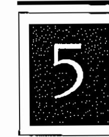
Finally, we again want to encourage you at each stage in the writing process—from your initial inquiries, through your research on a particular topic, as you prepare drafts of your essay, and in revising as you complete the final version of your essay—to make backup copies of your work. Make multiple 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]

in: Richard Marius and Melvin Page,
*A Short Guide to Writing about History*
(Longman, 7th ed. 2010), 119-131

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

> the art of writing—the test of the artist—is to resist the beguilement and cleave to the subject.[1]

The facts cannot be an end in themselves. They must be carefully selected and woven together in such a way that they support a well-defined point of view you wish other people to believe. This will be the thesis of your essay, yet merely stating it clearly will be insufficient. You must also find a way to convince your readers, and that will require you to find appropriate ways of writing—a writer's "voice"—that will convince them to believe the evidence you present and to accept the argument you make. In doing so, you will likely use several approaches, sometimes called modes, in your writing. The modes of writing most frequently employed by historians in supporting their arguments are *narration*, *description*, *exposition*, and *persuasion*.

## MODES OF WRITING

As you study the following modes, keep in mind when writing history essays that argument, in the sense of developing a thesis, is fundamental to all the modes. You may use all of them in a single essay; certainly we have in our own writing. And although they do often overlap, the four modes of writing are distinct; one will usually predominate in a given essay or book. When you write an essay, try to determine which modes will best advance your argument. If you have a clear idea of the mode best suited to your purposes, you make the task easier for yourself and your readers.

### Narration

Without narratives, history would die as a discipline. Historical narration tells us what happened, usually following the sequence of events as they happen, one event after the other—just as you tell a

[1] Barbara Tuchman, "In Search of History," in *Practicing History* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1982), 18. This is actually the text of a 1963 address Tuchman gave at Radcliffe College.



story about something that happened to you this morning. Good narrative history often looks easy to write because it is easy to read. In fact, storytelling is a complicated art. A key part of the art of narration lies in a sense of what to include and what to exclude, what to believe and what to reject. Narration must also take into account contradictions in the evidence and either resolve them or admit frankly that they cannot be resolved.

A good narrative begins by establishing some sort of tension, some kind of problem that later development of the narration should resolve. The beginning arouses readers' curiosity. It introduces elements in tension, and the rest of the story dwells on resolving or explaining that tension. Do not introduce material into your essay at the beginning if you don't intend to do something with it later on. A narration should also have a climax that embodies the meaning the writer wants readers to take from the story. At the climax, everything comes together, and the problem is solved or else explained. Because it gathers up all the threads and joins them to make the writer's point, the climax comes near the end of the essay, and your readers should feel that you have kept a promise made to them in the beginning. If you cannot find a climactic point in your narration, you need to reorganize your story. The story should move along to that point, unburdened by unnecessary details. In telling a story, it is usually better to keep quotations short and pointed, and examples limited, so that they clearly illustrate the events being recounted and readily lead to the conclusion you intend.

In the following narrative concerning the Battle of Adwa, fought in 1896 between Ethiopian forces of Emperor Menilek and Italian armies threatening to bring his country within Italy's northeastern African colonial orbit, Harold G. Marcus is spare in mentioning details and even more parsimonious in his use of quotation. He begins by indicating the plans of the Italian commander, General Oreste Baratieri, establishing an expectation of the outcome. Then he narrates the story of how the battle actually unfolded.

> The general and his army of 8,463 Italians and 10,749 Eriterans [local Africans] held the high ground between Adigrat and Idaga Hamus.

Baratieri was prepared to outwit his enemy, whose limited supplies would have forced retirement southward, permitting Baratieri to claim victory and also advance deeper into Tigray. . . .

At 9:00 P.M. on 28 February, the Italians began a forced march to the three hills that dominated the Ethiopian camp, to surprise and challenge Menilek's army. To secure his left Baratieri sent his reserve brigade to an unnamed, nearby fourth hill, but the Ethiopian guide, either through misdirection or sabotage, led the Italians astray. Not only was the left flank uncovered but also a quarter of the Italian force was rendered useless and vulnerable. So, even if Baratieri's army had occupied the high points and deployed in strong defensive positions on the frontal slopes, it was foredoomed to defeat. Indeed, the timing of the Italian attack, as a surprise on early Sunday morning, was all wrong.

