# How to Plan and Write Good Coursework

# History Subject Group

## 2016-17

This guide is designed to act as a companion to writing a successful university History essay. To make it accessible, the guide is broken down into three different sections – i) Before, ii) During, and iii) After. It is not intended to act as an exhaustive essay-writing manual. As such, throughout this guide there are some useful website links that provide you with the opportunity to learn more.

**A neat, clear and effective writing style is also a skill that employers value, so taking the trouble to develop such a style will benefit you in terms of employability, as well as being an important study skill.**

**<u>Before</u>**


**Planning Your Reading**

You **cannot** rush reading—it is the most time-consuming part of writing an essay and it is essential to achieving a good mark. Moreover, markers can easily spot essays that are not informed by thorough reading and will penalise the work accordingly. Thus, when scheduling time for writing your essay, always remember to leave aside plenty of time to do a sufficient amount of reading. Doing an appropriate amount of reading will also expose you to good academic History writing and thus better enable you to develop your own writing style further.

You should consult relevant books and academic journal articles on reading lists provided, but you are also encouraged to go beyond these lists to find other relevant scholarly work.

Avoid websites that are aimed at school students - e.g. *BBC Bitesize Encyclopedias, SpartacusSchoolnet*. These are NOT appropriate for university essays and you will be penalized if you cite them. It is fine to visit *Wikipedia* or similar websites to find out very basic information, but do NOT use it as a scholarly source; you will be penalized if you cite it. Only through consulting appropriate scholarship will you write a successful essay. Relevant and helpful websites will often be listed in the course handbook that you receive at the beginning of each module.


**Good Reading Habits**

To help you ensure that your essay is answering the question effectively, covering a comprehensive range of issues and also including a sufficient amount of evidence to back up its points, it is a very good idea to follow these steps:
1. Using the relevant lecture handout or lecture notes, identify the issues that strike you as relevant to the particular question (NOTE: not *all* the points in the handout will be relevant *necessarily*; it will depend on what the question is asking you to do specifically.)
2. Ensure that your reading and note-taking cover each issue in sufficient depth. This will involve you going beyond the essential reading and doing your own research through more in-depth reading. It is up to you to select sections and chapters from c. eight to ten books (or more, if you are feeling ambitious). It is also recommended that a normal, very good essay contains reference to no fewer than six primary sources and at least two journal articles.
3. When reading and note-taking, it's a very good idea to read three or four pages at a time, then make notes on the relevant points, rather than just alternately read and make notes every few seconds. That way, you get a much better idea of the meaning and importance of the information you're reading, and are better able to select what's relevant.
4. Ensure that your note-taking also records appropriate evidence for each point (e.g. concrete historical examples, statistics, contemporary quotes, occasional historians' quotes if particularly memorable)
5. Ensure that you have noted page numbers when it comes to writing your essay, so that you are able to find the relevant points easily. You can also ensure that pieces of evidence and really key points of argument are even more easily identifiable in your notes, by asterisking, highlighting or underlining them.
6. When it comes to actually writing the essay, compile a fairly comprehensive list structured along the lines of the one in the accompanying document, *Ensuring Range*

*and Evidence in Essays* (which shows just a sample of the points you might include for the 'Lions led by donkeys' essay, a piece of coursework from the Level 3 module *Lion versus Eagle: Britain, Germany and the First World War, 1914-1918*). List the points which you need to cover. Tick a box in column 2 when you've covered a point in your essay, a box in column 3 when you include evidence to back it up, and a box in column 4 when you provide a footnote for that evidence. If you have an extensive list of relevant points and a solid block of ticks across the page, you know you will have done a thorough job of ensuring that your essay both covers a comprehensive range of issues and features proper evidence to support them all.

**Planning Your Essay**

*Answering the Question*

Answer the question you are being asked, NOT the one you want to be asked.

When planning and writing an essay, always ask yourself - 'Is this relevant to the question I am being asked?' Remember that you are working to a strict word count and irrelevant material will be costing you precious marks.

*Structuring an Essay*

You should ALWAYS have a plan for how you are going to structure your essay before you begin writing.

There is not a single, correct way to structure an essay. However, every essay you write will have to include the following sections: Introduction, Relevant Context, Main Body, and Conclusion. Below is a basic outline of an essay:

Introduction - put forward your argument in relation to the question, raise the key points that you plan to discuss to prove your argument, what the essay will do and how it will go about it.

