

A SHORT GUIDE TO WRITING

ABOUT HISTORY

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Sixth Edition

RICHARD MARIUS

Late, Harvard University

MELVIN E. PAGE

East Tennessee State University

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—DOH—09 08 07 06 For our children—

Richard, Fred, and John

Megan, Melanie, and Michael

And our adventures together exploring history,

AT HOME AND AROUND THE WORLD.

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Since its first edition, many college students have used *A Short Guide to Writing About History* in their

adventures with writing history papers. I have always found it useful for my students as they have tried coming to grips with methods historians employ in research and writing about the past. More than that, the commitment of Professor Marius to such endeavors was unstinting. As he promised, those who wrote to him with questions were not disappointed; and on several different occasions he joined my entire class for organized listserv discussions of historical research and writing. His insights were always helpful and to the point for my students. And they certainly were important to me as I attempted to teach the excitement of historical study.

There is no question of the importance that Richard Marius had in shaping a new generation of historians. Following his untimely death in late 1999, editors at Longman were determined to keep his advice available for still more students in the twenty-first century. I was honored and pleased to prepare subsequent editions of this *Short Guide* and grateful for the conversations I previously had with Richard about this book, which helped me immeasurably in updating the work. In creating the sixth edition, I have myself been going back to Richard's advice even as I have tried to adapt it for a new generation of students. In addition to our passion about the study and writing of history, we both shared a great faith in the intelligence and tenacity—as well as the curiosity—of our student readers. I hope this edition continues to reflect that belief.

The sixth edition recognizes more than before how accelerating technological developments have not so much reshaped but rather reoriented research and writing efforts of almost all historians. Chapter 6, “Writing in an Electronic Age,” especially, reflects more than any previous editions the impact of computers and the Internet on historians' work. At the same time, I have continued to ground advice to students on the same basic principles that both Professor Marius and I believe are the foundation of good historical writing. Dealing with this new environment, however, does require all historians to adapt their conventions, and this edition continues to reflect such change.

The emphasis of student capacities to improve their own writing is also reflected in updated “Writer's Checklists,” including a new “Writer's Checklist for Peer Editing,” which I hope will serve to

encourage collaborative revision processes. In addition, continuing public discussions about the fundamental integrity of historical scholarship has led me to include an expanded discussion of the principle of original work and the problems of plagiarism, with suggestions about how to avoid that unpardonable sin of historical writing. And in response to requests for more examples of note and bibliographic citations, I have added two new reference charts that are keyed to the text of Chapter 8, which explains the basic principles for documenting sources.

As before, I am eager to hear from readers about experiences with this book. Please write to me with any thoughts you have about *A Short Guide to Writing About History*. Letters may be mailed to me at the History Department, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 34614. You may also send e-mails to, pagem@etsu.edu. As did Professor Marius, I shall always respond.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of historians at various colleges and universities offered priceless advice in the preparation of the manuscript for various editions of *A Short Guide to Writing About History*. I am particularly grateful to those whose thoughtful comments helped shape this sixth edition: Alan Baumler, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Sandra M. Frink, Roosevelt University; Cynthia Kosso, Northern Arizona University; Kriste Lindenmeyer, University of Maryland—Baltimore County; David John Marley, Vanguard University; Brian A. Pavlac, King's College; Jeff Roberts, Tennessee Technological University; Lee Shai Weissbach, University of Louisville; Kenneth Wilburn, East Carolina University; and Allan M. Winkler, Miami University.

I also appreciate the support I have had from colleagues at three universities where I have taught about historical writing and research: Murray State University, the University of Natal, Durban (South Africa), and East Tennessee State University. While all my colleagues have influenced my thinking about these subjects in one way or another, I especially appreciate conversations with Doug Burgess, Henry Antkiewicz, Daniel Newcomer, Steve Fritz, Charles Allan, and Myra Jones on many details concerning historical research and writing; our continued engagement with these issues has been especially important

for the sixth edition. I have learned much, as well, from my students who shared with me their frustrations and triumphs in historical research and writing; Joe Gayeski, Justin Horton, Tabettha Garman, Bill Hembrock, and Sabrina Shilad have made specific contributions to this book. And I want especially to thank my former student, Penny Sonnenburg-Willis for crucial help in reshaping the advice concerning research and note-taking. At Longman Publishers, I appreciate the continued encouragement and confidence of Joseph Opiela and Whitney Baer.

