

Advice on Writing

What to look for in your paper

- *Title*: Does your title have an argument? Will it make me want to read the paper?
- *Argument*: Have you carefully formulated your argument in the first paragraph? Making sure your argument is clear and well-formulated will help you in all the rest of your writing.
- *Background*: Does your paper have the right amount of background but not too much? You can assume that I know the basics about the Russian revolutionary events so you do not need to repeat them.
- *Evidence*: Does your evidence clearly support your argument? Have you carefully read the primary sources available and chosen a few that support your argument? This is the second most important part of the paper (after the argument). Be sure to quote them judiciously (i.e., not excessively), providing careful analysis to explain what they show. You should have from one to three or four primary sources, depending on their length and complexity. You will also want to consult one or two secondary sources (i.e., articles by historians) for this paper to supplement your understanding of your main character and/or the problem they were grappling with.
- *Verb tenses*: Have you used consistent verb tenses, with past tenses for actions in the past and present tense for what any authors you quote are saying/writing/expressing?
- *Citations*: Are they clear and complete? They do not have to be in a particular style, but you must give the full name of the document, its author and date, and page number.
- *Paragraphs and transitions*: are they clear so that each paragraph has a dominant idea and the transitions between them are easy to follow?
- *Be careful of sweeping generalizations*: Have you tried to say more than you can provide evidence for?

Suggestions for rewriting

Be sure to state your argument clearly and persuasively in your opening paragraph. Reread and perhaps even rewrite that paragraph after you have finished the entire draft of your paper. It is the most important paragraph in your paper. Be sure you have not overstated your argument. Be sure as well that you have not understated it in the sense of saying something that is so obvious as to be uninteresting. Be sure it is logical and not so equivocal that it becomes meaningless. Here is an example of a problematic thesis statement: "Lenin used logical fallacies, but he was a great writer." What do you mean by "great writer"? How can the second part of the sentence square with the first part?

I would recommend rereading your sources now that you have a first draft. Have you captured the drama of the language? What assertions in them can you analyze in more depth, especially questions of word use, phrasing, diction?

Try to reread your whole paper, watching for word use and grammar. You may want to read your paper out loud. That is how I catch a lot of my own mistakes.

Also, reread the first sentences of each of your paragraphs. Do they progress logically, building from one point to the next? A couple of you had trouble trying to pack completely unrelated points into the same paragraph. Also

typically it is best to construct your paragraphs so they progress forward chronologically. Occasionally you may need a flashback to make your point. Try to make it as clear as possible.

Try also to put your points in order of importance. I often outline my articles before I write them so I can be sure of the order in which I am writing. And, believe it or not, I often outline or re-outline them in mid-stream if I think I have gone astray.

Be very careful of redundancy and repetition. I usually pick up on your point the first time.

Try to avoid what I would call fillers, e.g., empty phrases that you have not fully thought through: "History was moving on." "The Russian Revolution was one of the most momentous events of the 20th century."

It is usually better to paraphrase than to quote from secondary sources. Once in a great while it can be useful to use a quotation to convey an author's exact phrasing if he or she has said something particularly noteworthy, but that is rare.

Some classic grammar points

Provisional Government – both words should be capitalized

bourgeoisie – collective noun; bourgeois – adjective (not a noun!)

"it's" means "it is"; "its" is the grammatical equivalent of "his" and "her."

Be careful of excessively colloquial language. Words to throw out: thing; stuff; people; really. Also avoid "natural" and "inevitable" – nothing is entirely natural or inevitable from a historian's point of view. Avoid "very" and exclamation points if at all possible. Contractions are also too colloquial. Most evaluative words can be thrown out: even good and bad, but definitely wonderful, fabulous, awesome.

Be careful with the word "however." It has to be used in a complete phrase and it has to be separated from the preceding complete phrase by a semi-colon or a period. Phrases beginning with "while" cannot be used on a stand-alone basis (e.g., "while he was writing his paper, he had a great insight" – is fine; but "While writing his paper" by itself is not okay).

Avoid passive voice: ask yourself **who** was acting, **what** was happening? Instead of "the people were influenced by Lenin," try to think about whether you mean "the people allowed themselves to fall under Lenin's influence" or "Lenin persuaded the people," and then ask yourself **which people** you have in mind. Do you mean workers or peasants or members of the intelligentsia, for example? Or do you mean members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party?

Finally, let me make a pitch for proofreading, proofreading, proofreading. I grow tired of seeing grammar mistakes that could easily have been avoided. Sometimes I have to guess what students mean. I want to know what you really mean. Consider me a very positive reader. I like reading your papers. I enjoy seeing your arguments, your ideas, your ways of thinking and phrasing. Do your best!

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21H.245J / 17.57J / 21G.086J Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, 1917 to the Present
Spring 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.