Context - what are the key events of which your reader should be aware? Usually one paragraph should be enough. Stick to the events that are relevant to the question.

Main Body - what are the three key points you are making to prove your argument? (does not necessarily have to be three but this is usually a good number for 1,500-2,000 word essays). In this section you will outline these points, provide evidence for them, and add your own analysis for how these points relate to the question you are being asked.

Avoid long narrative sections: You do not need to tell the story of what happened, but you do need to answer the question by offering an analysis of the topic and of the historiographical context.

Point 1
- Paragraph 1
- Paragraph 2
- Paragraph 3

Point 2
- Paragraph 1
- Paragraph 2
- Paragraph 3

Point 3
- Paragraph 1
- Paragraph 2
- Paragraph 3

Conclusion - partly a reiteration of your introduction. Summarise key points and do NOT introduce new information in the conclusion. Be imaginative - good writing goes a long way! As well as summarising your argument, you also need to evaluate it. A good way of doing this is to think about all the points your essay has made to answer the question, and think about which one or two points are the most important of all. Try briefly to justify why you think these are particularly important points. Being able to evaluate (i.e. place a particular value) on certain explanations will show enhanced analytical ability.

## *Be Flexible*

You might find that when you begin writing your essay that your argument or structure does not make sense or does not flow as you had hoped. This is perfectly normal, so be aware that you might have to change either or both in the process of writing.

**Paragraphs**

Paragraphs are not used only to break up your writing. Each paragraph should serve a function towards the overall purpose of your essay and will not necessarily follow that standard format below:

Q: Which of the following do you believe was MOST IMPORTANT to the Industrial Revolution: population increase, agricultural revolution or the transport revolution?

[Pgph 1] population increase

[Pgph 2] agricultural revolution

[Pgph 3] transport revolution

Remember paragraphs are about ONE thing and they should rarely exceed three quarters of an A4 page (double-spaced). If you are consistently exceeding this length then it is likely you are trying to cram too much information into each paragraph. Visually, paragraphs are marked by an indentation or a line break.

In academic writing, paragraphs start with a **topic sentence**, which tells the reader what the paragraph will be about. For example, 'It was not only inefficiency that encouraged a change in attitudes towards crime and punishment.' It will also sometimes link the paragraph into a previous discussion in your essay. Linking paragraphs is a great way to demonstrate a coherent and logical argument, i.e. you are not simply stopping at one point, and starting at another.

**Supporting sentences** follow which explain your argument clearly and concisely; they include examples, quotations, references and statistics. Structurally, this will strengthen your essay, make it easier to read and help you avoid repetition.

**Sentence Structure**

Ideally, when composing a sentence, you want to be as comprehensive as you can, as directly as you can. You will be trying to express some complicated themes and arguments within a limited number of words, so effective sentence structure will be necessary.

The meaning of every sentence should be **clear** and there should be no unnecessary words. You can use your class reading lists (other than textbooks) to see how sentences in academic writing can be formed.

Common problems in sentence structure are:

*Sentence fragments*: Incomplete sentences i) missing a verb, ii) missing a subject or iii) containing only a dependant clause (starting a sentence with 'because' for example).

*Right example:* The German army leadership was contemplating an alliance with the only political party that appeared to have the potential to command popular support—the Nazis.

*Example of mistake i):* An alliance with the only political party with the potential popular support—the Nazis.

*Example of mistake ii):* With the only political party with the potential to command popular support—the Nazis.

*Example of mistake iii):* Because the Nazis were the only party with the potential to command popular support.

**Run-on sentences**: Parts of a sentence are inappropriately joined. This is most commonly done through misplacing or excluding commas.

*Right example:* The army leadership was contemplating an alliance with the only political party that appeared to have the potential both to command popular support and to stop the communists—the Nazis. Many of the army's conservative-minded senior-most officers had serious doubts about the Nazis, particularly given the left-wing economic radicalism of some of its elements and the brutal, unruly thuggery of its storm troopers. However, the Nazis had long trumpeted their belief in militarizing German society.

*Example of a run-on sentence:* The army leadership was contemplating an alliance with the only political party that appeared to have the potential both to command popular support and to stop the communists, the Nazis, many of the army's conservative-minded senior-most officers had serious doubts about the Nazis, particularly given the left-wing economic radicalism of some of its elements and the brutal, unruly thuggery of its storm troopers, however the Nazis had long trumpeted their belief in militarizing German society.

