

A Style Sheet for History Writers

Contractions: Standard English does not permit words like "don't."

"Its" and "it's": "It's" is a contraction for "it is," and should not appear in a history paper. "Its" is the possessive form of "it," as in "The corporation gave its assent to proceed."

"However" is tremendously over-used. Avoid it if possible. It is only properly used to contrast one point with another. It seldom belongs at the beginning of a sentence.

If you must use a word like "however," "for example," or "nevertheless," place it in the middle of the sentence, and use a comma both before and after the word.

"Hopefully" is another heavily mis-used term. It does not mean "it is hoped"; it is an adverb which modifies a verb or adjective. "Hopefully, the truck will make it on time" is incorrect. "Hopefully, I await the truck's arrival" is correct. "Hopefully" should rarely if ever appear in your papers.

Students often use "therefore" to demonstrate a logical connection between two points. If the connection is clear, "therefore" is unnecessary; if it is not clear, "therefore" will not make it so. The same also applies with "thus."

To "beg" the question does not mean to raise it, or demand that it be asked, current improper usage notwithstanding. Begging the question is a form of logical fallacy, wherein a conclusion is assumed without proof. How do we know Darwin's theory of genesis was wrong and the Bible's is right? Because God created the world in seven days.

Avoid splitting infinitives and compound verbs, as in "The general ordered them to frequently march" ("to march frequently"). Also applies to compound verbs: "has often wondered" becomes "has wondered often."

Lead and led: Lead is only present tense. Led is the only correct past tense.

The word "unique" does not take modifiers. Either something is one or a kind, or it is NOT! You can not be more or less unique than someone else.

"Very" is overused. Many words cannot be qualified, so "very" is inappropriate ("very unique" is an error; something cannot be only somewhat unique.) A better word exists; it is your job to find it. As in: very tired (exhausted), very happy (elated), very unhappy (miserable).

Learn the difference between "fewer" and "less." Fewer refers to numbers, less to amounts, degree, or value. Try and convince your local grocers that their signs should read "ten items or fewer!"

The present tense of "lay" and "lie" are different words. You lay something down. You lie yourself down.

Things can only be different from one another, NOT different than each other.

Use "between" with two items or people and "among" with three or more.

A comma separates phrases; a semi-colon separates two otherwise complete sentences. A colon is used only for a list of items and illustrative quotations.

When referring back to a person, use "who," not "that." "Mary, who wanted to buy a new dress, went shopping." "People who shower, do not smell." Not, "people that shower, do not smell."

Be careful about noun-verb agreement. If the subject is plural, the other references, the adjectives, the verb must be in plural form. Students prepare themselves, not himself or herself.

Be aware of incorrect capitalizations--some writers capitalize unnecessarily, others do not capitalize when it is necessary. If in doubt, look it up in a dictionary or style manual.

If you need to hyphenate a word, be sure to divide it at a syllable break.

Use exclamation marks and italics only for emphasis, and then, very sparingly.

Do not abbreviate the names of states or the United States. Never end sentences with abbreviations.

Never use "etc." and "and so forth." These terms are vague.

Never use a slash ("/") to separate words. Instead of "Britain clearly dominated in terms of military/economic might," use "Britain clearly dominated in terms of military and economic might."

Numbers: Spell out numbers which are less than three digits. If you use numbers, use Arabic numbers consistently.

Centuries: Spell out centuries, and do not capitalize them. Hyphenate centuries only when they are adjectives:

twentieth-century technology

the twentieth century
the mid-nineteenth century

Black people may be termed “African Americans.” Note that this is not hyphenated unless used as an adjective, as in “African-American culture.” “Black” may be capitalized, but I prefer that “white” not be (there is debate over these matters). In all cases, be consistent with capitalization. “Negro” is also capitalized. Like “colored,” it is considered outdated and sometimes offensive; use these terms only in meaningful historical context and never as generic terms of reference. “Afro-American” may also be used, though its popularity has declined in recent years. To call someone “a black” is to objectify that person on the basis of skin color; I prefer “black person,” which retains skin color as an adjective rather than a noun.

“Prejudice” is a noun, not an adjective. “Prejudiced” is the adjective. The following sentence is therefore incorrect: “Southern whites lynched blacks because they were prejudice.”

Decades:

When referring to decades, there is no need for apostrophes between the date and the “s” which makes the decade plural. (There is no need, because in this case the apostrophe denotes neither possession nor a contraction. *The 1940's saw massive use of bombers in warfare* might just as easily be: *The 1940s saw massive use of bombers in warfare.*

Apostrophes are used in dates under only two conditions:

- C Before the date, they denote that you have omitted the first two digits of the date, as in: *Inflation and the legacy of Watergate hovered over the decade of the '70s.*
- C To denote possession: *1997's worst political scandal centered around the Democrats alleged improprieties in campaign fund-raising.*

References to decades may be made using Arabic numbers (“the 1940s”) or spelled out (“the forties”) depending on the context:

- C The 1940s saw massive use of bombers in warfare.
- C During the ‘forties, grain prices plummeted.

Possessives:

Singular noun: President Chamberlain’s Bowdoin.

Singular noun ending in “s”: President Sills’s Bowdoin.

Plural noun: The women’s salaries.

Plural noun ending in “s”: The deans’ luncheon.

Special case of singular noun ending in “s”: Moses’ laws; Jesus’ parables. [religious figures only]

Note that only in the last two cases does the apostrophe appear without a concluding “s.”