

NOTES AND DRAFTS

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Although every respectable historian knows the importance of gathering information before completing a historical essay, most also know how important it is to begin the writing process as early as possible. In reality, this is a form of practice. Pianists do finger exercises before they play. Baseball players take batting practice before a game. These activities help them limber up for the real thing. Similar exercises will help you prepare to write. Maintaining such a view of the writing process will also help you avoid falling victim to some common, and often recurring, myths about writing.

One such myth is that writers are inspired, that real writers turn out articles and books and reports with the greatest of ease. Another is that if you must write several drafts of anything, you are not a good writer. Still another is that if you labor to write what you want to say, you will not improve it much if you write a second or even a third draft. We can well attest that none of these is really true in practice. While every writer has a different approach to the process, it is neither quick nor easy for any of them. All writing—if it is done well—is hard work.

For example, few writers manage to write without revising. The almost unanimous testimony of good writers in all disciplines is that writing is always difficult and that they must write several drafts to be satisfied with an essay or a book. “I write at least three drafts of everything,” the celebrated American historian Richard Hofstadter

confessed; “I have lots of second thoughts.”¹ Indeed, the easier writing is to read, the harder it has been for the writer to produce it. Your final draft must express a clear understanding of your own thoughts. But the way to that understanding may lead through several drafts. Writing, taking notes, rereading, and revising clarifies your thoughts and strengthens your hold on your own ideas. Once you have gone through that process, you have an essay that cannot be blown away by the first person who comes along with a firm opinion.

Inexperienced writers often assume that an accomplished writer simply does all the research first and then writes. On the contrary, most experienced writers find that no matter how much they know about a subject at the start, the act of writing forces them to confront new problems and new questions, gives them new leads, sends them off in search of more information to pursue those new leads, and eventually takes them to conclusions different from those with which they began. For the experienced writer, the writing proceeds in a process of leaping forward and leaping back, but above all involves some sort of writing very early and continuing until the essay is completed.

RECORDING INFORMATION AND IDEAS

If you start writing early in the process, the great values of rewriting will be clearer to you. As you take notes during a lecture or discussion, listen carefully for important concepts, taking cues from repeated phrases, enumerated lists, and items presented in writing. Use quotations marks for key ideas stated briefly, but you should *not* try to take down every word. Instead always make an effort to focus on what is most important. After class, try to summarize what you heard and consolidate your understanding of the most important concepts. Write down any questions you have about the information; many instructors

¹ Quoted in David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 120.

will entertain—in later classes or during individual consultations—your questions and attempt to help you understand more clearly what they want you to know. Write down those answers as well! Also try writing a brief summary of the important points made; that process alone may lead you back to update certain sections of your notes. It will likely lead you as well to formulate further ideas about what you have just heard. This active note-taking process will be a great help as you study for tests, especially when you begin preparation for essay examinations. And such a writing habit may also produce a personal treasure trove of topics for future history essays.

Note-taking from your reading and research, however, will be even easier. As you are reading you can go back and reread, concentrating on what was not clear to you at first. Always work on identifying the major points, separating them from supporting arguments and subsidiary evidence. Take extra care to use quotation marks for any direct statements you want to remember, but keep even those to a minimum. Always try to summarize in your own words. As an example, consider this brief passage from the well-regarded book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney Mintz:

When it was first introduced into Europe around 1100 A.D., sugar was grouped with spices—pepper, nutmeg, mace, ginger, cardamom, coriander, galingale (related to ginger), saffron, and the like. Most of these were rare and expensive tropical (and exotic) imports, used sparingly by those who could afford them at all. In the modern world, sweetness is not a “spice taste,” but is counterposed to other tastes of all kinds (bitter as in “bittersweet,” sour as in “sweet and sour,” piquant as in “hot sausage” and “sweet sausage”), so that today it is difficult to view sugar as a condiment or spice. But long before most north Europeans came to know of it, sugar was consumed in large quantities as a medicine and spice in the eastern Mediterranean, in Egypt, and across North Africa. Its medical utility had already been firmly established by physicians of the time—including Islamized Jews, Persians, and Nestorian Christians, working across the Islamic world from India to Spain—and it entered slowly into European medical practice via Arab pharmacology.

