

A GUIDE TO WRITING HISTORY PAPERS AT CALTECH

This resource provides detailed guidelines for writing history papers in Caltech courses, along with specific examples taken from prizewinning essays written by Caltech students. It was created through a collaborative effort between the [Hixon Writing Center](#) and the history faculty members at Caltech.

The goal of historical writing at Caltech is to help students learn how to ask questions of the past and answer them, in areas of inquiry in which the available evidence is always incomplete and scholarly opinions are frequently divided. In writing history papers, students come to their own conclusions and advance them with clear, well-constructed, and persuasive arguments. This involves evaluating the nature and quality of the available sources, drawing evidence from them to support arguments, and making logical and even imaginative inferences when the evidence cannot by itself answer the question. It likewise involves organizing arguments in a way that proceeds logically from one step to the next and expressing them in prose that is both accessible and engaging. As they explore in writing the traces the past has left behind, students will learn how to engage readers in their questions and persuade them that their answers are compelling.

HISTORICAL SOURCES AND HOW TO APPROACH THEM

Definitions

Historical arguments stand or fall on the quality of the sources that support them, so it's important to understand what you're using. Caltech history courses will train you how to evaluate and categorize historical sources. Applying these skills at the outset of your writing process will save you time later. Your introduction will be sharper, your paragraphs will do focused "jobs," and your central argument will be better calibrated to the evidence you can actually show.

- **Primary sources** are materials produced in the period or event you're studying. Examples include letters, diaries, petitions, court records, newspapers, oral histories, photographs, maps, ledgers, government reports, and material artifacts. In history of science papers, primary sources also include lab notebooks, protocols, instrument logs, patents, datasets, diagrams, museum labels, and exhibition files. Scholarly editions of a historical text can function as primary sources for the text itself; the editor's introduction and notes are secondary.
- **Secondary sources** are works in which historians (or other scholars) interpret the past using primary evidence: single-author books from academic presses,

peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters from essay collections, and review essays. Some secondary sources might be historiographical works, in which historians trace the history of historical writing—how and why historical interpretations have changed over time. The next section of this handout discusses historiography in more depth.

- **Tertiary sources** distill established knowledge for quick orientation: encyclopedias (including Wikipedia), handbooks, timelines, textbooks, and many websites. They are useful for getting an overview of a topic and finding leads on primary and secondary sources, but they are rarely appropriate to cite as evidence in a college-level paper.

Primary Sources: Evaluating Authorship, Audience, Purpose, Bias, and Silences

Not all primary sources are equally revealing for every question. Before you lean on a source, ask what it can and can't tell you. Here are some questions you can ask about sources to get a clearer sense of their uses and limitations:

- **Authorship and Position:** Who made this? What was the author's role, status, and proximity to the events described? A king's proclamation, a physicist's notebook, and a religious tract may each illuminate different aspects of a historical event or period and carry different blind spots.
- **Audience and Genre:** For whom was it written, and in what form? A confidential report, a public speech, a lab protocol, or a newspaper editorial follows distinct conventions and persuasive aims. Be sure to understand the intended audience of your primary sources and the conventions of its genre.
- **Purpose and Stakes:** Why does this document exist? To inform, persuade, justify, record, petition, advertise, or comply? Identify what the author gains or risks.
- **Time and place of creation:** When and where was it produced relative to the events—contemporaneous, revised later, translated, excerpted? Be alert to retrospective accounts and later edits.
- **Medium and material features:** Consider how format shapes content: a lithograph, a typed circular, a bound ledger, a dataset with a codebook, or a photographed object each organize information differently. For history of science sources, note measurement units, instrument settings, uncertainty, and visualization choices.
- **Provenance and integrity:** How did the item reach you? Track collection names, box/folder numbers, scans, and transcriptions. Items in digital archives are surrogates: check for cropping, missing pages, OCR errors, or mislabeling.
- **Bias, perspective, and rhetoric:** Every source has a point of view. Instead of dismissing "biased" sources, analyze how language, metaphors, euphemisms, and framing work to shape a story.
- **Silences and selection effects:** What (or who) is missing, and why? Ask whose voices don't survive in the archive, whose data weren't collected, and how institutional practices shape the record. Corroborate by triangulating across different kinds of sources rather than relying on a single vivid document.

- **Fit to your question:** A source can be excellent yet irrelevant to your research question. Use sources that advance your line of inquiry.

Secondary Sources: Evaluating Scholarly Context, Method, and Currency

Secondary sources also need to be evaluated carefully. A book or article may be scholarly and still not be the right source for your research question. Before relying on a secondary source, consider the following:

- **Author and disciplinary context:** Who is the historian or scholar, and what field are they writing in? A historian of religion, a political historian, and a historian of science will approach the same topic differently.
- **Date of publication:** When was the source published? Older works may still be valuable, but you should consider whether newer research, newly available archives, or changes in method have altered the conversation.
- **Argument and method:** What is the author's central claim, and how do they support it? What kinds of primary sources do they use, and what methodological approach do they bring to the material?
- **Place in the historiography:** Is the source offering a broad overview, intervening in a scholarly debate, or challenging an older interpretation? Understanding where it fits in the larger conversation will help you use it more effectively.
- **Scope and limitations:** What does the source focus on, and what does it leave out? A study may be excellent on one region, period, or group of actors but less useful for another.
- **Relevance to your project:** Even a strong scholarly source may not be the best fit for your paper. Use secondary works that directly help you frame your question, understand the context, or situate your argument in relation to other historians.

