

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL INQUIRY

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Department of History Essay Writing Guide. This guide is a collaborative effort by a former tutor in the History Department, Nayantara Pothen, a lecturer, Dr Cindy McCreery, and a committee of academics from within the department. The guide was made possible with funding assistance from both the Teaching and Learning Committee of the Faculty of Arts and the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry. It is based on material prepared by the Learning Centre at the University of Sydney and a previous essay writing guide prepared for HSTY1045.

This guide is consistent with the principles set out in *The Write Site – Online Support for Academic Writing (University of Sydney)* at <http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au> We encourage you to make use of both *The Write Site* and the resources of the Learning Centre if you would like further assistance with academic writing. The Department of History Essay Writing Guide is specifically tailored for student of the department. Although this guide has been prepared specifically for first-year students, we hope it will be useful for other History students as well.

Our goal is to provide students with clear and detailed suggestions for preparing their written work in the Department of History. Please note that this guide should be read in conjunction with the Department of History's Presentation Guide <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/history/docs/historyreferencingguide.pdf> which sets out the convention for presenting footnotes and bibliographic entries accepted by the department. All the **secondary sources** listed are by staff and students of the Department of History at the University of Sydney.

UNPACKING THE QUESTION

Essays must answer the set question. Many students do not demonstrate an understanding of the essay question. This lack of understanding is usually indicated by the use of irrelevant information in the essay and/or a failure to directly answer the question. **Students who write a brilliant essay that answers a related but different question will be penalised, because they have not answered the set question.**

When you read an essay question, ask yourself 'What is the question really asking? What am I supposed to be examining?' To answer the set question, you must:

1. Identify the focus of the essay question.
2. Answer it within the terms set down by the question and the discipline, in this case History.

Interpreting the essay question

There are several components you need to consider when interpreting an essay question.

Firstly, you need to identify the instruction words in the essay question. Instruction words tell you what to do. They can be explicit or implicit and it is not unusual for an essay question to have more than one instruction word. Examples of instruction words used in History essay questions include: 'analyse', 'discuss', 'evaluate', 'comment', and 'assess'.

Consider the following examples:

In what ways did the Civil War signal a radical break from past traditions?

Instruction words - by using the phrase 'in what ways', you are being provided with an implicit instruction. The essay question implies that the Civil War signalled a break from past traditions, and you are asked to consider how it did so.

Assess the usefulness of Thomas More's *Utopia* as a primary source for the historian.

Instruction word – you are being asked to **analyse** and **evaluate** the usefulness of the text. What does *Utopia* tell us about the political, social and intellectual contexts in which it was produced? If there is a disagreement on this issue in the secondary literature, you may need **to take and justify a position** within the debate.

Secondly, you need to identify the key terms. They will assist you to focus your response, and will need to be defined at the beginning of your essay. You will need to explain how you intend to use these terms. By defining the key terms, you establish the boundaries of your essay.

For example:

In what ways did **the Civil War** signal a radical break from **past traditions**?

Key term - the terms 'the Civil War' and 'past traditions' provide you with clear boundaries for your essay – the essay question asks you to consider one in relation to the other.

Assess the usefulness of **Thomas More's *Utopia*** as a **primary source for the historian**.

Key term - the main thing to remember with a question such as this, where you are asked to examine a particular text, is that the text is the **focus** of the question. Everything in your response should be related to the text.

Key term – literary sources provide something less tangible than a scholarly historical text: individual perspective, as opposed to historical overview. In your assessment of this source, ask yourself whether it provides insight into a particular historical context or situation through the perspective of an individual. That is, you must discuss *Utopia* as an historical source, rather than as a work of literature.

Finally, you should also be aware of any 'value-laden' terms that might be part of your essay question. These terms usually indicate that an evaluative or argumentative response is required. A 'value-laden' term might imply a positive or negative emphasis. A 'value-laden' term might also imply a scale of degree or importance. Examples of 'value-laden' terms include: 'significantly', 'potentially', and 'to a certain degree'.

Consider the sample essay questions:

In what ways did the Civil War signal a **radical break** from past traditions?

Value-laden term - the use of the term 'radical break' implies that the Civil War was a radical break from past traditions. You are being asked to give it a degree of importance – in your opinion, how radical was it? – and explain why. This does not mean, however, that you must automatically accept the implication. You might find, for example, that the break between the Civil War and past traditions was not as radical as some scholars have argued. If this is the case, justify your argument with evidence from primary and secondary sources.

Assess the **usefulness** of Thomas More's *Utopia* as a primary source for the historian?

Value-laden term – you are being asked to evaluate the text's importance. Is it useful, is it not useful at all, or is it useful up to a point? Remember that you must justify your argument with evidence from primary and secondary sources.