At 4:00 A.M., on 1 March, Menilek, [Empress] Taitou, and the rases [chief political and military subordinates of the Emperor] were at mass, which the Orthodox church celebrates early. It was a sad time, since the food situation had forced the emperor to order camp to be struck on 2 March. His relief must have been great when a number of couriers and runners rushed in to report the enemy was approaching in force. The emperor ordered men to arms, and, as the soldiers lined up, priests passed before them hearing confession, granting absolution, and offering blessings. The green, orange, and red flags of Ethiopia were unfurled when the emperor appeared, and the soldiers cheered and cheered. At 5:30 A.M., Menilek's 100,000-man army moved forward, to confront an Italian force of 14,500 soldiers.

By 9:00 A.M., the outcome was obvious. The Italian center had crumbled, and other units were in danger of being flanked by Ethiopians who had found the gap in Baratieri's defenses. By noon, when retreat sounded, the Italians had paid dearly. Four thousand Europeans and 2,000 Eritreans had died, 1,428 of Baratieri's soldiers had been wounded, and 1,800 prisoners were held by the Ethiopians. All told, the Italian army lost 70 percent of its forces, a disaster for a modern army.

In sharp contrast, Menilek's forces suffered an estimated 4,000–7,000 killed and perhaps as many as 10,000 wounded, which made for an acceptably low loss ratio. The Italian enemy had been destroyed, whereas the Ethiopian army remained in being, strengthened by the weapons and matériel abandoned on the field. The victory was unequivocally Ethiopian.

In telling the story of this imperial encounter, Marcus poses a problem and then narrates the story to its unexpected conclusion.



Although there are many other sources available concerning the conflict at Adwa, including Italian official records, letters and diaries of soldiers, not to mention oral testimonies collected from some of the participants, Marcus wisely elects not to infuse his narration with too much of this potentially extraneous information. He uses just enough evidence—primarily the numbers of soldiers engaged in the battle and the numbers of casualties—in a way that lends credibility to his account. And thus you are disposed to believe him when he later goes on to conclude that Menilek's victory at the Battle of Adwa did "guarantee Ethiopia another generation and one-half of virtually unchallenged independence; it gave the country a status similar to that of Afghanistan, Persia, Japan, and Thailand as accepted anomalies in the imperialist world order."[2] And you can see how his narration of this battle experience supports the essential argument he makes in his book.

Of course, in your research you might just as well consult some of the numerous published (and perhaps, if your college or university has its own archive, also unpublished) collections of letters, as well as journals and collected papers. They offer similar opportunities for research enabling you to write narrations of other stories concerning the past. Not just battles, but also the lives of individuals, and even the explanations they offer for the circumstances of their existence, can become fascinating subjects for your history essays.

## Description

As straightforward as narration may sometimes appear, description presents an account of sensory experience—the way things look, feel, taste, sound, and smell—as well as more impressionistic descriptions of attitudes and behavior. Popular history includes vivid descriptions, and you, too, can describe people and places with great

[2] Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 98-100.

effect in an essay intended for a college or scholarly audience. No matter how learned or unlearned in the limitless facts of a historical period, everyone has had sensory experiences similar to those of people in the past. Therefore, description is useful to kindle the imagination of readers and draw them into the story you wish to tell. Jonathon Spence does exactly that as he begins his study of life in seventeenth century provincial China, *The Death of Woman Wang.*

> The earthquake struck T'an-ch'eng on July 25, 1668. It was evening, the moon just rising. There was no warning, save for a frightening roar that seemed to come from somewhere to the northwest. The buildings in the city began to shake and the trees took up a rhythmical swaying, tossing ever more wildly back and forth until their tips almost touched the ground. Then came one sharp violent jolt that brought down stretches of the city walls and battlements, officials' yamens [or residences], temples, and thousands of private homes. Broad fissures opened up across the streets and underneath the houses. Jets of water spurted into the air to a height of twenty feet or more, and streams of water poured down the roads and flooded the irrigation ditches. Those who tried to remain standing felt as if their feet were round stones spinning out of control and were brought crashing to the ground. . . .
>
> As suddenly as it had come the earthquake departed. The ground was still. The water seeped away, leaving the open fissures edged with mud and fine sand. The ruins rested in layers where they had fallen, like giant sets of steps.[3]