**Simple and 'loose' structure**: Using too many simple sentences to express your ideas means you are not using transitions to link these ideas, and you will likely lose marks for the coherency of your arguments. You must therefore strike a balance in your use of sentence structures. Using 'and' too often can also obscure the meaning of your writing. Poorly ordering phrases is also a problem, i.e. connecting several clauses in one sentence where two or more sentences were necessary. It therefore also follows that you shouldn't make your sentences too long, but rather break them up into shorter ones.

**Writing Style - Common Errors**

**Avoiding passive writing** - Your writing should avoid lapsing into vague language as much as possible. Avoid overusing phrases such as:

- Somewhat...
- Perhaps...
- The historian suggests...
- Puts forward the notion that...
- Might be taken as...
- To some extent…
- To a large extent…
- It is possible that…
- Most historians…
- Some historians…

Excessive use of passive language such as this suggests to the marker that you have not done enough reading to construct an argument based on evidence and that you are 'hedging your bets'.

You should also avoid making sweeping statements that you cannot back up with evidence. For example, do NOT write statements such as 'All Scottish voters decided that they did not like Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party' or 'Scotland, a more socialist country than England, preferred Labour to the Conservatives' unless you plan on providing evidence to support your assertion.

***Empty words before adjectives*** - Avoid adding words such as 'extremely', 'very', 'really' etc. in front of your adjectives. They do not add anything and do not read well. For example, something does not need to be 'very perilous'. If it is 'perilous' then you have already conveyed the dire nature of the situation! As Mark Twain supposedly said: "Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be."

***Antecedent use -*** Always ensure that it is clear to the reader to whom you are referring when you use words such as 'he', 'she', 'they', 'their', 'he', 'her'. It is very hard to read an essay that is constantly obscuring agency.

***Contractions, Slang, Personal language, and First-Person*** - In academic writing you want to **avoid** contractions (don't: do not; eg./etc./ie.), colloquialisms/slang, personal language. and the first-person ('I think that', 'in my opinion').

**Web-links**

To help you with the advice above, especially regarding punctuation and grammar, see the web-links provided below. Take the time to look over these, as students often loose marks more for poor expression than for comprehension.

**Punctuation** (apostrophe and semi-colon): http://www.uefap.com/writing/punc/puncfram.htm A basic overview of the correct uses of punctuation in academic writing. Some universities differ in their use of quotation marks however, so check you module guides for the correct use in your department (see *History and Politics Assessment Guide*).

**Grammar**: Verb tenses with suggestions as to when each tense is appropriate in academic writing  http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/verb-tenses. The University of Edinburgh have a very detailed PDF on grammar in academic writing with writing exercises, which you can find here: http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.150040!/fileManager/Grammar%20for%20Academic%20 Writing%20(ISM).pdf.

There are countless books and webpages on academic writing style and technique. Many of them are repetitive so there's no need to look at such resources exhaustively. Be aware that some universities apply the rules around punctuation such as quotation marks differently. Target what you need, as well. If there is a particular area you have trouble with, look specifically for aids on this area as it's easy to get distracted in the more comprehensive guides out there.

**Word Count**

A common concern is that essay word-counts are restrictive. However, you are being asked to critically engage with a historical problem and provide a detailed but clear answer. Smaller word-counts prevent 'waffling' and unnecessary tangents. They help you become direct in your analysis and focus your writing on the question.

n.b. Your footnotes and your bibliography **ARE** included in your overall word count.


**Referencing**

Referencing correctly is a must at university level and is something you should aim to master as early as possible in your academic career. When you are taking information from a source, be sure to cite. Even if you are paraphrasing or you do not mention the name of the author, you must still give a footnote. The exception to this rule is if you are putting forward what could be termed 'common knowledge'. This is when a piece of information is taken as read.

Unless otherwise stated, while writing History essays you should employ Chicago style referencing. This guide (particularly pages 2-5) is very helpful in providing examples of how to footnote Chicago style for a variety of sources:

http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/572/196182/Newestchicago.pdf

The first time you footnote an author, you must always give full bibliographical details of the cited work. Thereafter, you can use the form: Name, Page. If you are referring to more than one piece by the same author, you should use the format: Name, Name of source, Page. If you are referring to the same author multiple times in succession, you can use the form Ibid, then the page number.

When compiling your bibliography, there are only two differences to the style in which you footnote. Unlike the footnote, the author's surname comes first and, if it is a book, you do not need to note the page numbers.