HISTORY VS. HISTORIOGRAPHY

In Caltech history and history and philosophy of science courses, you may be asked to write *history*, *historiography*, or a paper that blends the two together. Understanding the aims of these modes of writing, as well as how they complement each other, will help you prepare to write effectively.

Doing History

When you *do history*, you advance an interpretation about the past by analyzing primary source evidence—documents, images, artifacts, and data, to name a few—and explaining how that evidence supports your claims. Because no account can capture everything, historical writing rests on thoughtful selection and interpretation: you decide which sources and details matter for your question, show how they fit together, and address counterevidence. Your reader evaluates your argument by the quality of your evidence, the soundness of your reasoning, and your transparency about limits and uncertainties. For example, a history argument about Florence might claim that the

Medici family consolidated political power not only through wealth, but also by patronizing religious and civic institutions in ways that made their authority seem natural and beneficial to Florentine public life.

Doing Historiography

Historiography is writing about how other historians have explained your topic—what they argued, how interpretations have changed, and where debates now stand. Within a longer history research paper or thesis project, a historiographical section maps the existing conversation so a reader can see the gap your project fills or the claim it revises. Think of it as the historian's version of a literature review. It summarizes the main lines of interpretation, highlights points of contention, and shows why your question matters now. Historiography also reminds us that interpretations shift as new sources appear and methods evolve. For example, a historiographical argument about Florence might claim that historians have moved from interpreting the Florentine Renaissance primarily as the achievement of elite male patrons and artists to understanding it as a broader social and political process shaped by class conflict, religious culture, and civic institutions.

One type of historiographical assignment you may encounter in Caltech history courses is the *review essay*, which performs this kind of analysis on a single scholarly article or book or perhaps compares and contrasts two scholarly sources. In this kind of essay, you may be asked to explain the work's aims and relevant context, summarize its central claim, examine the sources and methods it uses to build that claim, assess its strengths, note its limitations or unanswered questions, and situate the work within a broader debate, or suggest how it might be extended.

Positioning Strategies: Agree, Revise, Challenge

After sketching the field, signal how your paper positions itself:

- **Agree:** Adopt a scholar's core claim and extend it (to a new place, period, corpus, or method). For example, if a historian argues that patronage was central to Medici influence in Florence, you might agree and extend that claim by showing how patronage also shaped neighborhood-level religious life.
- **Revise:** Accept part of an argument but refine its scope, mechanism, or emphasis (often by bringing in overlooked evidence). For example, you might accept that elite patronage mattered in Florence, but revise the argument by showing that guild politics, not just elite families, played a crucial role in shaping civic culture.
- **Challenge:** Dispute a prevailing view by showing evidentiary problems, analytical gaps, or a better-fitting alternative. For example, if a common interpretation presents Renaissance Florence mainly as a story of artistic achievement and elite humanism, you might challenge that view by arguing that labor unrest and class conflict were equally central to Florentine political life.

In all cases, state your contribution plainly: Are you adding new sources, foregrounding new actors, or reconfiguring known facts into a more persuasive explanation?

Doing History and Historiography

Some assignments ask you to combine both modes: a concise historiographical paragraph that introduces the reader to an ongoing debate, followed by your own historical analysis grounded in primary evidence. In this case, be sure to calibrate the balance to the prompt and the paper's length. Keep the historiography tight in short essays, and let your analysis do the heavy lifting.

In the example below, former Caltech student Bradley Kaulana Chun does a historiographical assessment in the form of a review essay:

Example

While the accessibility of the article is undoubtedly hindered by the inherent complexity of the subject matter, there are a few leaps that Early and Monson ask the reader to make that are not strictly necessary in conveying their overall thesis. It is crucial that the final definition of the concept of jazz is tinged with ambiguity and nuance but that does not preclude the authors from beginning with a more basic definition from the outset. Letting the reader come to their own conclusions about how they categorize things is a good way of engaging their analytical capacities, but it can lead to later confusion if the reader is unaware of how distant their definitions or understanding are from the text's. If a reader sees the quote at the top of the article and concludes that jazz is not meant to be understood, the tone of the subject changes from one that invites interpretation to one that is obscurant or elitist. Monson wants to convey that the erudite music theory that a lot of modal jazz and bebop operates under is deeply meaningful to the trained ear but instead of outright saying as much she poses the question and hopes that her readers will come to a similar conclusion (or at least close enough to understand her argument). Overall, the text effectively captures the variability and nuance of jazz as a broader concept but falls short of clarifying the more important elements and patterns that we can learn from and apply to jazz.

From Hixon Prize-winner Bradley Kaulana Chun's ["The Relevance of Jazz in Modern Historiography"](#)

TYPES OF PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Understanding and Responding to Essay Prompts

Before you start, read the prompt slowly and note what it requires you to do and what it rules out. Here are some questions to ask when trying to understand a prompt:

- **Action verbs:** Does the prompt ask you to analyze, explain, trace change over time, compare, evaluate, contextualize, interpret sources, or do a historiographical review?
- **Scope:** Does your instructor note time frame, place, actors, required or prohibited sources, expected length, or formatting?
- **Audience:** Is your intended audience class peers, a general educated reader, or a specialist audience? This affects how much background you will provide.
- **Texts and research:** Does the prompt ask you to focus on a specific text (or set of texts)? Are you asked or permitted to find your own sources?

