

Some Tips for Writing History Papers

As you compose or revise your history paper, consider these guidelines:

- **Write in the past tense.** The “literary present” is acceptable in other disciplines but not in historical writing. For example—using the literary present you might write: “William Wood describes the various species of fish abounding in the waters off the coast of Cape Cod.”

Instead: Rely on the past tense to **emphasize that you are writing about a phenomenon that was specific to a particular time and that this phenomenon has changed:** “William Wood described the various species of fish ...”

- **Avoid vague generalizations.** Historians value specificity, not broad, trite, or ahistorical phrases like “societies have always...” “once upon a time,” or “from the dawn of history...”

Instead: **Provide key descriptive details and necessary context.** Contextualize the topic of your paper in the historical setting that is most relevant for staging your analysis (thesis statement) and supporting evidence. For example: “By the middle of the eighteenth century, colonial settlement had expanded from the coast to the Appalachian Mountains, which marked the frontier between British, French, and Native territories.”

- **Avoid anachronism.** Resist the temptation to relate all historical arguments or concerns to ideas and events that occurred long after the events you are analysing took place. Cultivate an informed sense of historical distance from your subject, rather than **clinging to preconceptions based on your own personal experience or current events.**

Instead: **Approach your historical subject with curiosity. Strive to investigate and understand the past on its own terms** and remember that historical actors could not know the future, including contemporary values or assumptions.

- **Paraphrase if you can, quote if you must.** Many students rely on quotations as a crutch, thereby missing an opportunity to develop their analytical skills.

Instead: **Quote sparingly.** When you do quote, briefly introduce the source and context of every remark for the benefit of the reader. For example: “Samuel Williams, Hollis Professor of Mathematics at Harvard College in the 1780s, taught his students that the “peculiar advantage” of mathematics was its “exactness.”

- **Take some time to outline the sequence of events about which you are going to write.** Include specific dates if possible. This chronology will not be included in the paper but it is guaranteed to be immensely helpful for organizing your thoughts about the topic, your notes on primary and secondary sources, and ultimately for outlining your paper.

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

21H.S01 Food in American History
Fall 2014

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