

1.c.

Avoid Common Mistakes In Your History Paper

Good writing requires attention to lots of rules and conventions. They may not be fun to learn, but they are vital if you are to communicate your ideas with credibility.

Number the pages and staple them together. Why is this so hard to do? Number them by hand if you cannot make your computer do it.

When speaking of those in the past, there is rarely a point in speaking of what they "**felt**." Thomas Jefferson did not "feel" that an agrarian lifestyle was the best security against tyranny, he "said" it, or "believed" it, or "argued" it – anything but felt. Why are students so enamored of "felt"? Perhaps it is a function of our self-help age. Perhaps it feels safer to assert "feelings" rather than beliefs. In any case, it is ahistorical. We can rarely know what those in the past actually felt, and it is more accurate to describe what they say as beliefs rather than feelings.

History should be written in the **past tense**. Use the simple past tense (or "preterite") whenever possible. Use the present tense only when speaking of other historians, or (rarely) when your subject is a text itself. Avoid the subjunctive tense, as in "After serving as minister to France, Jefferson would go on to become the President of the United States." Instead, simply say: "After serving as minister to France, Jefferson became the President of the United States." The subjunctive tense often reveals an author who desires to anticipate something that will come later in the paper; avoid this.

Spell out **numbers** up to 100. Consult Turabian for the rules on using numbers in your papers.

Do not use **contractions**, such as "didn't"; instead, say "did not."

Faulty **pronoun references** are inexcusable at the college level. Pronouns referring to plural referents must be plural. Often, the trouble happens when authors attempt to make language gender neutral. Find the faulty reference in this sentence: "The political candidate could not spread their message because they lacked the resources to control media."

No one writing at the college level should have **sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-on sentences** in their papers. Learn what these are and avoid them! (See Hacker, *Rules for Writers* for more.)

Sentence fragment: A sentence fragment is a sentence that is not a sentence because it lacks a subject, verb, or modifying clause. "Jefferson, who served as minister to France during the Critical Period."

Comma splice: A comma splice occurs when two clauses are improperly joined with just a comma, as in: "Thomas Jefferson became minister to France, he went on to become President of the United States."

Run-on sentence: A run-on sentence is a sentence that is not grammatically correct because Run-ons can be caused by a variety of problems. Usually the culprit is a sentence that is trying to do too much. If you are not sure of your long sentences, break them up into shorter, simpler ones. Here is a sample: "Jefferson, who was schooled at William and Mary and lived the life of an independent farmer and something of a Renaissance man who read avidly and acquired the best private library in America."

Quotations, footnotes, and bibliographies: Small matters of style, such as where footnote number are placed, the use of commas, or how indenting works, are important. You will be learning and using citation styles for the rest of your life; it is crucial that you become proficient in following them closely. The following examples should help.

Samples of quotations with footnotes.

In the words of J. Theodore Holly, a powerful national affiliation was "all-powerful in shielding and protecting each individual of the race."¹²

At various times, these moralists railed against drinking,⁷ theater-going,⁸ and even dancing.⁹

"Free the slaves," Delany urged, "and I warrant you, they will not fall short in comparison."³⁴

Sample note for a book:

¹⁹Cyril E. Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 129-32.

Sample note for a journal article:

²³Chris Dixon, "An Ambivalent Black Nationalism: Haiti, Africa, and Antebellum African-American Emigrationism," *Australian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (December 1991), 13-14.

Sample bibliography entry for a book:

Griffith, Cyril E. *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.

Sample bibliography entry for a journal article:

Dixon, Chris. "An Ambivalent Black Nationalism: Haiti, Africa, and Antebellum African-American Emigrationism." *Australian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (December 1991): 10-25.

Again, there are lots of rules to learn about good writing. This is just a quick guide. It is up to you to learn how to fix your errors. Good writers follow good models. Study and use the assigned writing guide for this class: Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*.