives being in session in Philadelphia, Mr. Rufus Griswold of Connecticut alluded to a story that Mr. Matthew Lyon of Vermont had been forced to wear a wooden sword for cowardice in the field. Thereupon Mr. Lyon spat in Mr. Griswold's face. Sometime later, Mr. Griswold went to Macalister's store on Chestnut Street and bought the biggest hickory stick available. He proceeded to the House, where, in the presence of the whole Congress and with Mr. Speaker urging him on, he beat Mr. Lyon about the head and shoulders. An effort to censure both actors in the drama failed.⁶

Making sure that you connect the subjects of your sentences closely to the verbs which describe the actions they are taking—and that you use singular subjects with singular verbs, and

plural subjects with plural verbs—will also help you focus on another important stylistic element of good writing.

Avoid the passive voice.

In sentences using the passive voice, the verb acts on the subject. In the active voice, the subject acts through the verb. Here is a sentence in the active voice:

President John F. Kennedy made the decision to invade Cuba.

Here is a sentence in the passive voice:

The decision was made to invade Cuba.

You can see at once a problem with using the passive voice. It often hides the actor in the sentence. In the active voice we know who made the decision. In the passive voice we do not know who made the decision unless we add the clumsy prepositional phrase “by President John F. Kennedy.”

Announcements by governments frequently use the passive voice. “Mistakes were made,” according to one government press release that we read not long ago. The passive shields us from knowing who made the mistakes. We sometimes receive essays from students who write in the passive voice, thinking that will absolve them from writing anything which suggests they have learned who did what. Of course, if that effort is successful, it also reveals that they have done the hard historical work necessary to write stories about the past that they intended to be true.

Readable historians use the passive only when they have a reason for doing so. Use the passive when the obvious importance of the sentence is that the subject is acted upon:

Bill Clinton was elected to a second term as President of the United States in November 1996.

The passive may also help keep the focus of a paragraph on a person or group where the agent is understood throughout. In the following paragraph from a history of the Russian Revolution of

1917 and afterward, the passive is used several times. We have indicated clauses using the passive in italics. Study them to understand how the author uses the passive voice:

The Kronstadt Naval Base, an island of sailor-militants in the Gulf of Finland just off Petrograd, was by far the most rebellious stronghold of this Bolshevik vanguard. The sailors were young trainees who had seen very little military activity during the war. They had spent the previous year cooped up on board their ships with their officers, who treated them with more than the usual sadistic brutality since the normal rules of naval discipline did not apply to trainees. Each ship was a tinderbox of hatred and violence. During the February Days the sailors mutinied with awesome ferocity. *Admiral Viren, the Base Commander, was hacked to death with bayonets, and dozens of other officers were murdered, lynched or imprisoned in the island dungeons. The old naval hierarchy was completely destroyed* and effective power passed to the Kronstadt Soviet. It was an October in February. *The authority of the Provisional Government was never really established, nor was military order restored.* Kerensky, the Minister of Justice, proved utterly powerless in his repeated efforts to gain jurisdiction over the imprisoned officers, *despite rumours in the bourgeois press that they had been brutally tortured.*⁷

The focus of the paragraph is the consequence of the uprising of the sailors at Kronstadt. Thus, in this paragraph, the passive helps to keep that focus.

Our best advice is this: When you use the passive voice, ask yourself why you are doing so. If you do not have a clear reason for the passive, rewrite your sentence using the active voice.

Write about the past in the past tense.

Inexperienced writers also sometimes strive for dramatic effect by shifting their prose into the historical present. They may write something like this:

The issue as Calvin Coolidge sees it is this: The government has been intervening too much in private affairs. He is now the head of the government. He will do as little as possible. He takes long naps in the afternoon. He keeps silent when people ask him favors. He says things like this: "The chief business of the American people is business." He does not believe the government should intervene in the business process. Within a year after Coolidge leaves office, the Great Depression begins.

Such an effort is usually intended to provide life to the drama of history, to make it seem that it is all happening again as we read. Some students copy this form from what they hear on television, and in particular from sportscasters who have adopted similar phrasing in an attempt to make their reports more exciting. But in American as well as British historical convention, it is most appropriate to use the past tense to write about the past. The present becomes tedious after a while—and often confusing.

