

Guidelines for Historical Projects

1) The historical project has a strong thesis (argument).

We provide data—information from our sources, our evidence—and our argument about what the facts mean. Your project should start with “The Big Question.”

Argument = The main thing you want to tell others; the reason for doing the project. In other words, it is the **THESIS**, the proposition that you want others to accept. It expresses the thrill of your discovery.

Don’t be content with telling a story others have told hundreds of times. Find something puzzling in the evidence and try to solve the puzzle or explain why it is a puzzle. Ask a question and try to answer it.

2) Good historical projects have a sharply focused, limited topic.

Find a topic you can manage in the time and space you have available. If you try to do too much, you will not do anything. You must be sure that evidence is available, that you have time to study it carefully and repeatedly, and that you choose a topic on which you can say something worthwhile.

3) Good historical projects are based on primary sources.

Primary sources are texts nearest to any subject of investigation. Secondary sources are always written about primary sources. The most common primary sources are written documents. They can also include photographs, paintings, sculpture, architecture, oral interviews, statistical tables, and even geography. Consult old newspapers and perhaps magazine files for stories.

Never forget the power of the interview when doing history. Always remember in an interview that participants can get things wrong. Human beings forget, or they tell the story in such a way to exalt themselves, and sometimes they simply lie. The historian is always skeptical enough to check out the stories he or she hears, even from eyewitnesses. Although primary sources are basic to history, secondary sources are also essential. You should always consult books and articles written by historians about the subject you write about yourself. These books and articles will help you learn how to think about history, and they will provide much information that you can use.

4) Tell (or write) your historical project in the same spirit that you would tell (or write) a good story.

A good story begins with something out of balance, some tension to be resolved or explained. Or, you can say that a good story begins with a problem. Get to the point quickly by revealing a tension that the audience wants to see resolved. The beginning put various elements together, reveals tension, makes us ask questions, and proceeds to explain its importance.

The main quality of any story is that it makes us relive the experience it describes. The audience wants to live through the experience for themselves. Create the experience of living through events or of living through step-by-step interpretation of those events.

5) Get to the point quickly.

Set the scene quickly, reveal a tension to be resolved, and set out in the direction of a solution. Don't take long to introduce your argument—the audience will lose interest. Don't shovel out piles of background information at the beginning just to prove you studied the issue. Don't lay out a “moral justification” for the topic with statements like, “I am writing this paper to make a better world and to prove that I am on the right side.” The best historians have something to say and start saying it quickly! When writing a historical paper, for example, the reader should know your general subject in the first paragraph, and within two or three paragraphs, they should usually know why you have written your essay.

Stick to the point and don't digress. Be sure that everything in your project serves your main purpose. Be sure that your audience understands the connection to your main purpose of everything you include. Your project makes a point. Don't use it as an excuse to pour out facts as if you were dumping the contents of a can onto a tabletop.

6) Establish a good title for your project.

It informs your audience and helps keep you on track. Make it represent your project as clearly as possible. Titles, subtitles, and opening paragraphs should fit together as a unit. If you cannot write a succinct title for your work, you may not have a clear point to make in the project itself.

7) Build your project step by step on evidence.

Your audience needs some reason to believe your story. You cannot parade your opinions unless you support them. Presenting history is much like proving a case in a court of law. The audience is judge and jury. You must command your evidence and present it clearly and carefully.

What is evidence? It is detailed factual information from primary and secondary sources. You must sift through these sources, decide what is reliable and what is not, what is useful and what is not, and how you will use these sources in your work. Follow this rule: When you make a generalization, immediately support it by quoting, summarizing, or otherwise referring to a source.

Historians fit their evidence together to create a story, an explanation, or an argument. To have evidence at their command, they spend days in libraries, in museums, or wherever sources of evidence are to be found. You cannot manufacture evidence out of thin air; you must look for it. When you find it, you must study it until you know it almost by heart. If you make a careless summary of your evidence and get it wrong, you lose the respect of a knowledgeable audience.

