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How to Write a History Essay

Structure of the Essay

- * **Answer the question!** It may seem a bit obvious, but many history essays simply do not answer the question posed.
- * **Introduction.** Probably the key to any History Essay. It should state what you will do in the essay. Have a Thesis Statement that directly answers the question. The rest of the introduction should explain what to expect in the coming paragraphs. A strong introduction shows that you already know what you are doing before you start to write.
- * **Body.** Here you offer historical evidence that supports what you were saying in the introduction. Each new paragraph should have a topic sentence which supports your Thesis Statement. The sentences in the paragraph should then support the paragraph's topic sentence.
- * **Summary.** For goodness' sake do not skim here. This is where you quickly remind the reader of the points you have made and how they support your Thesis Statement which answers the Question. A good way to remember how to do a summary is to ask yourself, "So, what was the point I was trying to make."

Tips

- * An essay with a strong conclusion, weak body, and strong summary is better than an essay with a weak introduction, enormous amount of information in the body, and weak summary.
- * Make sure your facts are relevant rather than related. An example: You are trying to explain how to write an essay and start using facts on the manufacture of paper. Now paper *is* related to an essay (you use it to write on) but it is not relevant to how to write an essay.

Avoid

- * Unnecessarily flowery language (use concise language and get to the point)
- * Irrelevant facts. They should all directly relate to the points you make.
- * Strong and highly opinionated statements without adequate factual support.
- * Dumping huge amounts of information rather than reasoning historically.

Hints For Composing An Excellent Essay

1. Make sure you articulate a strong **THESIS STATEMENT**. A thesis statement tells the reader exactly what argument you are taking and why. Even if the question doesn't appear to ask for an argument, make one anyway.
2. Answer the question. This seems obvious but all too often students start off on the right track and then quickly diverge into a generalized discussion that misses the point of the question. Don't invent your own questions to answer.
3. Support your thesis statement with historical evidence from the readings, lecture, and/or sections. You will probably only be able to consider one or two pieces of evidence per example. Don't overpack your paper with historical evidence that you are not able to explain and analyze.
4. Analyze, don't summarize. This means that you need to explain **HOW** or **WHY** the evidence you chose supports your argument. Asserting a thesis and listing evidence is not enough. Everyone in class is drawing from the same body of evidence yet many of your thesis statements will differ. The only credible way to distinguish one paper from another is to see how you connect your evidence to your argument.
5. Take time to think. This is the hardest and most important step in writing a paper. After you've finished the reading and selected the question to answer, spend some time thinking about how you will go about answering the question. This is a good time to talk to classmates or your professor. Unfortunately, this is the first step students sacrifice as they hurry to write their papers the night before they're due. Don't skip this step. It often means the difference between an excellent paper and an average one.
6. Make sure your paper reads well. Check for spelling errors. Insure that your grammar is correct and that the paper is double-spaced with standard one-inch margins. Don't try to squeeze 10 pages of text into 5 pages (or stretch 2 pages of text into 7 pages) with creative use of fonts, spacing, and margins. If your paper runs short, it's a good clue that you need to **ANALYZE** more. If it runs long, chances are you've **SUMMARIZED** too much.