Common Assignment Types

- **Document analysis:** Interpret one primary source document (or a small set) in detail. Explain authorship, audience, purpose, rhetoric, and context; quote selectively; move from description to argument.
- **Comparative essay:** Place two primary sources, cases, or periods side by side to show a meaningful similarity or difference. Keep the basis of comparison explicit and consistent across paragraphs.
- **Review essay (historiography):** Assess one secondary-source scholarly book or article, or a small set, with attention to aims, methods, sources, strengths, and limits. Conclude by stating how the work fits into or revises a debate.
- **Research paper:** Answer a focused how/why question with multiple primary sources and selective secondary scholarship. Calibrate scope to length and available evidence; show how your sources support, complicate, or challenge your claim.
- **Close reading of a historical narrative:** Treat a primary narrative source (chronicle, memoir, institutional report) as crafted text. Analyze language, structure, and omissions to infer the author's aims and constraints

CLOSE READING FOR HISTORY

Close reading is a method that you may have encountered in a literature class, but some Caltech history classes will also ask you to perform close readings of historical texts. When used in history, close reading treats documents not as transparent windows onto “what really happened” in the past, but as constructed texts that pursue particular purposes in particular settings. Close readings of historical documents attend to wording, imagery, and rhetorical strategies, and they ask what the author is trying to accomplish, for whom, and under what constraints. Many sources (petitions, reports, chronicles, letters, etc.) were written to persuade specific audiences or authorities, so your analysis should account for motive and situation, not just content.

Reading with and against the Grain

When close reading historical texts, it's helpful to think about two modes of reading: “with the grain” and “against the grain.” Reading “with the grain” identifies the document's explicit claims, key terms, and the narrative it offers. Reading “against the grain” notes silences and omissions, euphemisms, shifts in tone, and contradictions between what the text asserts and what its language, structure, and evidence actually support. As you're reading, you might ask yourself the following questions: Who produced this? When and where? For which audience? With what purpose? How does its rhetoric (metaphors, appeals, framing) position readers to accept certain conclusions? The goal of historical close reading is to explain *how* the document constructs its version of events—not only *what* it says.

Writing a History Close Reading Essay

A close-reading essay in history typically opens with an introduction that identifies a focused problem or question raised by a specific source (or set of sources) and states a clear thesis about how the text makes meaning. The body of the paper advances logically connected claims, each supported by concrete, cited evidence from the document; you situate that evidence in context and interpret it, then make the connection back to your larger argument explicit rather than implied. Many writers find it effective to anchor the paper in a brief, dense passage—introduce it, pose the interpretive question it raises, and let your thesis emerge from sustained analysis of its language, rhetoric, and purpose.

In the example below, note how former Caltech student Christina Lin carefully unpacks one of Mao Zedong's speeches to emphasize his careful rhetorical choices:

Example

In "Be Concerned with the Wellbeing of the Masses, Pay Attention to the Methods of Work," Mao furthers his support for the plea of the common man, saying that his party must "lead the peasants' struggle for land and distribute the land to them, heighten their labour enthusiasm and increase agricultural production, safeguard the interests of the workers, establish co-operatives, develop trade with outside areas, and solve the problems facing the masses— food, shelter and clothing, fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt, sickness and hygiene, and marriage." Beyond recognizing that common problems unite people, Mao intends to solve these specific problems for the sake of the people. Again, Mao writes based on the belief that tangible, visible improvements to daily life, such as better living conditions and food supply, are key to bringing people together and consequently, to revolution. In both of these writings, Mao's political rhetoric is not about the ideological power of Marxism, or about communism at all, but about how to improve the lives of people and solve their problems. By focusing on concrete results, Mao hopes to appeal to the common man and ultimately to unify the masses behind his cause.

From McClure Prize-winner Christina Lin's ["The Rhetoric of Change"](#)

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Your work on a history paper should start with a question rather than a preconceived argument. Some Caltech history classes will provide you with a research question in the form of a prompt; others will ask you to develop your own research question. A good research question is specific, answerable with available evidence, and arguable. Historical questions usually ask how or why, attend to change over time, and point to actors, context, and contingency. The question you pose should be grounded in the sources you have access to.

Moving from Topic to Research Question

Begin with a broad interest, then narrow by testing it against evidence and scale:

- **Inventory the evidence:** What primary sources and credible secondary work are realistically available to you now? Has your instructor limited you to certain sources, or are you allowed to do additional research?
- **Identify something you find interesting:** Look for tensions. A change, contradiction, gap, or surprising pattern in what you're reading might lead you toward a compelling question.
- **Frame a how/why question:** Name the who/what/when/where of your question, and point to a change or mechanism. Avoid questions that will lead to simple "yes" or "no" answers or purely descriptive narratives. For example, a question like "How did KMEX newscasts frame Chicano protests in Los Angeles from 1968–72, and why did that framing differ from the *Los Angeles Times*?" will lead to a richer argument than something like "Did TV help the Chicano civil rights movement?"
- **Make it arguable:** A question that invites multiple plausible answers will yield a better paper than one that prompts a summary. Another reader with access to the same historical sources should be able to disagree with you.
- **Define your scope:** Make sure your question is appropriate to the length of the paper. A question like "How did scientists use X-ray crystallography in the 20th century?" would be too broad for a 5- to 10-page paper. A better alternative would be "Between 1912 and 1920, how did crystallographers use error estimates in published tables to argue for the reliability of their lattice measurements?" The latter focuses on a specific technical feature, a defined corpus of texts, and a manageable period.