You will need to consider all three components discussed above in order to answer the essay question effectively. In writing an analytical response to a set question, you should also consider whether you need to undertake some or all of the following:

- **Explanation** – offer an explanation of why certain things happened.
- **Interpretation** – examine information within a broader framework.
- **Evaluation** – present and justify a value judgement about a certain debate.
- **Argumentation** – take and justify a position on an issue/debate.

RESEARCH

It is essential that you use scholarly sources in all essays submitted to the Department of History. Scholarly sources enable you to verify the facts and views presented in them. Using such sources will also allow your reader to ‘check the facts’ and obtain more information on the topic. Scholarly sources are divided into two main groups - primary sources and secondary sources.

Primary sources are texts (documents, books, films, images or any other kind of evidence) that were produced by someone who participated in the era or event described. Usually these texts are produced at the time of the event but some may also be produced afterwards (e.g. in an autobiography). They provide direct evidence for a topic. For example, the diary of Victor Klemperer (1881-1960), *I will bear witness: a diary of the Nazi Years* (published 1998) discusses Klemperer's first-hand experience of life in Nazi Germany (1933-45). Another example of a primary source is a newspaper published during (or shortly after) an historical event. For example, the October 1962 issues of the *New York Times* provide insight on the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the USA and USSR to the brink of war.

Secondary sources are texts about a topic or a primary source which are produced after the period or event described. They are not a direct source of evidence. They are written not by participants in the events described, but by scholars. While secondary sources include encyclopaedias, almanacs and school texts, these are NOT adequate sources for university essays. Instead you should use those secondary sources, such as books, academic journal articles, book chapters and websites, created by recognised scholars (usually professional historians or other academics who work in universities or accredited research institutions such as museums). Nikolaus Wachsmann's *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (2004) and Alice L. George's *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2003) are both examples of scholarly secondary sources.

The Use of Primary and Secondary Sources

Use primary and secondary sources carefully. The extent to which you use primary and secondary sources will vary depending on the essay question and the available sources. As you do more History units of study at university, you will probably find yourself spending more time analysing primary sources. Primary sources are, after all, the main focus of professional historians' research.

You may well refer to secondary sources for background information on a topic, or to note an important historiographical debate. This is fine, but remember that it is not sufficient merely to cite another historian's opinion. You must indicate what evidence s/he has supplied to support that opinion, and why you find it persuasive. Simply repeating another historian's conclusions adds absolutely no weight to your argument – you must demonstrate how her/his use of evidence supports your argument.

Planning your Research

How to begin?

- Your lecturer may provide you with a selected reading list to help you get started.
- Unit of study texts, tutorial readings, lecture notes and supplementary readings in the course outline will provide you with background information as well as help you to place your question within the context of the themes being considered in the unit of study.
- Use the bibliographies and notes in these sources to advance your search for useful material.
- Academic journal articles publish the latest findings and debates. (HINT: new scholarship usually appears in the form of a journal article before it appears in a book.)
- Electronic databases provide bibliographic details of academic journal articles, book reviews and theses. Fisher Library provides electronic access to databases such as *Historical Abstracts*, *J-STOR* and *America: History and Life* which will help you identify useful articles using keyword or subject searches. Some full text journal articles are available via the Library catalogue. Most Library electronic resources are available via the internet and can be accessed off-campus.
- For monographs (i.e. a scholarly book on a specialised topic), keyword and subject searches on the library catalogue in Fisher Library are particularly helpful if you do not have the author's name or the title of a particular book.
- Library staff are happy to assist students with using electronic databases and catalogues. They will not (and should not) do your research for you, but they will be happy to show you how to use the library's resources. Ask for help at the 'Information Desk'. HINT: Every time you check the online library catalogue, have a glance at the library homepage which lists newly available electronic research aids.

Choosing and Evaluating your Sources

When you begin reading, you will need to decide the following:

- Which sources you will need to read in detail.
- Which sources you will skim for background information.
- Which sources you may not need to read at all.
- With a book, use the table of contents, the index and read the introduction – these will give you some indication of how useful the source is for your purposes. With a journal article, read the abstract.
- Reading the introduction will also give you a general introduction to the key arguments and methodology of the author. This will help you decide whether or not you will need to read the text in further detail.

When you begin reading for your essay, it is important that you read all material critically. Analyse the logic of the argument being presented to you. Then examine the nature and extent of the evidence used to support this argument. The reader of your essay, who is also the marker, will subject your essay to this sort of scrutiny.