All these descriptions of the earthquake will resonate with any reader who has likewise lived through such an experience and also with those who understand earthquakes only from seeing images of them and their aftermath on television. The vivid descriptions will make it easy for you to imagine being transported to eastern China more than three centuries ago. And by introducing his study with such clear and believable descriptions, Professor Spence has prepared you to trust his analysis of life in a society that is likely far different

[3] Jonathon D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 1–2.



from any of your experiences. You can often accomplish much the same effect in your essays by careful attention to description.

But never make things up when you describe something. Although some readers may be entertained by flights of fancy in historical writing, historians find them cheap and dishonest, and with good reason. Here are two paragraphs written by the late Paul Murray Kendall in his laudatory biography of Richard III, King of England between 1483 and 1485. They describe actions and emotions during the battle of Barnet on the morning of April 14, 1471, in which Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, fought on the side of his older brother, Edward IV, against an effort by the Earl of Warwick to overthrow King Edward.

> Suddenly there was a swirl in the mist to the left of and behind the enemy position. A shiver ran down the Lancastrian line. Exeter's men began to give way, stubbornly at first, then faster. Warwick's center must be crumbling. Richard signaled his trumpeters. The call to advance banners rang out. The weary young commander and his weary men surged forward. Then the enemy were in full flight, casting away their weapons as they ran.
>
> Out of the mist loomed the great sun banner of the House of York. A giant figure strode forward. Pushing his visor up, Richard saw that the King was smiling at him in brotherly pride. The right wing, driving westward across the Lancastrian rear, had linked up with Edward's center to bring the battle to an end. It was seven o'clock in the morning; the struggle had lasted almost three hours.[4]

Kendall's description evokes a vivid image of battle, but his scene is almost entirely made up. The sources for the battle of Barnet are skimpy. It is agreed a mist lay over the ground and that the battle was confused. In the midst of the battle, someone on the Lancastrian side shouted "treason," and others took up the cry. The Lancastrian troops in the middle of the line, thinking one of their leaders on a flank had gone over to the enemy, broke and ran. Their commander, the Earl of

[4] Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard the Third* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 97.

Warwick, was killed while trying to catch his horse. But Kendall's description of Richard meeting his brother Edward is all fantasy. No wonder historian Charles Ross, in remarking on Kendall's account of Barnet, comments dryly that "the incautious reader might be forgiven for thinking that the author himself was present at the battle."[5]

Much worse than Ross's scorn is what such fictional details have done to Kendall's credibility. His book aims at resurrecting the reputation of Richard III from Thomas More and Shakespeare who made him a lying hypocrite and a murderer, guilty of ordering the deaths of the little sons of Edward IV after the King died. To believe such an argument against a predominant historical opinion, you must have confidence in the author. But a book so filled with fictional descriptive detail as Kendall's cannot be taken seriously by dispassionate and thoughtful readers, and it has been regularly ridiculed since its publication. You would do well to resist the temptations to enliven your writing with spurious descriptions such as those offered by Paul Murray Kendall.

## Exposition

Expositions explain and analyze—philosophical ideas, causes of events, the significance of decisions, the motives of participants, the working of an organization, the ideology of a political party. Any time you set out to explain cause and effect, or the meaning of an event or an idea, you write in the expository mode. Of course, exposition may coexist in an essay with other modes of writing. The narrator who tells *what* happened usually devotes some paragraphs to telling *why* it happened—and so goes into expository writing. Some historical essays are fairly evenly balanced between narrative and exposition, telling both what happened and why, explaining the significance of the story. Many historical essays are primarily expositions, especially

[5] Charles Ross, *Richard III* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 21.



those that break down and analyze a text or event to tell readers what it means—even as the author narrates what happened that makes the explanation necessary.