Aim for a question you can answer with careful interpretation of concrete evidence. If your sources lead you to refine or pivot, revise the question early. Your introduction and body paragraphs will be clearer for it. Whether your instructor gives you a prompt or you're tasked with coming up with your own research question, these principles will guide you to an arguable historical argument.

NOTE-TAKING

Effective note-taking turns reading into analysis and makes drafting much easier. The aim is to create an ongoing conversation with your sources rather than a pile of highlighted pages. Your notes should help you see patterns, test claims, and retrieve precise evidence when you write. The habits below can be applied to both primary and secondary sources and will lead to better historical arguments:

Read Actively

Read actively with two aims in mind: comprehension and interpretation. Capture what a source says and what it is doing. Note who produced it, for whom, and to what end. Mark details that surprise you, terms that carry weight, and places where the language hedges, exaggerates, or omits. Treat each note as a small step toward an argument, not just a record of content.

Use a Simple, Repeatable Template

Use a consistent structure, such as a table, so your notes are searchable and citation-ready later. For each source, include: full citation; brief summary of what the source claims; exact quotations with page numbers; your interpretation of how those passages advance or complicate your developing claim; relevant context (author, audience, purpose, date, place); limits or silences you notice; leads to follow up. Don't leave the citations and bibliography until the very end. Noting this information throughout the process will make citing sources easier and help you avoid accidental plagiarism and/or misattribution.

Separate Summary from Analysis

Make it visually clear which words belong to the source and which belong to you. For example, you might put your analysis in brackets or a different font. Right after you paraphrase a passage, add one sentence that explains why it matters for your question. This habit keeps your future paragraphs focused and reduces "floating" quotes later.

Quote Precisely and Paraphrase Purposefully

When wording matters, transcribe exactly and record the page number. Indicate changes with brackets, and note unusual spellings or errors only when they affect meaning. When paraphrasing, avoid sentence-by-sentence retellings. Condense to the point that serves your argument, then add your interpretive sentence.

Track Contradictions, Patterns, and Scale

Flag moments where sources disagree or where expected evidence is missing. Start small comparison tables for competing accounts so you can see who says what, when, and with what categories. Build brief timelines when your question involves change over time. These tools help you move from description to explanation.

Corroboration and Follow-ups

End each note with two quick lists: what this source helps you claim and what you still need to find to test that claim. This keeps your research targeted and prevents last-minute scrambles.

Consistent note-taking with an eye toward analysis will save you time in drafting: topic sentences will have clear "jobs," evidence will be easy to locate and cite, and your central argument will stay focused to what you can actually show.

FORMULATING A CENTRAL ARGUMENT

What Is a Historical Argument?

A historical argument is a specific, debatable claim about the past that you support with evidence and reasoning. It explains how and why something happened (or persisted), identifies key actors and institutions, and attends to change over time, causation, and contingency. Unlike many literary arguments (which often center on interpreting a text as a self-contained work) or philosophical arguments (which may advance normative or

conceptual claims), historical arguments are constrained by the sources you can actually show and by context: who produced a document, for whom, and to what end. Your claim should arise from close engagement with your primary materials and be calibrated to the scope of the assignment.

Characteristics of a Strong Central Historical Argument

- **Original to you:** It grows from your own reading of the evidence, not a generic summary of the topic or lecture notes.
- **Specific:** It names what changed (or didn't), for whom, where, and when; it avoids broad, catch-all claims.
- **Arguable:** Reasonable readers could disagree; the claim is interpretive, not a restatement of facts.
- **Grounded in evidence and analysis:** Each point ties to concrete passages, documents, images, data, or artifacts, and explains how their language, structure, genre, audience, or material features support your inference.
- **Clear about historical mechanisms:** It indicates what does the work in your explanation (policies, practices, rhetoric, technologies, institutions), not just that an outcome occurred.
- **Properly scaled:** It fits the page limit and your source base; it's better to argue one focused claim well than many loosely connected points.
- **Concise:** You can state the core claim in two or three clear sentences in the introduction and then use the body to do the proving.
- **Transparent about limits:** It acknowledges ambiguity or gaps and shows how your reading accounts for them without overreaching.

In the example below, Caltech student Mariana Taveira concisely states an arguable, specific central argument that traces a development in the history of astronomy:

Example

The telescope soon tested and refined Bayer's scheme. Johannes Hevelius plotted 1,564 stars in *Firmamentum Sobiescianum* (1690), adding magnitudes while preserving silhouettes. Ignace-Gaston Pardies adopted new projection grids, and John Flamsteed banished constellation art to an appendix, foregrounding raw positional data. Across a single century, star maps migrated from qualitative curiosities to quantitative diagrams without ever severing their aesthetic roots. This essay traces that migration. The popularization provided by Uranometria and its telescopic heirs, building on early predecessors, evidences how changing visual conventions turned observation—naked-eye and telescopic alike—into compelling arguments for a heliocentric universe.