As a spice sugar was prized among the wealthy and powerful of western Europe, at least from the Crusades onward. By “spice” is meant

here that class of “aromatic vegetable productions,” to quote Webster’s definition, “used in cooking to season food and flavor sauces, pickles, etc.” We are accustomed not to thinking of sugar as spice, but, rather, to thinking of “sugar *and* spice.” This habit of mind attests to the significant changes in the use and meanings of sugar, in the relationship between sugar and spices, and in the place of sweetness in western food systems that have occurred since 1100.²

Here are some notes taken after reading this passage:

- sugar introduced to Europe ca. 1100 AD, grouped with spices--rare & expensive tropical imports, used sparingly by those who could afford them
- now sweetness not a “spice taste,” but compared to other tastes--“bittersweet,” “sweet and sour,” or “hot sausage” & “sweet sausage”
- before Europeans knew of sugar consumed as medicine and spice in eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, & North Africa
- physicians--Islamized Jews, Persians, and Nestorian Christians in Islamic world from India to Spain—used sugar as medicine, slowly came to European medical practice via Arab pharmacology
- as spice, sugar prized by wealthy and powerful of western Europe since Crusades
- Webster’s dictionary: “spice” “aromatic vegetable productions used in cooking to season food and flavor sauces, pickles, etc.”
- we think of sugar not as spice, but of “sugar *and* spice”
- shows significant changes in use and meaning of sugar, in relationship between sugar and spices, and in place of sweetness in western food systems since 1100

² Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in World History* (New York: Viking, 1985): 79–80.

These notes, however, would be of limited value. They are nearly sixty percent as long as the original excerpt and little more than sequential listing of what appeared there; the note-taker does not appear to have thought carefully about the reading. Moreover, these notes often repeat words and phrases, sometimes pieced together in the same or a similar order, directly from the original but without the benefit of quotation marks. Using these notes in the preparation of an essay could easily lead you to being accused of plagiarism, an unpardonable sin for any writer. Much better if you tried to read the original passage, summarize its main points and, at the same time, indicate in your notes—by using quotation marks—any key quotations, which you might later use in an essay. Now consider this example of notes made after reading, and then rereading, the same passage from Professor Mintz's book:

Mintz, *Sweetness*, pp. 79–80

Sugar long seen as medicine by Muslim, Jewish, and Nestorian physicians in Islamic lands; became known in Europe after Crusades (ca. 1100) as a spice and was regarded just as valuable. Hard for moderns to see it that way: "We are accustomed not to thinking of sugar as spice, but, rather, to thinking of 'sugar and spice.'" (80) changing perceptions of sweetness also seen in contrast to other tastes: "bittersweet" and "sweet and sour"

Notice how this second set of notes attempts to capture both the historical sequence of events *and* the main idea of the original passage. They also indicate clearly, in an abbreviated reference, the source of all the information and, more specifically, the exact reference for the quotation. Taking notes such as these from the very beginning will serve as an early start for any writing process. And you may well benefit from taking notes such as these as you read required texts in your history classes as well, not just for essay examinations, but also in being better prepared for lectures and class discussions.

As you read background information, and later specific sources, regarding your essay topic, you should certainly keep notes with location information, including URLs for Web sources and page numbers for books and articles. The location details will help you find the information again should you need it. Write down questions about what you read, much as you would when you take notes during your classes. (We often scribble notes and questions in the margins of our own books. But never, NEVER write in a library book, or any book you have borrowed!) There are many ways to keep such notes. For years we recommended that our students take notes on 3 × 5 cards or keep a separate notebook for each project. Either are easy to carry in a briefcase or book bag, and we found them more convenient than loose tablets or sheets of paper and much easier to organize. In recent years we have come to rely more and more on our computers for note-taking as well as writing. We encourage you to do so as well.

Almost any word processing program can be used for note-taking and then be of enormous value in organizing your notes as you begin to write a draft of your essay. Do take care—as you should in *all* note-taking endeavors—in selecting keywords and using them in your note files. You can later locate all the references you have found on a particular subject by using the search or FIND function on your word processing program to locate those keywords. Many such programs will also allow you to shift your notes in the electronic file in which you are writing your essay; simply block and copy text from your note files, then open your essay file, and paste the information there. Be sure to indicate clearly [perhaps in square brackets] location information, particularly Web links or page numbers, as you write your notes into a computer file. For some Web sites, you must indicate clearly the precise and complete URL for the particular source you have found, as well as any search terms you have used to locate specific information.

While you may use almost any word processing program to accomplish such tasks, there are a number of specific note-taking programs available that you might wish to use instead. A program we find particularly useful is *Scribe*, created by Elena Razlogova for

George Mason University's Center for History and the New Media. It is available as a free download from the World Wide Web at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/scribe> in a compressed file format. You will need to use a file decompression program to activate the *Scribe* program and its attachments before you can begin work; there is a link to a recommended program on the Web site. With *Scribe*, you can create virtual note cards with detailed location information, very long notes and separate personal comments, plus have the capacity to use a large number of keywords. You can export footnotes and bibliography entries, formatted to match *The Chicago Manual of Style* suggestions, which historians usually use. It does take a little time to study the instructions and master *Scribe* features and operations, although if you anticipate using it for several projects we think it will be well worth your time and effort. There is also a *Scribe* discussion list available where you can ask questions about the program. You may also wish to consider using a new research program, *Zotero*, also available from the Center for History and the New Media, although it is designed specifically for use with the Firefox Web browser.

