



Teaching Historical Writing Skills

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Composing a historical argument is a very specific skill – one which often runs contrary to the way students are taught to construct papers in high school, or in other disciplines. The following exercises help walk students through the act of composing a historical argument, and help them look at their papers with a critical eye as they become more familiar with the process of writing history.

1. Provide Models of Good Writing

One of the easiest ways to have students begin to think about the task of historical writing is to have them analyze articles and books written by historians.

- a) Collectively examine the introductory paragraphs of a chapter of the course textbook. How does the author set the scene for the events he or she will discuss? What does the author argue is significant about this period of history? How easy is it to identify where, when, what, and whom is under discussion – and does the author succeed in providing a reason why we should care? Does the introduction differ from later text in the same chapter? Why or why not?
- b) For homework, have students copy out the first sentence of each paragraph for the first few pages of the day's assigned reading. What do they notice once they review these first lines? Is the argument the author makes clear, even without seeing the full text of the paragraphs? Do the sentences move one to the next in a fashion that makes sense to the reader? Why or why not? What does this suggest about writing good historical arguments?

2) Subject Paragraph ☐ to Thesis Statement ☐ to Outline

- a) Set aside a class period, at least one week before a paper is due, to work on writing. Have students bring in two copies of a one paragraph description of the paper they'd like to write. For example:

I want to write a paper about marriage in the era of the Revolution. I'd like to explore the ways that women were prevented from voting and holding property once they were married, and whether the Revolution should have changed that. I will draw on evidence from our course textbook, and the letters that John and Abigail Adams exchanged in 1776.

This is their 'subject paragraph' – it describes the subject matter of their paper, but does not yet make an argument about the issues under consideration.

- b) Pair up your students and have them read each other's subject paragraphs. One at a time, have them work together to transform the subject paragraph into a thesis – a statement of what the student will argue is significant about the subject, based on available evidence.

Remind students that their paper must seek to persuade readers of a particular point of view – that their job is similar to that of a lawyer prosecuting a case, trying to persuade the jury to believe in their interpretation of the evidence. (If your students have particular trouble understanding what it means to make an argument, consider showing them a courtroom scene from a television show or movie to drive the point home.)

- c) One way to help students get to their thesis statement is to ask them to brainstorm all the evidence they have about a given subject. Looking at that evidence, what can they say for sure? Remind them that their argument must not ignore evidence that contradicts what they'd like to say.

- d) When students have a thesis statement, have them write a one-sentence description of what they will say in each paragraph of their paper. Below each one-sentence description, they should list the evidence they will use to prove their point. For example:

- *The men leading the Revolution understood that they were leaving women's political status untouched, and that there were alternatives.*
 - *John Adams: "we know better than to repeal our masculine systems"*
 - *Martin vs. Massachusetts, 1805.*



- e) Have students tweak their one-sentence descriptions until they are topic sentences.

This entire sequence may take more than one class period, or can be begun in class and ended as homework.

3) Polishing Transitions and Organization

- a) Have students bring two copies of a completed first draft of their paper to class, plus a pair of scissors. The paper should be printed single-sided.
- b) Have students cut up their papers into individual paragraphs, removing everything that could identify the order in which the paper was originally written: borders, headers and footers, page numbers, and footnotes. (Footnote numbers within a paragraph can be scribbled out in pen.) When the student has finished cutting up their paper, have them shuffle the resulting pile of paragraphs.
- c) As students finish cutting up their papers, pair them with another student finishing at the same time. Ask students to swap their shuffled paragraph piles. Their task is now to reassemble the other person's paper in the order that makes most sense to them. They may not ask each other for direction. (It's usually easiest to have students do this work on the floor.)
- d) When the students have finished reassembling the papers, they can look at their own work. Did their partner assemble the paper in the order that it was originally written? What changes were made? Students should discuss these changes and work together to improve introductions, conclusions, and transitions.

This exercise makes the importance of organization, thesis statements, and topic sentences apparent to students in a way that simple comments do not. The act of cutting up their paper frees them to re-imagine their argument – they are not tied to the organizational structure of their paper as it was originally conceived. (In the last five years, I have had only one student whose paper was sufficiently well organized for a peer to put the paper back together exactly as it was originally written.)