From Hixon Prize-winner Mariana Taveira's ["Dot, Letter, Legend: Johann Bayer's Graphic Code"](#)

WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

The introduction sets the stage for your entire history paper. It should give readers just enough background to understand the stakes, pose a focused historical question or problem, and present a clear central argument about the past. In shorter essays, this is usually one paragraph; in longer papers, it may be two or more.

Establishing context, the Historical Question, and Significance

- **Open with focus, not broadly:** Avoid sweeping generalizations (“Since ancient times, people have debated...”) that add little. A sharper opening orients the reader to *where and when* you’re working and hints at the specific problem you’ll address.
- **Give only the context your reader needs:** Identify the period, place, actors, and any terms of art you’ll use. Resist lengthy historical summary or a tour of everything you know unless an assignment has guided you to provide an extensive summary.
- **Pose the historical problem or question:** State the question or problem you’re addressing—how/why something changed, persisted, or diverged—and why it matters. If relevant, signal (briefly) where your paper sits in an ongoing scholarly debate without turning the intro into a literature review.
- **Indicate stakes:** One or two sentences should make clear what insight your paper offers: about causation, contingency, policy, practice, representation, or method.

Presenting a Clear, Arguable Thesis

- **Make a claim, not a topic:** Move quickly from question to answer: a specific, debatable claim that you can support with the sources you have.
- **Name the mechanism or logic:** If your argument hinges on policy, practice, rhetoric, technology, or institutional constraints, say so. Readers should know what the explanatory work does in your account.
- **Scale and limits:** Indicate scope (dates, place, texts) and, when helpful, what you are *not* covering. This keeps your argument focused and prevents overreach.
- **Offer a brief roadmap:** For longer history papers, it may help to create a roadmap for your readers. In a few sentences, signal the order of major moves (“First, I show... Then I compare... Finally, I explain...”). Keep this part concise. The body will do the work of supporting your argument.

A strong introduction orients, narrows, and commits to a historical argument. It frames the historical problem, stakes out a precise claim, and prepares the reader for how the paper will demonstrate it.

A well-written introduction, like the one written by former Caltech student Emeka Nkurumeh below, should offer a concise preview of the argument to come. The goal is to show the reader what you plan to discuss and why it matters.

Example

When reviewing Muslim sources on the early Crusades, what seems to set apart the Third Crusade from the earlier ones is a focus on the concept of “holy war” which seems to be absent from earlier Crusades. It is as if the idea of “holy war” that would come to dominate the Muslim view of the Crusades developed as a response to the religious fervor of the crusaders. However, upon further study of the history of the Islamic world, two things become clear: the Islamic concept of “holy war” is different from that of Christendom, and its history is not so simple. The majority of the accounts written on the first three Crusades were written by historians during the time of Nur ad-Din and Saladin, who both used religion to legitimize their conquests and subsequent rule. Their religious piety gave Muslim historians an avenue to explain their successes where those before them had failed. However, it is undeniable that most early Muslim historians, and often those in power, saw all three Crusades as deeply religious conflicts. An Islamic concept of “holy war” was present throughout all three Crusades, but the piety that Nur ad-Din and Saladin displayed led to an increase in the use of the concept of a “holy war” by Muslim historians trying to legitimize the rule and analyze the response of Muslim leaders to the Crusades.

From McClure Prize-winner Emeka Nkurumeh's [“Qital and Jihad: The Faces of Holy War in Islam”](#)

WRITING SUPPORTING PARAGRAPHS

Topic Sentences

Each body paragraph should have one clear “job” in advancing your central claim. Open with a topic sentence that states that job—either a focused claim or a precise question that the paragraph will answer. Keep wording consistent with your key terms so readers can see how this step fits the overall argument. If a paragraph can’t be summarized in one sentence that links to your thesis, it probably doesn’t belong or needs to be split.

Incorporating Historical Evidence

Select evidence because it moves the argument, not because it is vivid or simply interesting. Before introducing a document, image, or dataset, give just enough context (author, date, audience, purpose) so the reader understands why it matters. Quote sparingly and precisely; paraphrase when the exact wording is not the point. Never drop a quotation in isolation. Rather, follow it immediately with analysis that explains *how* the passage supports your claim. When using longer passages, quote selectively and signal omissions with care. For data, identify categories, units, and method; for images or maps, describe the relevant features, not everything you see. Cite as you go, and keep figure/table captions complete (source, repository, box/folder, or call number when applicable).

Integrating Documents, Images, and Data

Weave primary materials into your own sentences so the paragraph keeps your voice. Introduce evidence with verbs that reflect what the source does (“petitions,” “classifies,” “frames,” “calculates”) rather than neutral “says.” When working with images or artifacts, translate description into analysis: name the formal or material features that carry your point (layout, scale, inscription, revision marks, tabulated categories). For quantitative materials, explain the construction of the table or graph, note uncertainty or missingness, and state the consequence for your claim. Refer to visuals in-text (“see fig. 2”) and discuss them where they appear—not in a separate list at the end.

Interpreting Credibility, Contradictions, and Counterevidence

Treat sources as crafted and situated. Note authorship, audience, purpose, and stakes; read for rhetoric as well as content. If a source is partial, strategic, or unreliable in some respect, say so and explain what it can still tell you. When evidence pulls in different directions, use that tension: lay out the discrepancy, propose the best explanation you can support, and calibrate the strength of your claim accordingly. Address a major objection before your reader raises it—concede what the counterevidence shows, then demonstrate why your interpretation better fits the full record. Qualify when appropriate (“suggests,” “supports,” “is consistent with”) rather than overstating what the sources allow.