Whether you use a specialized note-taking or database program, or merely take notes with your word processing program, be sure to save your notes as you work and especially as you finish each research or writing session, no matter how short. Some programs automatically create back-up files, but we encourage you to make others. Take advantage of the easy means electronic media provides to save your work. Keep several copies using your computer hard drive as well as additional copies in other formats. For as long as we have been writing, we have heard disheartening experiences almost every year of tribulations students and colleagues have undergone because they have lost all their research due to one sort of disaster or another. We have not wanted to join them! In preparing each edition of this book, for example, we have kept copies of every chapter in a separate file, and have four or more copies of each—on our computer hard drives, floppy disks, compressed “zip” disks, CD-ROMs created with our computers, and USB drives (also known as memory sticks or flash drives) as well as printed paper versions—and stored in alternative places. You should do so,

too, even with the notes from your first inquiries into potential topics, and continue as you proceed with more intensive research.

Whatever format you select, the main point is to take notes even as you begin your investigations. Ask yourself questions (and as a part of your initial writing, while they are still fresh in your mind, jot down a few possible—yet plausible—answers). Put down significant phrases. Note places where your sources disagree. Pay attention to what one historian notices and another ignores. Make notes of your own opinions about both the historians and the material. Even in the early stages of your research, important ideas may pop into your head. Write them down and then test them with further study. You may discover that further research confirms that some of your first impressions are gems! But always be sure to differentiate your ideas from those you find in your sources.

You should keep a working bibliography in your notes from the beginning and throughout your research. Take special care to include the essential elements of information for each reference you consult, recorded on a separate entry. Each should include all of the following: *authorship* (and also the names of editors and/or translators); the *title* (or titles, in the case of an article in a book or journal); the *location* where you found the information (including the publisher and the place of publication of books or, in the case of Internet information, the URL, and—when appropriate—volume and page numbers); and the *date(s)* of publication and/or access. It is not necessary to follow the conventions for note or bibliographic formats as you begin, but it is very important to be sure you include all the essential details. For example, you might consult:

Adams, Ephraim Douglass. *The Power of Ideals
in American History*. AMS Press, New York, 1969.

This information will need to be reorganized when you write in a conventional bibliographic or other reference format, but the first principle for any note-taking effort is clear: *Be sure you record where you got your information.*

If you make sure to record all the bibliographic details as you start with any source, later on you can refer in your notes simply to the author, a shortened title, and use page (and volume) numbers. Were you using Adams's *The Power of Ideals in American History* as a source in research about the origins of manifest destiny (as did Penny Sonnenburg in her essay presented in Appendix A), you might write "Adams, *Ideals*, 67" (to indicate *Ideals* as the essence of the source title and 67 to indicate the page number). Since you must be able to refer accurately to your sources when you write, you must also do so when you take notes. You will save yourself much grief if you keep track of your sources carefully while you do your research!

The second principle for good note-taking is to avoid copying too much direct quotation in your notes. Writing down the quotation takes time, and you can easily make errors in transcribing it. You save time—and sometimes create your best writing—if you exercise your mind by summarizing or paraphrasing rather than merely copying a direct quotation. You may wish to photocopy some pages relevant to your work if you must return the book before you write the paper. But as a warning, do not be tempted to simply stash the copies in a folder with all your other research. Instead, persevere and make notes while the purpose of the source is still fresh in your mind. Writing down ideas in your own words from the beginning is especially valuable as it opens your mind to the possibilities of how you might present the information when you begin to write your essay. And in attempting to paraphrase be especially careful that you do not slip in copying the original with only minor changes involving just a couple of words or using the same structure of presenting ideas.

As you read Adams's *The Power of Ideals in American History*, you might make a note summarizing some of his views like this:

Adams, *Ideals*, 67

origins

provides background knowledge to understand the true beginnings of manifest destiny, not just in American history.

Notice the inclusion of a separate topic heading, "origins"; this is especially helpful if you are using note cards, or in the margins of a separate notebook. You can use such headings as you would keywords in computerized notes to find materials on particular aspects of your subject. When you begin writing your complete essay, you can return to the original source (or your photocopies) for additional details and quote exactly if that seems necessary.

But you might avoid that additional effort by keeping in mind the third principal for note-taking, which is to take special care in making copies of direct quotations. Always place direct quotations within quotation marks in your notes and review the quotation for accuracy once you have written it down. The eye and the hand can slip while you are looking first at your source and then at your notebook, card, or computer screen. It may help to put a check or asterisk (*) by the quotation to tell yourself that you have reviewed it for accuracy once you have put it down.

