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Guide to Writing in History  
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**Introduction** pp. 1-5.

## WHY STUDY HISTORY?

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As any Harry Potter fan knows, the most boring class at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is History of Magic, taught by the dead (and “deadly dull”) Professor Binns. The professor’s droning lectures regularly send students into a stupefied trance, from which they emerge just long enough to scribble a few names or dates into their notes. Asked on one occasion about an unsolved mystery involving the school’s past, Binns replies, “My subject is History of Magic. . . . I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends.”<sup>1</sup> Students who take their first college history class with a sense of foreboding often think that real historians, like Professor Binns, are interested only in compiling lists of names, dates, places, and “important” events that happened sometime in the past. But history is much more than this. The historian’s goal is not to collect “facts” about the past, but rather to acquire insight into the ideas and realities that shaped the lives of men and women of earlier societies. Some beliefs and institutions of the past may seem alien to us; others are all too familiar. But in either case, when we study the people of the past, what we are really learning about is the rich diversity of human experience. The study of history is the study of the beliefs and desires, practices and institutions, of human beings.

Why should we bother studying the past in our increasingly future-oriented society? There are as many answers to that question as there are historians. First, a thoughtful examination of the past can tell us a great deal about how we came to be who we are. When we study history, we are looking at the roots of modern institutions, ideas, values, and problems. Second, the effort we put into grappling

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 148–49.

with the worldviews of earlier societies teaches us to see the world through different eyes. The ability to recognize the meaning of events from a perspective other than our own is of inestimable value in our increasingly complex and multicultural society. Moreover, an awareness of various perspectives encourages students of history to engage in a critical analysis of their own culture and society and to recognize and critique their own assumptions. Finally, while historians, unlike Hogwarts’ Professor Trelawney, don’t have crystal balls with which to predict the future, an understanding of how past events have shaped the complex problems of our own times can help us make informed decisions about our future.

History is a complex discipline, and historians are a diverse group. They take different approaches to their material; they interpret events in different ways; they even disagree on such basic issues as whether and to what extent historians can be objective. These debates and disagreements amongst professional historians demonstrate the passion with which they approach their subject and ensure that the study of history will always remain fresh and exciting. Regardless of their approaches, however, all historians see writing as an important tool of inquiry and communication.

In addition to introducing you to some of the basic elements of what historians do, this manual provides guidelines for writing papers in the field of history at all levels, from first-year surveys to upper-division seminars. The vast majority of students enrolled in an undergraduate history course are not contemplating a career in history. Indeed, most history majors enter fields like law, government, business, and international relations. Nevertheless, the skills you will need to write an effective history paper—reading critically, thinking analytically, arguing persuasively, and writing clearly—will be useful to you wherever your academic interests take you and in whatever career path you choose to follow.

### 1a Historical questions

Historians come to their work with a deep curiosity about the past; to satisfy that curiosity, they ask some of the same questions detectives ask: *Who? What? When? Where?* and *Why?* Some of those questions are designed to elicit

“the facts” and are relatively easy to answer: *Who* was the emperor of Japan during World War II? *What* tools did eighteenth-century weavers use? *When* did the Vietnamese drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh? *Where* was the first successful French settlement in Canada? Other questions, however, are less easy to answer: *Who* was Jack the Ripper? *What* were the religious beliefs of the peasants of twelfth-century Languedoc? *When* did President Nixon learn about the Watergate break-in? *Where* did the inhabitants of the original settlement at Roanoke go? *Why* did the civilization of the ancient Maya collapse? Complex questions such as these have formed the basis of absorbing historical studies.

Historians also need to analyze relationships between historical facts. Many of the questions historians ask, for example, reflect their interest in understanding the *context* in which events occurred. For instance, a historian interested in nineteenth-century science would not simply describe great “advances,” such as Charles Darwin’s publication of his theory of evolution by means of natural selection. As we know from the heated debates of our own time, science takes place within a social and cultural context, and scientific ideas can have a deep impact on politics, religion, education, and a host of other social institutions. Therefore, the historian would also consider questions about historical context: What role did political issues play in the acceptance or rejection of Darwin’s theory? What other theories were current at the time, and how did they influence Darwin’s thinking? Why did some theologians find his ideas threatening to religion, while others did not? What impact did larger social, political, and intellectual movements and institutions have on the study of biology in this period? In other words, historians do not examine events in isolation; rather, they try to understand the people and events of the past in terms of the unique historical context that helped shape them.

As they explore the relationships between and among events in the past, historians also examine the *causes* of events. The historical events that you will be studying and writing about can almost never be traced to a single cause, and historians are careful to avoid simplistic cause-and-effect relationships as explanations for events. For example, although the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand is often cited as the event that precipitated World War I, no historian would argue that it *caused* the

war. Rather, historians try to uncover the complex multiplicity of causes that grow out of the historical context in which events occurred.

Historians also ask questions about the relationship between *continuity* (events, conditions, ideas, and so on that remain the same over time) and *change*. Many of the questions historians ask reflect this interest. For example, a historian who asks, "What impact did the Black Death have on the economic and legal status of European peasants?" is interested in examining the changes brought about by the bubonic plague against the backdrop of the ongoing institution of serfdom.

Finally, while the past doesn't change, historians' interests—and the questions they ask—do. Historians, like the people they study, are part of a larger context. They are guided in their choice of subject and in their questions by their own interests and by the interests and concerns of their societies. As they ask new questions, historians look at sources in new ways. For example, in the 1950s, many standard U.S. history textbooks described Christopher Columbus as a heroic explorer; modern historians, writing from a more global perspective, have focused attention on the impact Columbus's explorations had on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Historians may even discover "new" sources—sources that had always existed but had been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. For example, the civil rights movement helped draw historians' attention to the central role of minorities in U.S. history.

History is a vital and dynamic discipline. We will never know all there is to know about the past because we are constantly posing new questions, and our questions, in turn, help us see the past in new ways. The best way to enter the world of the historian is to ask as many questions as you can about the particular historical issues you are studying. As you seek the answers, be aware of the new and more complex questions that your answers raise, and let those new questions guide your exploration further.

## 1b How this manual can help you

When you do research and writing in a history course, you become a participant in historical debate. You devise questions about historical topics, seek answers to those

questions in historical sources, and come to your own conclusions. In the papers you write, you need to construct arguments about the conclusions you have reached and offer support for them. This manual will help you understand the process from start to finish.

In Chapter 2, you will learn about the wide variety of sources historians use and how you can get the most out of them. Since critical reading is an integral part of effective writing in history, Chapter 3 walks you through some typical reading and short writing assignments given in history courses. Chapter 4 presents the nuts and bolts of writing an effective history essay, including how to develop a thesis, construct an argument, and organize your paper, while Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to how to write a research paper. Since all of the writing you do in history relies on your use of sources, Chapters 6 and 7 are designed to help you use your sources effectively while avoiding plagiarism. In addition, Chapter 7 includes models for documenting the sources you are most likely to use in an undergraduate history paper. Finally, Appendix A lists additional guides to writing in history, while Appendix B provides a list of resources you might wish to consult while doing research.

History, like other arts and sciences, provides a window onto the ideas and beliefs, the actions and passions, of human beings. Reading and writing history entail above all an exploration of who and what we are. This manual is designed to aid you in such exploration and to help you discover the pleasures of studying history.