

Skill Builder 1 – General Advice and Frequently-Made Mistakes

Be consistent with verb tense. In general, past tense makes more sense in history papers.

Watch for and remove passive voice from your writing (“Amendments were passed.” “It was argued that...”). Use active voice. Passive voice removes the actor(s) from the action, obscuring cause and effect. Passive voice is common or even recommended in other disciplines but in history we strive for precision and to acknowledge the human hand in history – active voice helps with both.

Make sure that you’re quoting from the *actual* historical document and not the editor’s introduction to it. I saw this in a number of papers. Use the primary source itself as your evidence. In the Fernlund reader and in the online *History Matters* site, the book or website editor introduces and describes each document with a paragraph or two at the beginning followed by a solid line. The real document begins BELOW that line.

No need for a Bibliography or Works Cited list at the end of the document. Yes, in a full Chicago-Style article there would be an appended bibliography, but for purposes of these papers, just put all the information in the footnotes.

Footnote all quotations, and “frame” your quote with an introductory phrase or sentence to orient your reader to who’s speaking and when/where/in what circumstance. If you just drop a quote into a paragraph without telling me who it belongs to, then it’s an orphan quote. And orphans make me sad. ☹

We don’t get to say what SHOULD have happened. We only get to say what DID happen and explain WHY. While it is tempting to make moral judgments about the past, especially when something happened that offends your sense of justice, this is not the historian’s job. Many papers about the Klan or about the injustices of Reconstruction struggled with this issue. We also can’t really know what should have happened – because it didn’t. So we have no real historical evidence we can use for “hypothetical history.” Stick with what evidence we *do* have.

Don’t use terminology that would be considered outdated or offensive today (“the white man,” “Negroes” and “colored people” are a couple of examples) unless you’re directly quoting from an old document, and if so, put it in quotation marks and footnote it.

Likewise, use gender-neutral language, unless you really are talking only about men. And FYI ships and nations are not “she” any more, that is outmoded usage.

Watch out for “Happy Ending Syndrome.” This is when your paper ends with a statement that says, basically, everything’s all good now. Not only is this inaccurate, but there’s no need to bring your paper all the way up to the present moment. A better strategy is to say something true about the past in your conclusion & tie it to your specific evidence, rather than make a sweeping (and usually inaccurate) statement about how things are now.

Getting the Footnote Right – Some Examples

Placement: Footnotes go AFTER all the sentence punctuation and OUTSIDE the quote’s quotation marks. Use the “Insert Reference” function in Word (or its equivalent in Pages for Mac), not the footer function and not a text box at the bottom of the page.

Example footnoting the Henretta textbook:

Henretta contended that “by the mid-1870s the North had no political willpower to renew the occupation.”¹

(Don’t use “the book says...”)

Example footnoting a source from the Fernlund reader:

Frederick Douglass forcefully argued for “immediate, unconditional and universal” black suffrage in his speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Boston in April 1865.²

Example footnoting material used online from *History Matters*:

Recalling the post-Civil War era many years later, Henry Blake recalled the terms of sharecropping contracts near Little Rock, Arkansas as unwritten and unfair, with a hidden threat of violence: “They’d keep you in debt. They were sharp... If there was an argument, he [the landowner] would get mad and there would be a shooting take place.”³

For more information: use the course website sidebar link to either the Chicago Style Quick Guide or Diana Hacker, *A Writer’s Reference*, or consult your copy of the Hacker book itself (you should have bought it when taking EN 102 – I recommend you having it for this course!)

¹ James Henretta, Rebecca Edwards, and Robert O. Self, *America: A Concise History*, Vol. 2, 5th ed. (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2013), 466.

² Frederick Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants,” April 1865. In Kevin J. Fernlund, ed., *Documents for America’s History: Volume 2: Since 1865*, 7th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 15.

³ “Henry Blake, Little Rock,” Oral History, Arkansas Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration; Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. In *History Matters* <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6377>>