One important category of expository writing, especially in college courses, is the historiographic essay. These "histories of histories," as they are sometimes called, can be very important in helping students understand the evidence and arguments historians have used when considering a particular topic or some corollary of it. Students are often asked to write such essays, though we have found that many of our students frequently find such an exercise very difficult. Perhaps this is because they prefer to stick to the facts, and treating ideas themselves as facts in such an essay sometimes seems overwhelming. But you should not be fearful of such an effort. If you approach it as simply another form of historical analysis, it won't be as difficult as you may at first imagine.

There are many examples of historiographic essays in a wide variety of historical journals; you would do well to look for them and familiarize yourself with this common form of historical writing. Many contain detailed analyses, which cannot be usefully illustrated in a short excerpt, but this selection from an essay by David Brion Davis will give you some idea of how to approach a historiographic exposition:

> During the past thirty years, our understanding of American slavery has been extraordinarily enriched by numerous studies that fall in the . . . category of rigorous and sustained comparison. One thinks particularly of the work of Carl Degler comparing slavery and race relations in Brazil and the United States; George M. Fredrickson's two volumes on white supremacy and its consequences in the United States and South Africa; and Peter Kolchin's comparison and analysis of American slavery and Russian serfdom, a project that greatly broadened and enriched his subsequent survey of American slavery from 1619 to 1877. Mention should also be made of more specialized studies, such as those by Shearer Davis Bowman on U.S. planters and Prussian Junkers, by Eugene D. Genovese and Michael Craton on slave rebellions, and by Richard S. Dunn on two specific plantations in Virginia and Jamaica. While the comparative method *can* lead to mechanical listings of similarities and

differences, it would clearly be useful to have more comparative studies on such specific subjects as domestic servants, slave artisans, and slaves in urban and manufacturing jobs. Peter Kolchin has candidly pointed to the severe problems comparative history faces, problems that help to explain the somewhat limited number of such full-length studies; yet I think that the cumulative benefit of comparative work can be seen in the global awareness of historians such as Thomas Holt, when writing on Jamaica; Rebecca Scott, when writing on Brazil and Cuba; Frederick Cooper, when writing on East Africa; and Seymour Drescher, when writing on British abolitionism and other subjects—to say nothing of the omnipresent economic historian Stanley L. Engerman, whose work on various forms of unfree labor could hardly be broader in perspective.

But while careful, empirical comparison is indispensable, especially in alerting us to the importance of such matters as the demography and sex ratios of slave societies, the differences in slave communities, and the social implications of resident as opposed to absentee planters, much recent research has also underscored the importance of "the Big Picture"—the interrelationships that constituted an Atlantic Slave System as well as the place of such racial slavery in the evolution of the Western and modern worlds.[6]

Of course, Davis brings the experience of a distinguished career in writing about slavery to his historiographic exposition. Yet the works he mentions would be easily accessible to a student searching for histories written on the subject of slavery, and the categories he uses to group the studies would be readily observable to anyone who read them carefully. Professor Davis continues with consideration of numerous other works on the subject of his essay, "Slavery from Broader Perspectives," but he might just as well have analyzed and compared the arguments in the more than twenty books and articles he mentions. The latter effort would, as well, have resulted in a thoughtful historiographic essay, and one within the scope of many

[6] David Brion Davis, "*AHR Forum:* Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives," *The American Historical Review* 105(2000): 453–454; we have eliminated Professor Davis's footnotes, which include complete citations to the many works he mentions.



undergraduates of our acquaintance. By applying your mind to careful research and thoughtful reading you could also create a similarly substantial exposition about how historians have, over time, written about slavery—or almost any other serious subject.

## Persuasion

Historians and others use persuasion in their writing to take a position on a subject; such essays are most interesting when the topics are important and the evidence is open to interpretation. On any important historical issue, you will find disagreement among historians. These disagreements are valuable in that they discourage becoming frozen in an intolerance of opposition, and debates may actually encourage toleration in the present. The disagreements also help readers see the sources in a different light. Disagreements thrive in book reviews. A historian who disagrees with another may make a counterargument to a book the reviewer thinks is incorrect. Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860, has provoked a virtual library of responses: reviews, articles, and even books attempting to persuade readers that he was right or wrong in his interpretation of the Renaissance—or arguing that he was partly right and partly wrong. Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis concerning the role of the frontier in U.S. history has been similarly provocative.