Well-constructed paragraphs link purpose to evidence to interpretation and tie back to the central argument. In the example body paragraph below, note how former Caltech student Luke Kottom interweaves quotations from primary sources with his own analysis to show how this evidence supports his argument.

Example

Huxley’s development of the term agnosticism shows a much more nuanced and complex position than simple dismissal of religion. In his anonymous article written in 1864 to *The Reader*, it was clear that Huxley had begun to develop his complex view on religion and science even before his coining of the term agnostic. He stated that “Religion has her unshakable throne in those deeps of man’s nature which lie around and below the intellect,” where theology was merely a “simple branch of Science.” This distinction was crucial to understand the complex stance that Huxley—and many other scientific naturalists—held during the Victorian period. It shows that Huxley believed science and religion could coexist and never truly conflict, as they remained in separate spheres or branches. Highlighting this point even further, Huxley stated that “religion belonged to the realm of feeling and ethics, while science was part of the realm of intellect.” Although he had not yet coined a formal term, these early remarks foreshadowed the approach he would later call “agnosticism.”

From McClure Prize-winner Luke Kottom’s [*Beyond the Battleground: T.H. Huxley’s Complex Vision of Science and Religion in Victorian Britain*](#)

ESSAY ORGANIZATION: DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT

A well-organized history paper leads readers through your reasoning step by step. Choose a structure that fits your claim and your sources or adheres to your instructor's prompt, then make that structure visible with clear topic sentences, strategic transitions, and consistent key terms.

Common Structures

- **Chronological:** Best when you're explaining change over time or causation. Move through stages and show what triggers each shift.
- **Thematic:** Group paragraphs by mechanism or theme (policy, rhetoric, institution, technology). Keep categories stable across the paper.
- **Comparative:** Either alternate A/B/A/B or use block form (all of A, then all of B). State the basis of comparison and keep depth roughly balanced.
- **Case study:** Analyze one focused case, then argue what it clarifies about a wider phenomenon—signal the leap in scope.
- **Problem–cause–consequence:** Useful for shorter papers that answer a specific how/why.

Transitions and Signposting

Open each paragraph with a topic sentence that states the paragraph's "job" in the argument. Echo a key term from the prior paragraph to build continuity, and use concise signposts to mark advances ("Having established X, I now show..."). In longer papers, section headings can help, but let the prose do most of the guiding.

Balancing Sections and Avoiding Repetition

Aim for proportional development: give more space to the claims that carry the argument. If two sections make the same point, consolidate. A quick *reverse outline*—jotting the topic sentence of each paragraph in order—will reveal gaps, redundancies, or jumps.

Placing Counterevidence and Alternatives

Address major objections where they naturally arise, or devote a short, clearly marked section to them. Present the strongest version of the alternative, concede what it explains, then show why your interpretation better fits the full record. Calibrate your claim accordingly.

RESEARCH AND WORKING WITH SECONDARY SOURCES

Many history papers focus solely on primary evidence, but some history and HPS assignments at Caltech will ask you to situate that evidence within an existing scholarly

conversation. Use secondary sources to clarify context, test interpretations, and show how your claim contributes to a debate. The work of other scholars should inform your thinking without drowning out your voice.

Identifying Credible and Relevant Sources

Look for peer-reviewed journal articles, university-press books, and reputable edited collections that speak directly to your question. The [Caltech Library](#) offers access to relevant databases such as [JSTOR](#), [Project Muse](#), [HSTM](#), [Iter Middle Ages and Renaissance](#), and [English Historical Documents Online](#). Start with recent overviews to learn the terrain, then follow footnotes to the key studies that shaped the field. Skim abstracts, introductions, and conclusions before committing to a full read. Check whether the author's sources, time frame, and methods match your project. The [Caltech Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian](#) can also help you locate and evaluate sources.

Strategies for Engaging with Scholarship

Read with a few targeted questions: What is the author's main claim, what evidence and method support it, and what problem in the literature does their piece address? Note how the author defines terms, what is left out, and how the argument could be challenged. Even if you disagree with the author, be sure to read generously, presenting an accurate version of their argument. Keep brief, structured notes that separate summary from your analysis so you do not blur their claims with yours.

Integrating Critical Sources into Your Argument

In history papers, scholarly monographs, articles, and review essays can supply historical context, map the historiography and methods, and offer interpretations that you test and refine against your primary sources. Writing studies scholar Joseph Harris identifies three ways that writers can respond to another writer's ideas:

- **Coming to terms:** Summarize a scholar's claim fairly and only as far as it is relevant to your argument.
- **Forwarding:** Adapt a concept, category, or insight to illuminate your evidence in a new way. Make the application explicit.
- **Countering:** Respectfully disagree when your sources point elsewhere. Show the strongest version of the view you challenge, then explain why your interpretation fits the record better.

Place scholarship strategically. A short historiographical paragraph near the start can orient readers to the debate. In body paragraphs, bring in secondary work at the moment it sharpens your interpretation of the primary evidence. Be careful not to cherry-pick from scholarship. If a source complicates your claim, acknowledge it and explain why you interpret the evidence differently.