Consider the appropriateness of your sources. Are the sources suitable to the academic context for which you are writing? How useful is the source for your essay question? Evaluating your source material for validity and appropriateness will also help you develop your argument. As you read, keep the following in mind:

- Who the author is. Is s/he well known and respected in the field? How has her/his experience and/or outlook shaped her/his particular view?
- Who the publisher is. Is it a well known and well regarded publisher? Academic journal articles and books published by academic presses (e.g. Cambridge University Press) need to meet certain standards before publication and are scrutinised closely by other experts in the field. Self-published books (e.g. published by Mr. Joe Bloggs) do not usually adhere to these guidelines.
- The author's audience. Is the text aimed at an academic audience, or the general public? The former is usually more appropriate than the latter.
- The author's purpose in writing the book or article. What is the author's main point? What are her/his secondary points?
- The evidence s/he provides to support their main points. Is the evidence provided sufficient and reliable?
- Opposing points of view and arguments. Are these taken into consideration?
- When the book or article was written. Does this provide you with further insight into the author's purpose?
- The accuracy of all the information presented. Can you check the information presented by the author? Is there an extensive bibliography which will allow you to check the primary and secondary sources used? Are there footnotes or endnotes?
- The use of value-laden keywords. Just as you looked for them and how they were used when you interpreted your essay question, check to see if the author of your source uses them as well. Are they used to reinforce the author's main point?
HINT: The first indication of a value-laden keyword is its use in the title of the source.

This might be a good moment to discuss 'bias'. All authors and readers (indeed, all human beings) are 'biased'. As an historian, although you recognise 'bias' you should not become obsessed with it. Instead, you should be asking the questions framed above. This is what is expected of students studying History at university. There should be little, if any, discussion of bias in your essay. Try to think, instead, in terms of the benefits as well as the drawbacks of an individual perspective. If a secondary source is hopelessly biased, however, then you should not use it.

Of course, the main question you should always ask of your source material is:

How does this material relate to my essay question?

The essay questions set for most units of study in the Department of History require you to critically assess the usefulness of your reading materials and analyse the interpretations of other historians. You draw upon others' evidence in order to develop and present your argument. In doing so, you must consider the relationship between your essay question and your source material.

A Word of Caution about Internet Sources

The Department of History recommends that you treat internet sources cautiously, as often the material available on the internet cannot be verified as proper scholarly material. With online sources, as for printed sources, you need to verify how the information has been made available. For example, scholarly journal articles are 'peer-reviewed', i.e. rigorously vetted by other experts. (Hint: most scholarly journals mention this peer review process on the first page/s or inside front cover of each issue.) An article in the *Journal of American History* is a scholarly source for that reason; and whether you encounter it in hard copy in the library, or online via J-STOR makes no difference to its scholarly status. The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia is quite another matter. Anyone can contribute to it, and the content is not reviewed by experts. Thus, a Wikipedia entry is not a scholarly source (and thus not an acceptable source for a university essay) because it has not been subjected to rigorous expert assessment before being made available online.

Scholarly internet sources include primary source material that has been placed on the web by a recognised academic, government or other institution (such as the Internet Modern History Source Book, which is hosted by Fordham University in the USA) as well as scholarly on-line journals, databases of academic journal articles (e.g. J-STOR), online collections of primary sources (e.g. ECCO) and, of course, internet sources recommended by your unit of study co-ordinator. Remember that when you do cite an internet source, you must provide sufficient details so that your reader can find the source easily. If you are not able to find this information, this is probably a fair indication that it is not a scholarly source and you should not use it.

Taking Notes

Begin by writing down the bibliographic details of the source at the top of the page. As you take notes, it is important that you put, in the margin of your notes, the page number where you found your information. This will save you a lot of time and hassle later. Where you find an argument that agrees or disagrees with another author's, make a note of this.

There are three main kinds of notes that you will need to take:

1. A brief outline of the author's main argument, secondary arguments and the evidence used to support these. Include the author's response to criticism or evaluation of his/her work. Try and condense these into your own words rather than copying out long passages – this will help you absorb and understand the material. Make sure you note on which pages you found this information. Even paraphrased material (i.e. material you have rewritten in your own words) must be cited in a footnote.
2. Specific pieces of information which are directly relevant to your topic. These could be in the form of direct quotations from primary or secondary sources.
3. Your own questions, criticisms and reflections.

Note taking is an essential part of the process of writing academic essays. A well-organised set of notes will give you a good start to planning and writing your essay. As you make your own notes, you should begin to think actively about your source material and its relation to your essay question. Photocopying, highlighting and marking pages without annotating will not serve the same purpose and will prove less useful when it comes time to start writing.

WRITING YOUR ESSAY

Analytical Writing

All history essays are analytical (why something happened), rather than merely descriptive (what happened). Although you might use description when presenting evidence, the key to a history essay is analysis – you discuss ‘why’ something happened, although you might also discuss the ‘how, what, where, when’ aspects to explain the ‘why’.