Of course, when you set out the thesis for your essay, you will also be using persuasion in an effort to convince readers to accept your central argument. Always state your thesis concisely and as early as possible in your essay, followed by an indication of the main points and evidence you will use in making your case. When you make an assertion essential in your efforts to persuade readers, always provide some examples as evidence. A general statement followed by a quotation or some other concrete reference to the evidence provides readers reason to believe you. In this example about volunteer nursing by French women during World War I, historian Margaret H. Darrow seeks to persuade readers to accept what at first seems to be a paradox. The myths of war held that it was "full of honor, courage, heroism,

self-sacrifice, and manliness." Nurses treating the wounded and the dying were caught not only by the power of the myth but also by the reality of what they saw; they had a hard time reconciling the two. Darrow offers this observation on the problem:

> Few memoirs resolved the tension between the rhetoric of noble suffering and heroic sacrifice and the reality of dirt, pain, fear, and fatigue, with most memoirs swinging from one mode to the other without any attempt at reconciliation. For example, Noëlle Roger began her description of a ward of seriously wounded soldiers with the claim that "each of these men had lived a glorious adventure." She then depicted the shrieking pain of a man brought from the operating table, the rigid terror of a tetanus victim, and the hallucinations of a shell-shock case. However, her intent was not irony; she did not seem to notice—or could not express—that none of these were glorious adventures.[7]

Here is a standard pattern in historical writing—follow it whenever you can. Professor Darrow first makes a general statement; then she offers a quotation and a summary of the evidence. A reader will more likely be persuaded by the argument because she has provided specific evidence for it. You can do likewise in your essays.

You will be more persuasive if you admit any weakness in your argument. If you admit the places where your argument is weak and consider counterarguments fairly, giving your reasons for rejecting them, you will build confidence in your judgments among readers. You may concede that some evidence stands against your proposition. But you may then explain either that evidence is not as important or as trustworthy as the evidence you adduce for your point of view. Or you may argue that the contrary evidence has been misinterpreted. But always stay on the subject of your argument throughout your essay. Inexperienced writers sometimes try to throw everything they know into an essay as if it were a soup and the more ingredients the better. Take the advice of Barbara Tuchman offered at the beginning of this

[7] Margaret H. Darrow, "French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I," *The American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 100.



chapter and resist "being beguiled down fascinating byways and sidetracks" only marginally related to your topic. Get to your point. Trust your readers. Moreover, trust yourself. Do as much as you can in as few words as possible. Your essays will be more persuasive if you do!

## SIMPLE AND DIRECT WRITING

Thinking about these four modes of expression as you begin will help you clarify your writing task. You can then define more precisely your reason for writing an essay, plan your research, and organize what you will write. Having these in mind will also help you in giving voice to your ideas and improving the style of what you write. We have appreciated the advice about writing summarized in the title of a book on the subject by the respected American historian, Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*. Of course, it is not always that simple. Among historians, writing conventions—which are neither laws nor strict rules, but rather simply customary practices—are important. If you depart from the conventions, you run the risk of not being taken seriously. Your readers may even turn hostile toward what you write because you seem to insult them by refusing to live up to their expectations. It makes no sense for a writer to irritate readers.

In seeking your writing voice and striving for a consistent style, you may be tempted to follow the all too common advice to "write as we speak. That is absurd," as Barzun plainly writes.

> Most speaking is not plain or direct, but vague, clumsy, confused, and wordy. This last fault appears in every transcript from taped conversation, which is why we say *"reduce to writing."* What is meant by the advice to write as we speak is to write *as we might* speak if we spoke extremely well. This means that good writing should not sound stuffy, pompous, highfalutin, totally unlike ourselves, but rather, well—"simple & direct."[8]

[8] Jacques Barzun, *Simple & Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 12–13.