Here is a sample note of a direct quotation for an essay concerning manifest destiny, discussing the idea's historical beginnings:

Barker, *Traditions*, 312

natural law/destiny

* The large and somewhat general expression "became a tradition of human civility which runs continuously from the Stoic teachers of the Porch to the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789."

This quotation may seem a particularly apt explanation of natural law—although the words themselves may reflect historical writing of more than a half century ago—than it is to a direct quote addressing manifest destiny itself. Try to take such matters into consideration and use direct quotations only sparingly in your notes.

This may be easier if you also practice the fourth principle of note-taking, which is to make your own comments as you read and make notes. Commenting requires you to reflect on what you read, making you an active rather than a passive reader. *But be sure to*

distinguish between the notes that are your own thoughts and notes that are direct quotations or summaries of your sources. We often put an arrow before our own thoughts whether we are using cards, a notebook, or our computers. The arrow lets us know that these thoughts are ours. If you do not take care in distinguishing your thoughts from the thoughts of your source, you may be accused of plagiarism, a very serious matter and one from which few authors can easily recover.

Here is an example of how you might write a note about your own thoughts on the origins of manifest destiny:

chosen people

→ the belief in manifest destiny has mostly appeared to be a uniquely American characteristic, but further research on other countries and their "chosen people" concepts leads to belief that the concept of manifest destiny predated not only United States history, but in some cases even also predated United States existence as a country

The purpose of such a note is to keep your mind active as you read. Again, notice the inclusion of a topic heading, which will lead you back to your own ideas as well as other information in your notes on the same topic. This practice will also help shape ideas for the essay that you are writing.

Writer's Checklist for Taking Notes

- ___ ✓ Do I practice note-taking when in class and reading assigned texts?
- ___ ✓ Have I recorded full bibliographic information for each source?
- ___ ✓ Do I limit the amount of direct quotation in my notes?
- ___ ✓ Have I used my own words to summarize or paraphrase information I find?
- ___ ✓ Have I taken special care in recording any direct quotations?
- ___ ✓ Am I careful to record all appropriate keywords in my notes?

- ___ ✓ Have I looked for patterns, even unexpected, in the evidence?
- ___ ✓ Are my own ideas a part of my notes on the subject?

ORGANIZING YOUR ESSAY

Taking notes that focus on both information and ideas—including your own ideas—will help you begin putting your mind to work organizing your essay. Having spent some time refining your subject, gathering a bibliography, doing preliminary reading, and taking notes, you should feel more confident about your knowledge. You will have left the somewhat flat and limited accounts of the encyclopedias and other reference books, and you will have started looking at specialized books and articles as well as primary sources related to your topic. You will have been asking questions along the way, writing them down in your notes. You will have noticed patterns or repeated ideas in your research, and you should have jotted down some of your own ideas as well. In these ways, your note-taking process should have helped you find interesting approaches to your topic.

Sometimes a pattern occurs in a consistent response to certain subjects. For example, the notion of manifest destiny was prevalent and commonly used outside the United States. Which nations also employed and extensively used this notion? How far back can one logically trace the idea of manifest destiny? You may have started with the resolve to write an essay about manifest destiny. If you were lucky, you thought of a limited topic right away, one you might do in ten or fifteen pages. Perhaps, however, you were not been able to limit your topic enough. Make a list of interesting topics or problems relating to manifest destiny. Keep working at it until you arrive at something manageable. The following notes illustrate this attempt to produce both something interesting and something you can do in the time and space available.

"Manifest Destiny and its importance in world history."

--Too vague. Not focused enough with too many subtopics.

"Manifest Destiny and its influence in European history."

--A narrower focus, yet still encompasses much.

--European history covers too large a span to incorporate into a paper of this size.

"Manifest Destiny: The American Dream of Expansionism"

--too narrow does not recognize motivation for the topic, ignores the true question of its origins.

For this last topic the temptation might be to go from manifest destiny to the American ideology of expansionism. Then you need to ask questions like these: Do I want this paper to be about the various stages of American expansion? Does this topic completely overlook the world influence of manifest destiny? Has my initial research been directed more at a global overview? In essence, What do I want to prove by writing this essay? What are other historical explanations of manifest destiny? As you ask yourself these questions, look back over your research notes and see if you can detect a pattern. Slowly an idea emerges and you add it to the list of potential topics.

"Manifest Destiny: A Requirement for all Nations."

--widespread evidence of this, but still a narrow focus.

--considerable primary source information in newspaper articles, plus Internet sources provide translated material.

Now you have a starting point, a provisional title. Remember, though, you can change anything at this stage, and your changes may be sweeping. While you use it, the provisional title will give direction to your work. That sense of direction will help you work faster and more efficiently because it helps organize your thoughts, making you evaluate information you have collected so you can make proper use of it. If you have done your research well, you cannot use all the information you have collected in your notes. Good writing is done out of an abundance of knowledge. The provisional title will act as a filter in your mind, holding and organizing things you should keep for your essay and letting information go that will not contribute to your argument.