Maintaining Your Interpretive Voice

Keep the focus of your paper on your reading of the primary materials. Use brief quotations from scholars sparingly and paraphrase when possible, then follow with your

own reasoning. Calibrate a sensible ratio of primary to secondary engagement for the assignment. If a secondary source shifts your view, say how and why, but return quickly to your evidence.

In the example that follows, Caltech student Luke Kottom forwards Bernard Lightman's argument to show how different religious groups integrated science into their belief systems. Notice how these paragraphs never lose sight of his own argument, despite making use of a secondary source.

Example

Institutional religion also responded to the societal shift. The predominant church during the Victorian Era, the Anglican Church of England, reaffirmed the majority of conventional Christian beliefs, and its tenets remained at the core of most segments of society. However, the majority of scientific discoveries refuted the accuracy of biblical assumptions and paved the way for the creation of natural theology. As Bernard Lightman describes in his book *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, it was during this period when growing tensions within the community between orthodox religion and emerging scientific viewpoints gained strength. According to Lightman, while many Victorians experienced a "crisis of faith" at this time, some continued to reformulate their beliefs in such a manner that integrated the emerging scientific assumptions into their basic belief systems.

An examination of the diverse responses within different religious denominations of this time period will demonstrate how different groups distinctly responded. For example, the Unitarians, "sailed through the spiritual storm that surrounded them" with relative ease and made sure to integrate a rationalist approach into their theology. In contrast, the Anglican community's transition was a much different story. The Anglican Church, while trying to emphasize personal faith and moral reform as the way to protect against the influence of secular beliefs, faced many internal divisions. These divisions arose from the pervasive struggles within the community between conservatism and progressivism.

From McClure Prize-winner Luke Kottom's ["Beyond the Battleground: T.H. Huxley's Complex Vision of Science and Religion in Victorian Britain"](#)

WRITING THE CONCLUSION

If your paper is well organized, the reader should already understand your main ideas by the end. An effective conclusion for a short history paper isn't a recap of each point; it's a brief final move that shows why your argument matters and how it fits into a larger historical conversation.

Synthesize Rather than Summarize

In one or two sentences, return to the historical question you posed and state the answer your analysis supports. Then synthesize the implications: what changed (or persisted), which mechanisms mattered, and what your evidence lets us see about particular actors, practices, or institutions. Keep the focus on explanation, not summary.

Broaden the Significance

“Open a door” rather than closing one. Point to the stakes of your claim—methodological, archival, ethical, political, or historiographical. You might note how your finding complicates a common narrative, clarifies causation, or reframes the scale (local vs. national; lab vs. institution). Keep this forward-looking move concise.

Signal Your Position in a Debate

In a sentence, indicate how your argument confirms, revises, or challenges existing interpretations. Name the move plainly without turning the conclusion into a mini-literature review.

Note Limitations

Good historical claims are honest about their limits. If helpful, flag the bounds of your conclusion (dates, place, available sources) and acknowledge any remaining ambiguities. This strengthens, rather than weakens, your credibility.

An effective conclusion, like the one below, written by former Caltech student Saehui Hwang, reminds the reader what you have shown, why it matters, and where the conversation can go next without rehashing the essay.

Example

Given the historical impact of hearing aids on technology as we enjoy today, it is worth mentioning where the future lies in this domain. Making the device ever smaller will continue to be a task for hearing aid manufacturers, in addition to enhancing sound quality by reducing distortion, noise, and feedback. Mudry claims there are three principal axes in the future of hearing aid development: the perfection of electronic signal processing, implantable hearing aids, and systems using wireless FM transmission (Mudry, 422). He claims that supraconducting materials hold the key to the future, as they allow for the elimination of all dissipation of energy and increase the output power while increasing the operating time. Some recent studies suggest that hearing instruments simply “cannot give the same auditory impression as a normal hearing ear does” (Campbell, 1), since the ear itself produces distortions. However, it is important to note that our relationship with sound will only continue to evolve, hand in hand with hearing aids, allowing for things once thought to be impossible to be possible. One thing is certain: electronic hearing aids are here to stay and will continue to be a site for innovative technology.

Attempts to control and amplify sound are crucial to our ability to thrive in a social environment. Initially, speaking tubes and ear trumpets were made to capture and directly feed speech to the ear. And by the 19th century, they evolved to be quite elaborate, and even to be a fashion accessory for the wealthy. In this paper, I have described some of the significant moments in electronics miniaturization and discussed how those moments connect to hearing aids. Charting this history reveals that the relationship between electronics miniaturization and hearing aid technology is bidirectional. One inspires, pushes, and improves on the other. The hearing aid was the perfect ground for the application and refinement of miniaturized materials and technologies and it remains in representing the leading edge of personal electronics today.

From McClure Prize-winner Saehui Hwang’s [“History of Hearing Aids”](#)

CITATION PRACTICES IN HISTORY PAPERS

Historians most commonly adhere to the Chicago Manual of Style for citations, but some of your professors may allow you to use other citation systems such as MLA. It is important to determine whether your course sets specific standards for citation style. Consult the Purdue OWL's [Research and Citation Resources](#) for information on specific citation styles.

No matter what citation style you are asked to use, it is important to provide a reference whenever you present another author's ideas. Failing to cite sources properly could constitute [plagiarism](#).

