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Preparing History Papers The Short Version

You need to know a lot of things when preparing your paper for a history course. I have prepared extensive online guides for you, and there are a great many published books and websites that offer help. But it is easy to feel overwhelmed by so much information. This short guide is the best introduction to paper writing I can furnish you. It is not comprehensive, but will help you avoid the costliest paper-writing mistakes, and point the way toward further resources.

Formatting basics:

- Your paper should have a title page, on which appears the title of the paper, your name, the course number, the professor's name, and the date.
- Double-space the text, and use a simple font, such as Times Roman 12pt.
- Number of the pages.
- Staple the pages together (do not use clips or fancy binders).

Footnote citations: Each time you quote a work by another author, or use the ideas of another author, you should indicate the source with a footnote. A footnote is indicated in the text of your paper by a small arabic numeral written in superscript, directly following the borrowed material. Each new footnote gets a new number (increment by one); do not repeat a footnote number you've already used, even if the earlier reference is to the same work. The number refers to a note number at the bottom of the page (or following the text of the paper, if you are using endnotes). This note contains the citation information for the materials you are referencing. Do not use parenthetical or other citation formats. The citation format you should use for history papers is called Chicago style. The writing guides listed later in this guide will show you how to cite sources using Chicago style.

Citation formats: While there are standard principles for citing different kinds of sources, each requires its own unique citation format. Thus, a book will be cited differently than will a journal article. Your style manuals (Rampolla and Turabian) explain the differences in these formats. Also, Chicago style requires one way of citing sources in footnotes, and another way for citing sources in your bibliography. (A bibliography is a list of sources you consulted in your research, which appears

at the end of your paper.) Consult your style manuals (Rampolla and Turabian) for the differences in citation formats, and pay close attention to the way you format footnotes and bibliographies in your paper.

Quoting sources in your paper: Most often, you should paraphrase materials from other authors, making sure to cite your sources with a footnote. Sometimes, when the original words of another seem particularly poignant or important, you will want to present those words directly to your reader. There are many rules of quoting material, which can be found in the resources listed at the end of this sheet. Here are some basic rules to get you started:

- When quoting others, any words of another author are placed between double quotation marks, exactly as they appear in the original. Do not put between quote marks any words that do not appear in the original.
- Never simply drop a quotation into your paper. Quotations must be integrated into your own prose. Introduce your speaker to your readers, so they will know who you are quoting.
- Pay close attention to the grammar and syntax of sentences with quotations in them. Just because you are quoting someone does not mean that the standard rules of writing cease to apply. In order to check this, imagine the sentence without the quotation marks; if it is not grammatically correct without quotation marks, it will not be grammatically correct with them.
- Pay close attention to what your style manuals have to say regarding punctuation in your quotations. Commas and periods generally go inside the quote marks.
- Footnotes go after the quotation, and are usually followed by no other punctuation.
- Avoid at all costs the use of brackets to insert clarifying material into your quotations. Instead, simply construct the sentence so that brackets are unnecessary, or consider paraphrasing the material rather than quoting it.

Avoiding plagiarism: The best way to avoid unintentional plagiarism is to take complete and accurate notes, and to cite your sources properly. When taking notes, clearly indicate whether you are paraphrasing a source or quoting it directly. Be sure to include a complete bibliographic citation of the source, so you can create an accurate footnote later. When writing, include a footnote citation for every idea or quotation you use from another author.

Common writing errors to study and avoid (consult Diana Hacker, *Rules for Writers*):

- comma splices and run-on sentences
- tenses: use the simple past tense when speaking of the past
- passive voice: thing something is done to a thing rather than by a thing
- faulty pronoun reference: when pronouns such as “they” lack clear referents
- faulty predication: when nouns do things they cannot do
- parallel structure: when sentences are not balanced

Research basics:

- [Library online catalog \(word search\)](#)
- Online journals: [Jstor](#) and [Project Muse](#)

- [America: History and Life](#)
- [Library guide to American History](#)
- [Rael's guide to historical research at Bowdoin](#)

Three books you should own:

- Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 2001). Contains much concise, useful advice, including a guide to Chicago-style citations.
- Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The standard source for college history writers. Comprehensive presentation of Chicago-style citation formats (as well as other styles).
- Diana Hacker, *Rules for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996). A standard grammar, useful for identifying and correcting mistakes.

Online guides for citing sources:

- Research and Documentation Online (online guide from Bedford/St. Martin's Press)
<<http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/resdoc/history/footnotes.htm>>
- A Brief Citation Guide for Internet Sources in History and the Humanities
<<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/about/citation/>>
- Online! from Bedford's/St. Martin's Press (for electronic sources only)
<<http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/index.html>>
- Citing Electronic Sources (from the Library of Congress)
<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/resources/cite/index.html>>

For more information: The principles mentioned here are discussed in greater detail in my online writing guides: "Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students" <<http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/>>.