Once you arrive at a provisional title, refocus your reading. If you plan to write about the origins of manifest destiny, limit yourself to reading historians' explanations of the concept and philosophical works which underlay the concept. You may be so interested in manifest destiny that you decide to continue to seek more information about the use of the idea in American history to justify taking Mexican land with an eye even further south. Good! But while you are working on this essay, limit your reading to information that helps you to your goal. Maintaining that discipline will help you avoid the problems which plagued the famous historian Frederick Jackson Turner! We would also encourage you to write at least a brief outline to help organize your ideas and your evidence.

Some writers sit down and start hammering on the keyboard without any clear idea of the steps they will take in developing their argument. Others worry about the details of formal outlining—Roman numerals, large and small, and the placement of each point or subpoint within the outline—just as they might have been taught early in school. But either approach may distract you from the essential task, appearing to be just another insurmountable obstacle that keeps you from writing. Instead, focus on organizing your thoughts. Most people find it more efficient to shape their ideas in some way before they begin to write a draft, and we have found that to be true in our writing. We encourage you to do the same, even for short essays and before you starting writing your answers for an essay

examination. You can at least jot down a list of points you want to cover—a list that can be much more flexible than a detailed outline.

This need for structure has long been recognized as a cornerstone for historical prose. More than a half century ago, the American cultural historian Dixon Wecter extolled the virtues of careful organization, observing that the historian's "structural gift—not merely the lumping together of details to be hurled at the reader like a soggy snowball—yields writing that can be read with pleasure." But his praise for the well-organized essay came with a caution, that "the structure ought to be clean and firm, yet not obtruding the bones of its skeleton."³ You owe it to your readers to shape your essay with such a goal in mind. Organize the key ideas for your essay so that their connections are readily apparent yet presented as something more than a sequential list of topics.

As you work on enumerating your key points, let your intuition suggest other, perhaps better, forms of organization. Never be afraid to change an outline once you have begun. But no matter how clearly you think you see your project in outline before you, write a full draft! Writing may change your ideas. Be ready to follow your mind in its adventures with the evidence. Remember that you are taking your readers on a journey, not a laborious recitation of loosely related facts and information somehow coalesced to read like an essay. You might create a rough outline something like this for a longer essay on the origins of manifest destiny:

Argument: John O'Sullivan's editorial about manifest destiny leads one to believe that it was an American concept to rationalize the expansionist movement that was sweeping the United States during the hotly debated annexation of Texas. But other

nations before the United States embraced the notion in their own expansionist movements.

1. John O'Sullivan's editorial itself supports the idea of the citizens of the United States being a selected people
2. Perspectives and explanations of natural law/right and how it can be related to manifest destiny
3. Early historian's viewpoints on the importance of using similar ideas in solidifying nationalism
4. Anglo-Saxon ideas of manifest destiny as essential for national survival
5. Global analogies
6. Early national precedents in the United States (up to 1840)
7. "Manifest Destiny" term popularized, 1840s
8. Extension to sea power and the Pacific Basin

A simple outline such as this one avoids a proliferation of numbers and letters for headings and subheadings. You may add subheadings if you want, but you may not need them. Determining the sequence of your thoughts is most important and likely sufficient. Having made an outline such as this, you can more confidently write a first draft. In this case, you would have decided to shape an analytical essay looking at manifest destiny from a more global perspective. You will explain the origins of the concept, shape a narrative of its articulation and use, introduce explanations of other concepts relating to it, and explain why it is important to attempt to overlook limitations on the subject. Along the way you will explain who wrote about these concepts. And you can then actually begin writing a draft of your full essay. Penny Sonnenburg used just such a process in creating her essay, taking notes and organizing ideas before actually writing a draft. Read her final essay in Appendix A; try to see how she proceeded in her work as we have described.

³ Dixon Wecter, "How to Write History," in *A Sense of History: The Best Writing from the Pages of American Heritage* (New York: ibooks, 2003), 43; this essay, originally titled "History and How to Write It," appeared in the August 1957 issue of *American Heritage* magazine.

WRITING AND REVISING DRAFTS

Leave yourself enough time to work on several drafts of your paper. If you start writing an essay the day before it is due, stay up all night to finish that first draft, and hand it in without having time to revise it, you do an injustice to yourself and your instructor. You may get by, but you may not be proud of your work, and the instructor will probably be bored with it. A hard-pressed instructor, sitting up for hours and hours reading and marking papers from everyone in the class (and yes, we have actually done this!), deserves your best effort.