8) Document your sources.

Your audience wants to know where you got your information. You gain authority for your own work if you demonstrate that you are familiar with the primary sources and the work of others who have studied the same material.

Documenting sources is the best way to avoid plagiarism, and plagiarism remains the unforgivable sin of any writer. It is the act of presenting the thoughts or words of others as your own. It constitutes the ultimate dishonesty in writing (or presenting history), a theft of intellectual property that is never forgiven in the publishing world. Always give credit to ideas you get from someone else, even if you express those ideas in your own words.

You may find that some ideas you get on your own are similar to those you read in secondary sources. You should then document those secondary sources and either in a footnote or in the body of your text point out the similarities and the differences.

9) Historical projects are presented dispassionately.

We identify with the people and the times we present, and often in studying history our emotions are aroused. We judge people, and decide whether they are good or bad. But your audience doesn't need coercive comments, and they often resent them. If you present the details, you can trust your audience to have the right reactions. You waste time and seem a little foolish if you preach at them.

10) A historical project should include original thoughts of the author; it should not be a rehash of the thoughts of others.

Projects are examples of reasoning. Don't disappoint your audience by telling them only what other people have said about your subject. By your work, they should learn something new or see old knowledge in a new light, one that you have shed on the subject by your own study and thinking.

Many students don't believe they have anything fresh and interesting to say about their topics. They don't trust themselves. As a result, some students insist on pursuing large, general topics that other people have done a hundred times. However, only a little searching will turn up evidence of times that have seldom been done.

You may not find new facts, but you can think carefully about the facts at your disposal and come up with something fresh and interesting. You can see new relations. You can see causes and effects and connections that others have missed. You may reflect on motives and influences. You may spot places where some sources are silent. You can present your own conclusions, which have the weight of authority behind them.

Don't construct a project in the spirit of a child who builds a model airplane bought in a kit from a hobby shop—sticking together parts that someone else has designed until he/she produces a model that looks like the picture on the box. Do not be happy until you shape a story that cannot be read in every encyclopedia textbook in the field.

11) Always consider your audience.

Develop your project as if you were the audience. Consider the sorts of things you might read and believe, and proceed accordingly. The main principle is that you must always be making decisions about what you need to tell your audience and what you think they know already.

The project should be complete in itself. The important terms should be defined. Everyone quoted or mentioned should be identified. All the necessary information should be included. Have a variety of people critique your project—especially those who have nothing to do with it.

12) An honest project takes contrary evidence into account.

Good historians try to tell the truth about what happened. If you study an issue long enough and carefully enough, you will form opinions about it. You will think you know why something happened, or you will suppose that you understand someone. Yet the evidence in history seldom stacks up entirely on one side of an issue, especially the more interesting problems

about the past. You must face such contradictions squarely. If you do not, knowledgeable people may decide that you are careless, incompetent, or even dishonest

Different historians interpret the same data in different ways. In highly controversial issues, you must take into account views contrary to your own. You don't weaken your argument by recognizing opposing views if you then can bring up evidence that supports your opinion against them. On the contrary, you strengthen your case by showing the audience that you know what other have said, even if their opinions contradict your own. Your audience will believe you if you deal with contrary opinions honestly, but they will scorn your work if you pretend that contradictions don't exist.

History is not a seamless garment. Our knowledge of the past—or of almost anything else—has bumps and rips and blank spots that remain when we have done our best to put together a coherent account of it. Our best plan always is to approach the study of the past with the humility that rises from the experience of our ignorance.

13) Let your first and last parts of your project mirror each other.

(First and last paragraph of a paper; opening and closing dialogue of a performance and a media presentation; connections made in an exhibit).

It may reflect some of the same words and thoughts. It's something like a snake biting its tail: the end always comes back to the beginning.

Information was taken from *A Short Guide to Writing About History*
Richard Marius (New York: Longman, 1999).