CHAPTER

3

How to Write History Assignments: The Importance of Writing Skills

WHY CLEAR WRITING IS IMPORTANT

The most important tasks in a history course often are the written assignments. You may be asked to write a short book review or a lengthy research paper. Whatever the writing assignment, you must take the time and care to make it your best work. Every instructor has had the experience of reading a poorly written paper from a student who did not take the trouble to do his or her best. If you hand in sloppy or thoughtless work, you will earn a poor grade and indicate that you are not aware of the importance of good writing. Writing is a task of great significance. You will be judged not only by your history instructor but also by everyone else who reads your words. Your writing skills tell the reader a lot about your ability to think clearly, whether you are writing a student paper or a proposal to your boss. As this chapter emphasizes, clear thinking is the source of clear writing. Two years after graduating, you may no longer remember the causes of World War I, but if you sharpened your writing skills in history assignments, you will have acquired a skill and an asset that will last a lifetime.

Clear writing accomplishes two important goals. First, it demonstrates that your thinking about a subject is logical. You cannot write clearly about something that you do not understand clearly. Second, it enables you to convey to your readers in a convincing way exactly what you want them to understand. Clear writing is persuasive.

THE COMPONENTS OF CLEAR WRITING

Think of your readers when you write. Tell your readers what you want them to know. Tell them this clearly, briefly, yet adequately.

Write Clear Sentences

Clear writing begins with clear sentences. A clear sentence leaves no doubt about the subject of the sentence. Consider the following examples. What are the subjects of these sentences?

EXAMPLES: On September 1, 1939, Germany was strong and Poland was weak, and so it attacked. When Lindbergh landed his plane in Paris, everybody was very excited to see the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean by himself.

The subject of the first sentence, describing the outbreak of World War II, is unclear. The reader cannot tell if the subject is Germany or Poland and therefore cannot tell who attacked whom. In the second example, the subject, Charles Lindbergh, is removed from fly, the verb that describes his great feat; the reader must slog through an unclear and confusing sentence.

Now look at these revised sentences:

REVISED EXAMPLES: On September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland. Charles Lindbergh made the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

The reader will know who (or what) the subject of the sentence is if that subject is placed as close as possible to the verb that describes what the subject is doing.

Do Not Clutter Sentences with Unnecessary Phrases

A phrase can add information. But phrases that are used indiscriminately can obscure a sentence's meaning.

EXAMPLE: Lindbergh took thirty-three hours to make the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

In that example, the phrase added to the original clear sentence tells the reader how long the flight took. This added information does not affect the clarity of the sentence. But look what happens when several phrases are added.

EXAMPLE: Although his plane was loaded down with extra fuel, Lindbergh was still able to get off the muddy runway in New Jersey despite very bad weather that rainy morning in 1927 and the fact that several other people had been
killed trying to become the first person to stay awake for the thirty-three hours it took to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

In that sentence, Lindbergh’s flight is surrounded by so many phrases that the main point of the sentence is lost. You should not attempt to pack into one sentence every fact you have learned. If some facts are not necessary, leave them out. If they are necessary, make room for them by creating additional sentences. For example, if the weight of the fuel and the muddy runway are important but the weather conditions and the failed attempts by others are not, writing two sentences instead of one makes the additional points and makes them clearly.

**REVISED EXAMPLE** Lindbergh’s plane was so heavily loaded with fuel that it almost failed to get off the muddy runway in New Jersey. Once in the air, however, Lindbergh was able to stay awake for the thirty-three hours it took to fly across the Atlantic.

**Avoid Using the Passive Voice**

The subject and verb are the core of any sentence. In the passive voice, the verb indicates that the subject is receiving rather than performing the action described by the verb.

**EXAMPLE** A vaccination against smallpox was introduced by Edward Jenner in 1796.

A clear sentence usually uses the active voice, which shows the subject initiating rather than receiving an action (or thought).

**REVISED EXAMPLE** In 1796, Edward Jenner introduced a vaccination against smallpox.

At times, however, the passive voice is acceptable, such as when you desire to emphasize the receiver of an action or thought. So although it is preferable to avoid the passive voice, you may find occasions in your writing to use it.

**Use the Past Tense**

When writing about historical events use the past tense. The only exception occurs when you are referring to a specific written document or to an object (such as an old building or a work of art) that still exists. Use the present tense to describe them.

**EXAMPLE** Thomas Jefferson wrote the draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson’s action took place in the past, so it is correct to use the past tense when writing about the event. Because the Declaration of Independence is a written document that still exists, you should use the present tense to describe its content:

**EXAMPLE** The Declaration of Independence says that “all men are created equal.”

The effort to write clear sentences forces you to think about what your subject is doing and how many points about the subject’s actions (or thoughts or feelings) you need to include. The result of this effort is a series of sentences that give the reader a clear understanding of what you have written.