**Other Resources**

The *History and Politics Assessment Guide* and the Essay section in your module guides are essential resources providing everything you need to know to plan, structure and reference your essays. Here you will find information on how to footnote, how to construct a bibliography, practical formatting tips, submission procedures, marking criteria and a detailed breakdown of what we expect from an essay. These resources are provided for your convenience, so please **make use of them**.

For greater ease of reference, an adapted version of the History-relevant parts of the section on 'Referencing Your Work' is included as an appendix at the end of this document.

A useful general study skills website is KwikFixSkills.com, which provides quick tips about working quickly when writing essays and reports, doing projects and exams, and working with people. Many of these skills apply equally to study and to the world of work: http://www.kwikfixskills.com.

**Learning Development Centre**

The LDC at GCU is there to help students develop their skills in many areas including academic writing. If this is something you feel you would benefit from, you can make an appointment with an Academic Development Tutor. This can be done one-on-one, in small groups, and in person or by telephone or email. Find more information here: http://www.gcu.ac.uk/gsbs/ldc.

<u>**After**</u>

**Presentation**

Following the presentation guidelines provided in your course handbook is vital. Simple tasks, such as double-spacing your work and using an approved font size are crucial to putting the marker in a good frame of mind before they read your essay. Poorly presented essays that ignore clear guidelines will automatically raise doubts in the marker's mind about the level of effort you have applied to your work. On the flip side, well presented work demonstrates to the marker that you have taken care over your work and thus puts the marker in a positive frame of mind before beginning to read the substance of your essay.

While all markers endeavour to achieve objectivity in their assessment, a well presented essay will almost always outscore an identical essay that is poorly presented.

***Basic rules of presentation***

- Font Size - 11pt or 12pt
- Font Style - Arial, Calibri, or Times New Roman for the main body. Nothing too extravagant for the headings.
- Either 1.5 or Double spacing
- Print only on one side
- Page numbers
- Correct referencing
- Proofreading to avoid silly mistakes

**Proofreading Tips**

At this stage, get into the habit of proofreading ALL coursework before submitting it. **Do not** proof-read just after spending hours writing an assignment. Take a break and come back to it later. **Do not** trust Microsoft Office or other writing software to catch all the mistakes. You can:

***Print it out****:* easier to catch mistakes here than on a computer screen. Be armed with a red pen.

***Read aloud (and slowly!)****:* you won't be able to 'skip ahead' this way and will catch more mistakes.

***Another pair of eyes****:* have a family member or a friend look over your writing, looking for mistakes and clarity **only**. If you ask a class-mate for example, this can quickly turn into a discussion about the analysis within your essay rather than the technicalities of your writing.

To illustrate a professional attitude to your work and avoid plagiarism, all continuously assessed work should use scrupulous standards of referencing. References should be given in substantiation of factual statements (including statistics), especially obscure ones, or when citing an opinion that is not your own, - and above all in quoting. A certain amount of judgement has to be exercised; it is not necessary to give references for facts which are well known and in the public domain, e.g. the date the Battle of Waterloo or of the outbreak of the First World War.

**NB. HISTORY ESSAYS SHOULD USE THE FOOTNOTE OR NUMBERED NOTE SYSTEM RATHER THAN HARVARD**

Good referencing is vital to achieving higher marks in academic essays. The following rules indicate how to write an appropriate footnote for each of the different resources you may use in an essay and it is crucial that you understand them and apply them in your work.

Some people seem to get confused when dealing with footnotes, and generally this is because they have been taught different styles or get confused about the choices you have to make when using footnotes.

The choices that need to be made at the beginning of your essay and remain consistent throughout:

1. Either use footnotes or endnotes. Footnotes appear at the bottom of each page of your essay, while endnotes appear at the end of your essay in a numbered list style.

2. Either use *italics* or underline the titles of your material within your footnotes.

3. Most footnotes come in the font size 10. Some computers may have different settings, so decide what font size you will you will use throughout.

Book

**An example**: A.G. Squid, *Wrecks of the Firth of Clyde: My Part in their Occurrence,* (Ardrossan, 2015), p. 345.

**An explanation**: Initials of author separated by full stops, full surname of author followed by a comma, italicized or underlined title of the book, open brackets and include the place the book was published and the date of publish and then close brackets, comma, use 'p' to signify page number followed by a full stop, page number again followed by a full stop.

Chapter from a book

**Example**: B. Shepherd, 'Writing my Yale Book', in J. Greenlees, (ed.), *Stories of Inspiring Endeavour* (Preston, 2015), p. 101.