It is, however, permissible to use the present tense in describing a piece of writing or a work of art, because such works are assumed to be always present to the person who reads it or observes it. Therefore, you can write something like this:

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution gives to the citizens of the various states all the rights guaranteed under the Federal Constitution.

However, you may often do better to use the past tense. This is especially true when you do not intend to give an extended summary of the work:

In his “Cross of Gold” speech delivered at the Democratic National Convention in 1896, William Jennings Bryan took the side of the impoverished farmers who thought that inflation would help raise the prices they received for their crops.

In this case, the emphasis is on Bryan rather than on the speech itself; thus the simple past tense seems more appropriate. Again, keeping the focus on what is most important in your writing is your best guide.

Keep descriptions under control.

Similarly, you should keep a clear focus on your main ideas when using descriptive modifiers and phrases. Among these are adjectives, which are modifiers and thus change the meaning of nouns somewhat. Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Both adjectives and adverbs can sometimes weaken the concept of the words they modify. A good

adjective or adverb, however, when well used in a necessary place, can brighten a sentence. Sometimes inexperienced writers will use several adverbs or adjectives in a usually vain effort to paint a fuller and richer picture for their readers. But too many of them thicken and slow down the flow of prose. Our best advice is to use both sparingly. The proportion of one adjective to every twelve or thirteen words is fairly constant among published writers in the U.S. The proportion of adverbs to other words is somewhat less. Of course, these proportions are not absolute. For some purposes you may have to use more adjectives and adverbs than normal. Be sure you need the adjectives and adverbs you use.

Sometimes there are other writing techniques which may accomplish similar goals and may, at the same time, add variety to your prose. Sometimes you may place descriptive words or phrases after the words they describe. If they could be removed and still leave an intelligible sentence, set the word or phrase off with commas, as in these examples:

Henry David Thoreau, *one of the greatest American writers*, died of tuberculosis.

William, *his brother-in-law*, was now King.

You may also use descriptive participial phrases, often to open sentences. But you must be sure they modify the subject you intend; otherwise you run the risk of making your prose incomprehensible and perhaps even ridiculous to readers. For example, consider this sentence:

Living in a much less violent society, the idea that every man, woman, and child in the United States has a right to his or her very own assault rifle seems ridiculous to most Canadians.

Who or what lives in that less violent society? The idea? The sentence should read like this:

Living in a much less violent society, Canadians find ridiculous the idea that every man, woman, and child in the United States has the right to his or her very own assault rifle.

Metaphors and similes—which appeal to some familiar experience or perception to illustrate something less familiar—can also help you communicate with your readers without

actually using descriptive words and phrases. In this passage, Civil War historian Shelby Foote writes of the danger sharpshooting snipers posed to troops in the line, even during lulls in the fighting:

Because of them, rations and ammunition had to be lugged forward along shallow parallels that followed a roundabout zigzag course and wore a man down to feeling like some unholy cross between a pack mule and a snake.⁸

Such metaphors and similes enliven writing. But you should not carry them to excess. Used discreetly, they can be a great help in communicating your ideas.

However, take care to avoid clichés, the tired old expressions that we have heard time and again. The essence of a cliché is its predictability. When you read the beginning of the expression, you know what the end will be. You know that a bolt is always from the blue, although you seldom think that the person who speaks of the bolt from the blue is speaking of lightning striking on a clear day. You know that unpleasant facts are cold and hard and that the determining influence in a discussion is the bottom line. These are expressions that require no thought on the part of the writer and that inspire no thoughts in the reader.

Connect your first and last paragraphs.

As a final check on the simplicity and directness of your writing, test the coherence of your essays to see if the first and last paragraphs have some obvious relations. In most published writing—the first and last paragraphs of a book, or chapters in a book—have such coherence that you can read them without reading the intervening material and have at least a fairly good idea of what comes between. Now and then you will find a piece of writing where the first and last paragraphs do not have a clear verbal connection. But writers wishing to be sure that their work holds together can help their efforts by seeing to it that each essay ends in a paragraph that reflects some words and thoughts appearing in the first. Notice how Penny Sonnenburg's essay

in Appendix A is constructed in this way.