Most of all, this edition would not be possible without the road laid down by Richard Marius years ago. Collaborators such as he are hard to find. I count myself fortunate indeed.

MELVIN E. PAGE

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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This little book arose out of my experience of teaching European history for sixteen years—first at Gettysburg College and then at my alma mater, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville—and then out of the sixteen years I spent directing the Expository Writing Program at Harvard, where I regularly taught a course called “Writing About History.”

Most students came into my courses believing that history was hardly more than a collection of names and dates to be memorized and repeated on examinations. They thought they could go to the library, look up several articles in encyclopedias, and write a paper to show how much they knew about a subject. They did not imagine that they could think for themselves about the facts. Sometimes they believed that “thinking” was to express vehement opinions, often about the supposed morality or immorality of the past they read and wrote about. Far too often they tried to write as though they were accomplished historians who had solved all the problems about some broad historical subject and could only scorn those who disagreed with them.

It was my job to teach them that history becomes most exciting when we study a collection of

primary sources—the basic stuff from which history is made—to make sense of these sources and tell a story about them. Primary sources are by definition the sources closest to the events and people whose stories we seek to tell. They may be letters, diaries, and books published by participants in events. Woodrow Wilson, Thomas More, Martin Luther King Jr., Virginia Woolf, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Toni Morrison all wrote extensively or spoke so that their words were recorded by others. These written materials are primary sources for their lives. Or primary sources may be the earliest reports of those who knew or claimed to know figures in the past whom we study in the present.

Historians and others have written about these primary sources. They have produced secondary sources—narratives, interpretations, and descriptions—to tell us what they think the primary sources mean. These secondary sources, as we call them, embody hard work and careful thought—and often disagree with one another. No one serious about the study of history can neglect this treasury of research and thought, and students should demonstrate in the papers they write in college that they are familiar with what other people have written about a topic. The best history papers show a balance between primary and secondary sources.

The best reasons for studying history are the same as those for studying all the liberal arts: historical study satisfies curiosity, and it enriches our minds. The most interesting human beings are those with curiosity. They ask questions. How did things get to be the way they are? Why have some names come down to us glittering with fame or stained with infamy? Why is this monument here? Why was this painting a scandal when it was first shown to the public? How did this book cause a revolution? Who built this amazing bridge?

History also provides us with the pleasure of vicarious experience—living in our imaginations lives others have lived in the past. It opens windows into the variety of human experience and reveals human nature, not in some abstract philosophical way but in the concrete actuality of what real human beings thought and did. History tells us how diverse human beings and their societies can be. If we study it attentively, it should make us more tolerant of people unlike ourselves because history reveals such an

immense variety of successful human experiences.

Teaching people to write about history has been for me a means of showing students of all ages that they have worthwhile thoughts and can use them to write interesting and original essays on many subjects. As users of this book will, I hope, discover, the study of history involves a special kind of thinking, closely related to the way we solve puzzles and try to guess who the murderer is in a good mystery. Historical thinking is indeed a kind of game, and it has a deeply serious side—but it is also a lot of fun!

I live and move and have my being in a circle of friends without whom nothing would be worthwhile. As I have done so many times in the past, I offer heartfelt thanks to a life that has brought me many friends, including my brother John, and my wife of almost thirty years, Lanier Smythe.

I hope *A Short Guide to Writing About History* will continue to help students think about history, see its puzzles and its pleasures, and gain the confidence that good writing about anything requires. You must approach the task with the trust that you have the tools to do the job, and I hope you will find them in this little book.

RICHARD MARIUS

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