We are not saying you should avoid staying up all night long working on your paper before you hand it in. Many writers discover that they get an adrenaline flow from working steadily at a final draft for hours and hours before they give it up, and they may stay up nearly all night because they are excited about their work and cannot leave it. We understand that feeling from our own writing adventures. Hearing the birds begin to sing outside at first light before dawn after working at our yellow pads or keyboard all night long is an experience we have both shared, and we have liked it. That kind of night comes when we have worked hard for a long time, perhaps for years, and feel in command of what we are doing and want to drive on to the end.

But no writer can produce consistently good work by waiting until the last minute to begin. Discipline yourself. If you have difficulty starting to write, make a concerted effort to actually write for some short period of time, even ten or fifteen minutes. Then stop, consult your notes, take a break. Come back as soon as you can; reread what you have written. Often reading over your work will stimulate further thought—and writing! Although you may not go very fast at first, try not to become discouraged. After a night's sleep, begin again. The most important task in writing your first draft is to actually write it! Get a beginning, a middle, and an end down on paper or on your computer. Write more than you need to write at first. If your assignment is to write fifteen pages, make your first

draft twenty pages. Pack in information. Use a few select quotations. Ruminant about what you are describing. Ask yourself the familiar questions about your paper—*Who? What? When? Where? Why?* and also *How?*—and try to answer them.

As you go from your notes and outline to writing a draft of your essay, take special care when using your word processing program. In particular, the ease of block and click operations for capturing and moving electronic text from one file (or even a Web page) to another can be a temptation for including large segments of a source in your notes—and then into your essay. If you use this technique in note-taking, you will need to be certain you insert quotation marks and carefully mark those notes as quotations. Failing to do so could lead to careless insertion of some material you have copied directly into your essay. And if you are careless, you will be guilty of plagiarism. Remember: It is *your* responsibility to avoid such errors.

When you get your first draft into being, several things happen. You feel an immense relief. An unwritten assignment is more formidable than one you have written—even in a rough draft. You now have some idea what you can say in the space you have available. You have some idea of the major questions you want to address. You know some areas of weakness where you have to do further research. You can see which of your conclusions seem fairly certain and which seem shaky. You can see if you have an idea that binds all your data together into a thesis, a controlling argument that resolves or defines some puzzle that you find in your sources. And you can now revise and in the process eliminate the extra words and sentences you packed into your first draft. Writers have long made revisions, even marking on their first drafts. Manuscripts of many well-known nineteenth century authors reveal such tinkering with their work, crossing out passages, adding others, writing new text in the margins, until the manuscripts are nearly impossible to read. Then they had to start again on a fresh piece of paper! But no matter how messy, they saved the originals (as their archived papers attest) so they might go back and look again at their initial writing efforts.

Computer word processing programs, of course, have made that process easier, although with one potential disadvantage. Often the original inspirations are gone, erased from the screen and replaced by a new version. We have found this to be a particular problem in our writing, and have taken to saving several versions of electronic drafts. Sometimes we open a new window on our computers and work separately on what seems to be a troublesome passage. Then we save that as a separate file so we can go back and look at it again. With the vast digital storage capacity of modern electronic devices, we can save many of these, but we are careful to give each a distinct file name. And we are grateful that our computers date and time each saved file so we are able, if necessary, to reconstruct the sequence of our thoughts. We believe the potential of our electronic writing tools—even more than the quick availability of information on the Internet—mark perhaps the greatest contributions of our electronic age to the writing of historians.

Some writers prefer to print out a draft and go over it with a pen or pencil, making changes that they then type into the draft on the computer. Some behavioral research has shown that the longer people work with computers, the more they tend to do their revising directly from the screen without printing out. You should use the method, or combination of methods, that suits you best. Keep in mind, though, that the most important part of the task is to read your work with a self-critical eye. You can cultivate a good sense of revision by reading your own work again and again. Be sure you consider, or reconsider, some of the steps you have already used in the process. As you read, ask yourself questions related to the five basic principles for writing a good history essay (which we discussed in Chapter 1):

1. Is my essay sharply focused on a limited topic?
2. Does it have a clearly stated argument?
3. Is it built, step by step, on carefully acknowledged evidence?
4. Does it reflect my own dispassionate thoughts?
5. Is it clearly written with an intended audience in mind?

And, of course, ask yourself once again, Does the essay represent my own original work!

Consider all these questions carefully as you read your draft. Reading aloud helps. You can sometimes pick out rough places in your prose because they make you stumble in reading them. Reading aloud with inflection and expression will help you catch places where you may be misleading or confusing. You probably want to take full advantage of the many features of an electronic writing program to revise and improve what you have written. Yet no such program, no matter how advanced or up-to-date, will be helpful until you learn how to use it effectively! Many colleges and universities have adopted particular word processing programs as a standard for their campuses and frequently provide technical assistance in using them. Take advantage of such help. Rather than an indication of your ignorance, doing so is a signal of your intent to improve your writing. Recent editions of word processing programs often have very useful **HELP** menus or utilities included. Take full advantage of them, as well, both to learn how the program works and to refresh your memory about features you infrequently use.