You might also study articles in published journals to see for yourself how often this principle is observed in the professional writing of history. Turn through the pages of *The American Historical Review* to see how first and last paragraphs can mirror each other. (Looking at first and last paragraphs is also a good research technique; you may quickly see if the article includes information you may want to use in your own work.) You can also find this mirroring of first and last paragraphs in many of the essays appearing in popular journals of opinion such as the *Atlantic* or the *New Yorker*.

As you construct your own essays, try asking yourself the questions below as a means of keeping your own writing simple and direct.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Is each of my paragraphs a coherent whole?
- 4 Have I kept my sentences short and manageable?
- 4 Are subjects and verbs in my sentences clearly connected?
- 4 Do I have clear reasons for the few times I use the passive voice?
- 4 Do I write about the past in the past tense?
- 4 Have I used descriptive words and phrases judiciously?
- 4 Do my first and last paragraphs have some obvious relationship?

WORD FORMS AND PUNCTUATION

Written language, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, is more formal than spoken language. Therefore, even simple and direct writing is more difficult than speaking. Sometimes in the physical labor of writing, our minds wander, and we make errors using words and punctuation. That is, we violate conventions. Most people can spot such errors by carefully reading their work aloud. You can usually trust your ear. When something does not sound right,

try changing it. Having someone else read what you have written can also be invaluable, whether informally at your invitation or as part of a peer-editing process. The following are some sources of common difficulties. It is not intended as a complete summary of English grammar and you should certainly supplement our advice with that of your instructor. And by all means consult suggestions in an English language handbook or perhaps the chapters on “Grammar and Usage” and “Punctuation” in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.⁹

Form plurals and possessives of nouns accurately.

Be sure to note differences between plurals and collective nouns. For example, the singular is *peasant*, the plural is *peasants*, but the collective class in European history is called the *peasantry*. We may call a man or woman who works in a factory a *proletarian*, and a group of them on an assembly line might be called by Marxists *proletarians*. But Marx called the whole class the *proletariat*. We may speak of a *noble* or an *aristocrat* when we speak of highest social ranks in some societies, and a group of such people would be called *nobles* or *aristocrats*, but the whole class is called the *nobility* or the *aristocracy*.

Take care not to use an apostrophe to form a plural. Do not write

The Wilsons' went to Washington.

The correct form is

The Wilsons went to Washington.

The plurals of dates and acronyms do not use the apostrophe. So you should write about the 1960s or the NCOs (noncommissioned officers such as sergeants) in the armed forces.

The apostrophe is used for the possessive, showing ownership or a particular relation. Some writers and editors add only an apostrophe to singular nouns ending in *-s*. But we believe the better practice is to form the possessive of these words as you would form others, like this:

Erasmus's works

Chambers's book

For plural nouns that end in *-s*, add just an apostrophe to form the possessive:

the Germans' plan

the neighbors' opinions

For plurals that do not end in *-s* form the possessive as you would for singular nouns:

women's history

children's rights

Distinguish spoken and written versions of common words.

The contraction *it's* stands for *it is* or, sometimes, *it has*. The possessive pronoun *its* stands for "belonging to it." Here are some examples:

It's almost impossible to guarantee safe travel.

It's been hard to measure the effects on the country.

The idea had lost *its* power before 1900.

Similarly, you should distinguish appropriately between the contraction *you're*, meaning *you are*, the possessive *your*, and the noun *yore* occasionally used to describe the past. Each of these should be used as in the following examples:

You're going to the picnic, aren't you?

Will you take *your* umbrella?

We'll have a good time, just as in days of *yore*.

You will recognize that these distinctions are ones that your word processor's spell-checking program will not recognize, so they require you to be especially diligent in proofreading. Similar confusions abound with the words *site*—as in *Web site* or *historic site*—and *sight*, which describes what we do with our eyes; the verb *cite* can also cause confusion with these, especially since it is coming into unfortunate use as a noun in place of a *citation* you would make to document your sources.

Perhaps the most common such error we see in student essays is the accidental confusion between the plural possessive *their* and the noun or adverb *there*, specifying a particular place, and occasionally the contraction *they're* (for *they are*). Pay careful attention to these differences, as your failure to do so will often mark your essay as particularly careless.

Use objective case pronouns appropriately.

The nominative or subjective forms of pronouns include *I, we, he, she, who, they, and those*. The objective forms include versions such as *me, us, him, her, whom, and them*. The nominative is used as the subject of a sentence or a clause:

I read Huizinga's books.