ADDITIONAL POINTS TO CONSIDER

When to Write in the Past or Present Tense

When writing about what happened in the past or what a historical actor did, use the past tense ("Railway managers adopted standard time on U.S. lines in 1883.").

When writing about what a past author is saying, right now, as we look at their text, use the historical present tense ("In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas says that justice is 'a habit whereby man renders to each his due by a constant and perpetual will.'").

Use the present tense for your paper's claims and for ongoing scholarly debates ("this essay argues..." "Smith's history of the civil war contends..."), or for the contents of historical texts.

Writing in the First Person

First person is acceptable when it clarifies your argument's logic or helps distinguish your argument from those of other scholars. Phrases like "I argue," "I show," and "I compare" can be helpful if used sparingly. Avoid phrases like "I think" or "I feel," which weaken your argument. Keep the focus on evidence and reasoning, not personal preference. First person is also useful for signposting ("First, I establish... Then I show..."), especially in longer papers.

Defining Specialized Terms

Define key terms the first time they appear, especially period terms whose meanings have shifted over time ("liberal," "republican," "standardization"), institutional jargon, acronyms, and technical language in history of science papers. Note whose definition you're using and, if relevant, how your usage differs from present-day meanings. Avoid anachronism: explain terms as actors used them, in their time and place. It is expected that you will repeat relevant key terms across an essay for clarity and consistency, so do not vary key terms for the sake of style.

KEY FEATURES OF CLEAR ACADEMIC WRITING

History scholarship often deals with abstract, complex subjects, so historical writing should strive for clarity. Clear writing exhibits a high degree of **coherence**, **cohesion**, and **conciseness**.

An essay demonstrating **coherence** focuses on a specific topic and purpose rather than jumping around. To judge coherence, we can look at the paper as a whole and at the paragraph level. Do all of the paragraphs contribute to the essay's main argument, and do they appear in a logical order?

In **cohesive** writing, sentences connect to one another so that the reader can easily follow the writer's ideas from sentence to sentence. You can ensure that your writing is cohesive by moving from old information to new information in individual sentences and judiciously using transition words and phrases between sentences like "therefore," "however," "furthermore," and "in contrast."

When writing is **concise**, it does not contain unnecessary words and phrases. Sentence structure tends toward simplicity (e.g., subjects preceding verbs; avoiding linking many phrases and clauses together), with longer or complex sentences being used sparingly. Historians especially value simple, straightforward language. As you revise, focus on simplifying sentences and eliminating unnecessary words.

Note that these features only characterize the writing itself. An excellent essay about history must demonstrate a deep understanding of the readings and present strong original ideas and arguments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Prize-Winning History Essays by Caltech Writers

- Clara Yu, [“The Tasmanian Devil: A Genomic Arms Race Against Extinction”](#) (2026)
- Luke Kottom, [“Beyond the Battleground: T.H. Huxley’s Complex Vision of Science and Religion in Victorian Britain”](#) (2025)
- Mariana Taveira, [“Dot, Letter, Legend: Johann Bayer’s Graphic Code”](#) (2025)
- Emeka Nkurumeh, [“Qital and Jihad: The Faces of Holy War in Islam”](#) (2024)
- Aramis Mendoza, [“Dismantling *The Help*: The Hollywoodization of The Civil Rights Movement in 1963”](#) (2023)
- Elia Gorokhovskiy, [“The Development of the Research Journal and the Prehistory of Peer Review in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*”](#) (2022)
- Saehui Hwang, [“History of Hearing Aids”](#) (2021)
- Bradley Kaulana Chun, [“The Relevance of Jazz in Modern Historiography”](#) (2021)
- Karen Pham, [“‘Otherness’: Examining the Relationship Between Human and Non-Human”](#) (2020)

- Diego Olaya, [“The Spectre of Race”](#) (2019)
- Tara Shankar, [“Why Cervantes' History is His Story”](#) (2018)
- Crystal Liang, [“Why Was *The Feminine Mystique* Such a Phenomenon?: A Clarification”](#) (2018)
- Christina Lin, [“The Rhetoric of Change”](#) (2017)
- Leonardo Balestri, [“Fifty Years of Dividing Lines: From Selma and Montgomery, 1965 to Ferguson, 2015”](#) (2016)

Additional prize-winning essays by Caltech writers can be found [here](#).

Hixon Writing Center Resources

- [Avoiding Plagiarism: Guidelines and Expectations for Writing in HSS](#)
- [Working with Source and Writing about History](#)
- [Writing and Procrastination](#)
- [Making the Time to Write \(And Actually Writing\)](#)
- [Generating a Draft without Getting Blocked](#)
- [Revising with Reverse Outlines](#)

Recommended History Writing Guides

- The Harvard Writing Center’s [Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper](#)
- The Duke Writing Studio’s [Writing in History](#)
- The UNC Writing Center’s [History Guide](#)

WORKS CONSULTED

In addition to the recommended guides above, the authors of this handout consulted several resources during the writing process:

- Cole, Stephanie, et al. *How History is Made: A Student’s Guide to Reading, Writing, and Thinking in the Discipline*. Mavs Open Press, 2022.
- Schrag, Zachary. *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*. Princeton UP, 2021.
- Storey, William Kelleher. *Writing History: A Guide for Students*. 6th ed., Oxford UP, 2020.

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