But it isn't necessary to master all the features before you begin to write. At a minimum, though, you will want to know how to use **bold** or *italic* text, set margins, change fonts, insert special characters (such as the currency symbols £, ¥, and €), add page numbers, and, of course, insert footnotes (and endnotes). We are grateful that our word processors allow us to change our citations from footnotes to endnotes and back again. You will too, if you first used one format and then discover your instructor would prefer another. We have found, however, that occasionally the automatic formatting of footnotes (much more so than endnotes) may result in awkward placement of references. You may need to manually alter the number of lines of text on a page to adjust the placement of the notes. If you do not have someone who can assist you in mastering these functions, you may not need an expansive (and all too frequently expensive!) reference manual, DVD, or other instructional disk for the program you are using. First, ask a fellow student or your instructor, then try

the program's HELP features or a campus computer help service. The time you spend will be well rewarded with an essay that looks and reads as you really want it to.

We have appreciated the great advantage our computers and word processing programs have been in allowing us to revise our essays; not only moving text, but also correcting errors, is far easier than we recall from an era of typewriters, paper, and correction fluid. Frequently the newer programs will do some of this automatically, or almost automatically, for you. Take care in using such features. Often the programs are designed to make such changes with minimal, if any, input from the writer. Remember: *You* are responsible for what appears in the final version of your essay. So be certain that any such changes reflect what you want to say. If you can set which items may be autocorrected, do so. If you cannot, you may wish to turn off any autocorrect functions. In any case, always read over the final text of your essay and edit it yet again yourself before you submit it to your instructor.

The word processing programs we use—and likely yours as well—are invaluable for checking our spelling, but only against the words stored in their memories. If you can add words to the spell checker, by all means do so; that way special terms associated with your topic will not be marked as misspelled. But be careful when you enter those words, making sure the spelling you wish to use is the one you actually save. We always read what we have written on the screen and study each of the errors identified by the program. We urge you to do the same. Most often we correct those the computer has spotted. But we also know that in the binary logic of the computer some mistakes are not readily identified. For example, if you refer to a particular *sight* where you have found valuable sources for your essay, that will not be marked as misspelled, even though your instructor may wonder why you were searching for something you could see out your window rather than on a Web site. There are many other examples.

Other word processing innovations may not be as useful to you in the writing process. Among these, grammar checking functions are

one of those which can be both helpful and also mystifying. When we have changed a word from singular to plural and forgotten to change the corresponding verb, the program usually marks the error, and we appreciate that. But sometimes whole phrases are noted as problematic, which, on close examination, seem to be exactly as we intended and easily read. Also the thesaurus on our word processors frequently offers only limited options for potential synonyms. We still prefer a printed version, especially the recent *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*, which is particularly valuable for identifying subtle differences in word usage and meanings.⁴ But our least favorite word processing innovation is the auto-summarizing option, which seldom achieves anything like the “executive summary” it promises. We never use this option, preferring to make our own summaries of what we have written and urge you to do the same.

After rereading our essays and making revisions on our computer screens, we have come back to the practice of also printing out a manuscript, going over it carefully with pen or pencil, and only then inserting final corrections and revisions in the computer. You may wish to consider this approach as well. But above all, you must take special care to read your work over multiple times. Professional writers often have others read their work and make suggestions as well. Get help from friends—as we have for every edition of this book. Do not ask them, “What do you think of my essay?” They will tell you it is good. Ask them instead, “What do you think I am saying in this paper?” You will sometimes be surprised by what comes out—and you will get some ideas for revision. Also ask them what you might do to improve your writing so that the essential points you want to make would be clear to them.

Some of you may also be involved in a peer editing process in which students comment on drafts of each others' essays. Your college or university may foster such collaborations, or your instructor

⁴ Christine A. Lindberg, comp., *The Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

may encourage—or even require—you to do so. If not you may wish to form your own group—a kind of writing club—in which you will all help each other in revising your essays. Recent additions to word processing programs may also facilitate revisions through peer editing and similar processes. Sometimes called “track changes,” these features permit several people to read each document file and make suggested deletions, insertions, and comments—each using separate distinctive colors for their recommendations.

As the author, you may want to ask several friends to read a computer file with your essay and make electronic editorial suggestions. If they do so sequentially, each adding new advice, you can come back to your essay in a single file with a variety of comments and ideas for improving what you have written. Most such programs then allow you to accept or reject each of those changes and incorporate decisions about them into your final document. This sort of collaborative writing and revision process does take some getting used to, but has the advantage of easily consolidating comments and making it relatively easy to incorporate them into your final draft. We encourage you to explore this word processing innovation as a means of making easier the peer editing process we also strongly recommend.