The Prince said *he* was not the king's son.

The objective should be used for the object of a preposition:

It was a matter between *him* and *me*.

Between *you* and *me*, I made a mistake.

And the objective should be used in an indirect object:

The President gave *her* a cabinet position.

Objective forms should be used as the subject or an object of an infinitive verb. The infinitive is the verb form that includes the infinitive marker *to* and the dictionary form of the verb. Thus *to go, to be, to dwell, and to see* are all infinitives. The subject of the infinitive is a noun or pronoun that comes before the infinitive in a sentence and that does the action the infinitive expresses:

King Leopold wanted *him* to go at once to Africa.

In the preceding example, the person designated by the objective pronoun *him* will go to Africa. Since he will do the going the action expressed in the infinitive *to go*—the pronoun *him*—is the subject of the infinitive and is in the objective case.

Be certain pronouns refer to antecedents.

Pronouns stand for nouns that are said to be the antecedent of the pronoun. Definite pronouns, such as *he, she, it, him, her, they, them, and their*, stand for nouns that usually appear somewhere before them in a sentence or paragraph. Be sure to make the pronoun reference clear even if you must revise the sentence considerably. You will confuse readers if you write:

The Czechs disdained the Slovaks because they were more cosmopolitan.

To whom does the pronoun *they* refer? Were the Czechs or the Slovaks more cosmopolitan? You must rewrite the sentence:

The more cosmopolitan Czechs disdained the more rural Slovaks.

Use commas and semicolons appropriately.

Independent clauses—which could stand alone as sentences—can be separated from one another by commas, but only when you use linking words in addition. Without the linking words, you should use semicolons. Do not join independent clauses with commas alone. Study these appropriate examples:

The McNary-Haugen bill would have provided subsidies for American farmers, but President Coolidge vetoed it in 1927.

The people of the United States decided that they must give up Prohibition; the law brought about too many social disruptions.

You should, however, use commas to set off long introductory phrases:

Even after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1867, some pioneers still made the trip West by covered wagon.

Also use commas to separate items—whether words or phrases—in a series:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved to solve problems of unemployment, banking, and despair.

William Jennings Bryan campaigned for the presidency in 1896 by traveling 18,000 miles, making 600 speeches, and attacking the “moneyed interests.”

However, if the series following a colon contains internal punctuation, then the items should be separated by semicolons:

William Jennings Bryan campaigned for the presidency in 1896 while insisting on several key positions, which included: attacking many wealthy, “moneyed interests”; supporting farmers; and promoting the silver rather than the gold-standard.

Similarly, you can use commas to set off nonrestrictive words and phrases, when you can substitute the word *and* for the comma and still have a sensible sentence:

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a tall, frail, and elegant man.

In this case you could write instead, “Ralph Waldo Emerson was a tall and frail and elegant man.” But do not use commas between adjectives where you cannot sensibly replace the comma with *and*. You can say

The three old maple trees stood on the hill.

But you cannot write “The three and old and maple trees stood on the hill.”

Carefully present and punctuate quotations.

When you use quotations in your essays, you should take special care in your use of punctuation, as well as lowercase and capital letters. If the quotation is to blend into the text of your essay, change lowercase and capital letters, as well as punctuation, so that the quotation will fit into your own sentence:

Kipling urged Americans “to take up the White Man’s burden.”

You need not use brackets to indicate you have made such changes, nor should you use ellipsis marks (three dots, like this...; some word processing programs may insert them automatically, without spaces, like this ...) at the beginning or end of the quotation. The quotation marks are sufficient to indicate you are beginning your quotation at that point. However, you should use ellipsis marks to indicate any words you have left out of the middle of

a quotation.

Commas and periods, no matter whether they were in the original or you insert them as a part of your own sentences using quotations, should go *inside* the quotations marks. This will make what you write clearer to readers, which should be the goal for any essay you write. However, a question mark at the end of a quotation goes within the final quotation marks only if the quotation itself is a question. If you are using the quotation as part of a question which you wish to pose, then the question mark should go outside of the quotation marks. The same is true of exclamations. Semicolons and colons always go outside the final quotation marks, no matter if they were in the original quotation or not.