**Explanation:**

Initials of the author of the chapter, full stop, surname of the author of the chapter, comma, inverted comma, title of the chapter, close inverted comma, comma, in, initials of the author of the book followed by full stops, surname of the author of the book, brackets with ed. within them which is a shortened version of editor, comma, title of book in italics or underlined, open brackets, place of publish, date of publish, close brackets, comma, p. for page, comma, page number, full stop.

Journal Article

**Example:**

S. Davidson, 'Pigs in Pajamas: the Limits of Anthropomorphism' in *International Journal of Terribly Difficult Studies*, vol. 24 (4) 2009, p. 78.

**Explanation:**

Initial of author, full stop, surname of author, comma, inverted comma, title of the article, inverted comma, comma, in, title of the journal, comma, volume number, open brackets, the issue number, close brackets, year of publish, comma, p. for page, page number, full stop.

Website:

**Example:**

http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/ - accessed on 10/03/2011.

**Explanation:**

The whole web address needs to be copied down, use a dash and then write the date you accessed the website, followed by a full stop. (The web address should be in black ink and not underlined.)

ibid.

*ibid.* (is an abbreviation from the Latin *ibidem* meaning "in the same place"). In common terms ibid means 'the same as above'.

**Example:**

1. V. Long, 'Academics turned serial killers: 1920-79', *Studies in Incipient Homicide*, vol. 267 (2008), p. 79.

2. ibid.

3. ibid., p. 79.

**Explanation:**

The first reference is written out in full. However if you want to immediately use the same reference again in the next footnote you simply use ibid. Footnote three shows that you can use the same reference again but if you are quoting from a different page you simple change the page number. ibid. can only be used if it is directly beneath the original footnote.


Page numbers

The use of page numbers in footnotes is very important. It gives the reader the opportunity to find an interesting quote or source for themselves instead of taking your word for it that itexists. Therefore you need to make sure that you have given a page number and that it is the right one. The two examples show how to note a page number correctly in a footnote.

Footnoting a quote or paraphrasing from a single page within a book:

M. McLay, *Lyndon Johnson's Swear Box and the Financing of the Great Society* (Washington, DC, 2015), p. 345.

Footnoting a quote or paraphrasing that spans a couple of pages within a book:

R. Lightbody, *Rousseau's Trainset: Democratic Models in History* (Glasgow, 2016), pp. 345-347.


**Bibliography**

Example: Walsh O., 'Percy French as a post-Famine cultural icon' in *International Journal of Irish Stuff*, vol. 24 (4) 2009, pp. 78-94.

Duncan F., *Building the New Frontier: Emigration in Contemporary Context*, (Saskatoon, 2016).

A bibliography is a list at the end of your essay of all the reading of books and sources that you have done. The references should be listed in alphabetical order with the author's surname at the start of the reference. Individual page numbers are not required for each reference. The exception is that the page numbers of the full articles and chapters should be noted.

All essays and presentations contributing towards your coursework grade require a bibliography. Your **bibliography** should cite in full the various books and articles which you have consulted in order to write your essay. These will, of course, be ordered alphabetically by author. Part of the point of a bibliography is to allow the marker to assess how successfully a student has mastered the reading. It does **not** contain works on the selected reading list which were not consulted. **Do not cite Lecture Notes or Seminar Notes – this is most unacceptable in all academic work. YOU WILL SUFFER!**

**Small quotes:**

Sometimes you encounter a small phrase (no more than a sentence) that you wish to quote. This should be placed in single quotation marks, with the surname of the author(s), year and page number. Here's an example, with a footnote:

Hitler's army commander-in-chief, General von Brauchitsch, was so spineless that the historian Gerhard Weinberg describes him as having been 'an anatomical marvel, a man totally without a backbone.'[1]

**Long quotes:**

Again, sometimes you encounter a few sentences that are so critical to your narrative that you decide to quote them in full. You should do this by indenting them into the text and including the surname(s), year and page number. Here's an example, with a footnote:

To help overcome conservative army officers' reservations about the Nazis, Hitler flattered them with, in the words of Joachim Fest,

> a flood of lip service to nationalism, tradition, the Prussian spirit, Western values, or the spirit of the front-line soldier, ostentatious displays of respect for the person of the Reich President, and stress upon decency, morality, order, Christianity, and all those concepts which went with a conservative idea of the state.[2]

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[1] Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler & World War II* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 140.
[2] Joachim C. Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich* (London, 1970), p. 237.