There are a number of explanations and guides to the process of peer editing, many available online. One that our students have found helpful is in the “Guilford Writing Manual,” prepared a number of years ago for students at Guilford College by Professor Jeff Jeske and revised in recent years. Our students have retrieved it at http://www.guilford.edu/about_guilford/services_and_administration/writing/ by selecting “Peer Editing” from the menu on the opening page. In addition, the ten questions in the “Writer’s Checklist for Peer Editing” at the end of this chapter offer an effective approach you can use in the process.

If you do take advantage of this frequently useful approach in your revision process, keep in mind that the purpose is to help one another, not to demonstrate how much more you may think you know about writing—or the topic of the essay—than the author.

Remember—a critical eye in the revision process is not just about making criticisms! As Professor Jeske cautions:

It is worth remembering that a major goal of peer editing is to enable writers to make effective revising decisions. Praise alone will not help; when it appears unalloyed, it suggests that the editor has not invested the necessary effort, not thought deeply about the paper’s effects and the way the prose could be improved.

Nevertheless, the tone of the editorial response should be positive. Don’t merely point out what’s wrong. Identify the things that the author has done well: this way the author will know what to continue to do. . . .

The collective goal is that we all improve—and, as this happens, that we develop a positive attitude toward the activity in which we are engaged.⁵

You will likely find that helping others with their writing will also sharpen your ability to improve your own drafts as you reread and revise them.

For most writers, the process of improving drafts goes on until the last minute. Writing and revising drafts will help you focus on all parts of your work more clearly. It will help you see your thinking, your research, your factual knowledge, your expression, and the shape of your ideas. Very often as you write and rewrite drafts of your essay, you will realize that your thought is flabby or you may suddenly think of contrary arguments you have not thought of before. You can then revise to take these contrary arguments into account. Reading your work over and over again, and taking advantage of comments from others, will help you track your own ideas so that they might flow from one to another without leaving gaps that might hinder readers from making the connections you want them to make.

⁵ Jeff Jeske, “Peer Editing,” in *Guilford Writing Manual*, http://www.guilford.edu/about_guilford/services_and_administration/writing/peer_editing/feedback.htmlservices/index.cfm?ID=700003980 (n.d., accessed 21 July 2008).

Finally, we again want to encourage you at each stage in the writing process—from your initial inquiries, through your research on a particular topic, as you prepare drafts of your essay, and in revising as you complete the final version of your essay—to make backup copies of your work. Make multiple electronic copies of your essay, and print a paper copy as well. Too often students have come to us ashen-faced, reporting they have lost, erased, or destroyed the only disk on which they saved their essay. While we can and do sympathize, and grieve with them, there is seldom much we can do to help. Remember: It is up to you to prevent losing your hard work!

Writer's Checklist for Peer Editing

- ___ ✓ Does the essay stick to the topic and also deal with all the essential issues?
- ___ ✓ Are the purpose and the thesis of the essay clear?
- ___ ✓ Is evidence used effectively and documented clearly?
- ___ ✓ Is the tone consistent and even-handed?
- ___ ✓ Are the author's views clearly evident, yet fairly presented?
- ___ ✓ Is the writing clear, avoiding needless repetition?
- ___ ✓ Are words used appropriately, avoiding clichés and needless verbiage?
- ___ ✓ Is the essay organized clearly, so a reader can follow the argument?
- ___ ✓ Do the conclusions mirror the opening in some way?
- ___ ✓ What is the greatest strength of this essay?



VOICE AND STYLE



Every historian offers an individual approach to the past. Certainly the modes of expression and style of writing vary from writer to writer. Some historians are vivid and dramatic. Others are content to be more prosaic. In similar fashion, every historian develops different arguments—even when considering the same or similar topics—drawing together facts and observations to present a proposition central to an essay. Instructors will expect you to do likewise by developing a *thesis*, a point of view, a main idea that unites your essay, a proposition you want others to believe. (*Thesis* comes from a Greek word meaning “to set down.”) Your thesis will be the argument, the reason you write the essay, the case you want to prove. To make your argument convincing, you will need to present evidence supporting your point of view. But we should offer a fundamental caution: A mere collection of facts, specific pieces of information, is not an essay nor would it constitute an argument.

The distinguished historian Barbara Tuchman was very clear about the temptations that “facts” offer to all historians:

To offer a mass of undigested facts, of names not identified and places not located, is of no use to the reader and is simple laziness on the part of the author, or pedantry to show how much he has read. To discard the unnecessary requires courage and also extra work. . . . The historian is continually being beguiled down fascinating byways and sidetracks. But