Any quotation longer than four or five lines in your essay should be indented five spaces and set up as a block within your text. Double-space such block quotations, and do not enclose them with quotation marks. The only quotations marks you should use with block quotations are those that appear within the original source you are quoting. Your instructor may want you to put block quotations in single-space text as your essays usually will not be for publication. Since it is difficult to edit single-spaced text, you would, however, always double-space any material intended for publication. The quotations we have used from the works of other historians in this book should serve as models of how you can use quotations from your sources in your own essays.

Maintain parallel form for a series.

English and American writers often use words or phrases in a series, but the units in the series must stand as grammatical equals. Therefore, you should *not* write sentences like this:

Richelieu wanted three things for France—authority for the king, an end to religious strife, and he also wanted secure ‘natural’ frontiers.

This series begins with nouns modified by prepositional phrases, but the last element is a clause.

The sentence should be rewritten something like this:

Richelieu wanted three things for France—authority for the king, an end to religious strife, and secure “natural” frontiers.

Careful attention to common conventions in using words and punctuation is clearly important for your writing. Ask the questions below as a start toward improving your essay:

Writer’s Checklist

- 4 Have I formed plurals and possessives accurately?
- 4 Do I distinguish between spoken and written versions of common words?
- 4 Are my pronoun subjects and objects in the right form?
- 4 Do my pronouns clearly refer to their antecedent nouns?
- 4 Have I taken care to use commas and semicolons appropriately?
- 4 Are quotations in my essay punctuated precisely?
- 4 Have I kept the parallel forms in my series statements?

THE FINAL PRESENTATION

The appearance of your essay—in either an electronic or print version—tells readers many things about you as a writer. A slovenly, scarcely readable version signals a writer who cares little for the subject or for readers. As a writer you may care deeply; make sure your readers can see this from the final version you present to them. Computers make things easier for writers and readers alike, and most writers and students nowadays use computers with word-processing programs. Take advantage of the capabilities of the computer and create a clean copy of your essay.

Using your word-processing program, take special care to eliminate typographical errors, misspellings, words left out or duplicated, and other such mistakes. Also number the pages of

your essay, even if it will be submitted only in an electronic version. Every word-processing program will allow you to do so; find the steps your program uses to number pages, and use them to insert page numbers into your essay. Your instructor may give you other specific directions about formatting your essay. Follow them. Lacking instructions, you usually will not go wrong if you follow the format of the model research paper in Appendix A of this book. Once you have completed these final corrections and formatting, you can save the final version of your essay—making sure to keep several copies, not all of them saved on your computer alone!

If a printed version of your essay is required, once you have saved the electronic file you can finally print a clean copy. Again, follow any instructions you have been given, but if you have none, here are some suggestions. Use a good quality 8 1/2 × 11-inch white bond paper. Double-space the essay and print it on one side of the page only. Leave margins wide enough for comments your instructor may wish to make, no less than one inch on the top, bottom, and each side. Use Times New Roman, Bookman Old Style, Courier or some other clean, easy-to-read type font and be sure the ink from the printer is dark enough to be read easily. If you must, and if your instructor will accept a handwritten essay, use lined white paper and write in dark blue or black ink on every line. Use a cover page giving your name, the name of your instructor, the name of your course, and the time your class meets. Fasten the pages of your essay with a paper clip or with a staple in the upper-left corner. Binders, however, are almost always a nuisance to the instructor, adding bulk and making it awkward to write comments in the margins. It seldom is helpful to use them.

The presentation of your essay—as an electronic file or a printed paper—is the last place where your adherence to historians' conventions is evident. But it is the first impression your instructor will have of your essay! Take advantage of that opportunity. But remember, if you

ignore the conventions, you may discover that the grade you receive may be less than you desire.

Simple and Direct Writing

1 Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 9, 197.

2 William Struck and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).

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3 Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 12–13.

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4 Lizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” *The American Historical Review*, 101 (1996): 1056.

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5 Margaret H. Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” *The American Historical Review*, 101 (1996): 106.

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6 Oscar and Lilian Handlin, *Liberty in Expansion: 1760–1850* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 160.

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7 Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1997), 394–395.

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8 Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, vol. 3 (New York: Random House, 1974), 297.

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Word Forms and Punctuation

9 *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 145–271.

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CHAPTER 7 n *Writing Conventions and Style*

The Final Presentation

CHAPTER 7 n *Writing Conventions and Style*