**Link Your Sentences**

Another element of good writing is **continuity** — the relationship between words, sentences, and paragraphs as a writer moves from one point to the next. Every sentence and every paragraph should say something new and significant about the theme of the paper. And each sentence (or paragraph) should be connected to the sentences (or paragraphs) around it. Sometimes a single sentence (or paragraph) cannot do both. Only a skilled writer can craft a sentence that advances the theme while also connecting with the surrounding sentences. Writers often separate these two tasks by means of a **linking sentence**. Such a sentence does not have to introduce new evidence about the theme. Its job is to tell the reader that the writer is shifting gears, moving from one point to a different but related one.

The middle sentence in the following example is a linking sentence.

**EXAMPLE** Therefore, changes in printing technology made newspapers cheaper and more available. But new technology alone does not explain rising readership. As immigrants poured into the country from Europe, it was the new look of the newspaper, especially the use of large illustrations and photographs, that attracted these new “readers.”

The linking sentence tells the reader that the paragraph (dealing with technological change) is to be followed by the introduction of a new point about the theme: how changes in the look of newspapers attracted new readers.

Linking sentences usually appear toward the end of a paragraph. Sometimes it is necessary to write an entire **linking paragraph** if the shift in focus is a major one or if you are moving from one section of a long essay to another (see pp. 61–62).

**Write Clear and Coherent Paragraphs**

A paragraph is a series of sentences about the same point. Each sentence in a paragraph needs to be clear, and each, as noted above, needs to add something to the theme or provide a link between sentences or paragraphs. Each paragraph also needs to be coherent — that is, to hold together. In a
coherent paragraph, each sentence expands on the point being made. Look for places in your writing where you repeat yourself. When a sentence does not add anything significant to what you already said, leave it out. Also look for places where you begin to talk about a new and different point. It is there that you will need to begin a new paragraph.

Consider again the following sentences about Lindbergh's historic flight:

**EXAMPLE** Lindbergh's plane was so heavily loaded with fuel that it almost failed to get off the muddy runway in New Jersey. Once in the air, however, Lindbergh was able to stay awake for the thirty-three hours it took to fly across the Atlantic.

Both sentences describe the famous flight. That is why they belong in the same paragraph. But suppose you are finished writing about the flight and want to talk about the wild celebration in Paris after Lindbergh's landing. That information probably belongs in a new paragraph.

**EXAMPLE** Once Lindbergh was on the ground, his plane was mobbed by excited Parisians who lifted him onto their shoulders.

In the new paragraph you would describe the reception Lindbergh received in Paris, until you decided to make a new point about him. If you wanted to describe the celebration when Lindbergh returned to New York, you would not add that account to your paragraph about the events in Paris; you would start another new paragraph.

Of course, a paragraph can be short — three or four sentences — or long — seven or eight sentences. There is no rule about the correct number of sentences in a paragraph. The key is knowing when a paragraph is complete is to ask yourself: Am I moving on to a point different from the one I am making in this paragraph? If the answer is "yes," begin a new paragraph.

**Link Your Paragraphs**

Since each paragraph says something new you must help the reader to see the connection between paragraphs. Disconnected paragraphs (like disconnected sentences) can leave the reader confused about what is coming next and why.

**EXAMPLE** Once in the air, however, he was able to stay awake for the thirty-three hours it took to fly across the Atlantic.

In 1925, Lindbergh flew mail between Chicago and St. Louis.

Note the disconnect between the end of the paragraph about the flight and the sentence that begins the new paragraph. Unless you say something in the new paragraph to explain why you are going back to the period before the famous flight, the reader will be confused and may think that you are too. If you have a good reason for going back in time in the new paragraph, make sure that the reader understands your reason.

**REVISED EXAMPLE**

Once in the air, however, he was able to stay awake for the thirty-three hours it took to fly across the Atlantic.

No one had expected the twenty-five-year-old Lindbergh to make it. Less than a year before the famous flight, he had been an inconspicuous pilot flying mail between Chicago and St. Louis.

By connecting your paragraphs, you let the reader understand why you are bringing up Lindbergh's earlier career. The addition of a linking sentence shows the reader why a new paragraph is necessary and what direction the writer is taking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Guidelines for Clear Writing</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Be sure that each sentence clearly names its subject.</td>
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<td>• If you have several points to make about the subject, split them up into separate sentences.</td>
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<td>• Prepare your reader for the transition from one paragraph to another with a phrase or sentence linking the two paragraphs. (The link can be placed at the end of one paragraph or at the beginning of the next.)</td>
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