The process of analysis requires you to:

- a) Break down a topic/concept/group of facts into categories,
- b) Look at the relationship between each category,
- c) Examine how each category contributes to the big picture and thus,
- d) Draw conclusions about their significance.

Descriptive writing is not acceptable because it does not present **your** own argument and position clearly. In a sense, you are simply **describing** what other people have said without really presenting any evidence to your reader that you have actually absorbed and **interpreted** the ideas in the sources and thought about how these might be relevant to your own argument. Unless **you** make the information relevant, it is merely extraneous. Unless you tell the reader **why** historian A's conclusions are relevant to your discussion, the reader will not know. When you use evidence in your essay, you are using it to support **your** argument; i.e. **your** position.

When you refer to a source, particularly a secondary source, it is best to begin your sentence by focusing on the ideas in the source that are important to your argument rather than simply summarising the author's arguments. By using evidence from several sources, you demonstrate that you have considered the relationships **between the ideas in their sources** as well as **the relationship between the sources and the essay question**. To write analytically, consider these questions as you write:

- What is my main argument?
- What is the argument I am attempting to make in this paragraph?
- What is the relationship between the two? Are they different? The same? Is one an extension of the other?
- What evidence do I provide to substantiate my claim in this paragraph?
- What do these pieces of information tell me?
- What is the relationship between these pieces of information?
- How do these pieces of information relate to my main argument?

Developing Your Argument

In the previous section, we considered choosing and evaluating sources as well as note-taking, all of which are important parts of the process of academic writing. Reading sources critically and making a good set of notes will help you absorb the source material. It will also help you to determine the position you are going to take.

You do not need to complete all of your reading before you begin planning and writing your essay. As you cement and refine your ideas, you will most likely find that you need to do some further reading to clarify or expand a point.

In developing (and defending) each stage of your argument to its conclusion, you will need to do the following:

- Demonstrate your interpretation of the appropriate evidence, by critically evaluating the work of other scholars writing in similar areas;
- Provide evidence, through the use of case studies, examples and explanation.

Do not be afraid to challenge another historian's interpretation. One of the areas your essay will be assessed on is your critical engagement with the sources. Essays which make intelligent and relevant criticisms of an historian's interpretation will impress the marker. This does not mean that petty or wild accusations against another historian are appropriate in your essay. Keep a calm, objective outlook. Whether you agree or disagree with an historian about a major issue, make your case, back it up with evidence, explain why it is significant and then move on to your next point. Your goal is always to answer the set question.

Essay Plans and Drafts

The best way to begin writing your essay is to make an essay plan. Jot down your intended central argument and what evidence you are going to present to support it. An essay plan will help clarify your ideas before you begin writing your first draft. In this way, a good essay plan will also allow you to plan the stages of your argument and thus provide a basic structure for your essay.

When you begin to write, you might find that your argument or your focus changes or develops along different lines than you initially intended. This is perfectly normal – few writers are ever sure of their final conclusions when they begin writing. Ideally, you should write several drafts of your essay before you finalise and submit it for marking. Each draft has a particular purpose.

The first draft:

- The purpose of this draft is to sort through your ideas and arguments, identify any gaps in your argument or changes of focus that might develop.
- Write this draft quickly without worrying too much about style, spelling and formatting.
- Write this draft to the end, rather than focusing intensively on one section.

The second draft:

- The purpose of this draft is to convey clearly your argument and ideas (identified in your first draft) to your reader.
- As you write this draft, keep these in mind:
 - Have you made good use of your sources?
 - Have you provided sufficient evidence?
 - Is your material in logical order?
 - Will the reader be able to follow your argument easily? Does your argument flow?

- Are your introduction and conclusion clear? Do the paragraphs progress the argument to its conclusion?

The third draft:

- The purpose of this draft is to edit for details of presentation. Check:
 - Spelling.
 - Grammar.
 - Sentence style and flow.
 - Formatting the main text of your essay (margins, font size, indentations etc) and of your references (footnotes and bibliography).
 - Word count (as set by the unit of study co-ordinator).

Supporting your Argument – Quotations, Paraphrasing and Summarising

A common criticism made by essay markers is 'Don't use quotations in place of your own words!' Many students use quotations in their essay without providing any sort of context. Keep in mind that quotations are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. In other words, they provide evidence to substantiate your claims but should not stand alone in your essay.

Generally, quotations should be kept to a minimum. If you must quote from a **secondary source**, then try and keep it very succinct. Lengthier (but not overly long) quotations from **primary source material** are more acceptable. Quotations should be provided in your text if they shed light on a particular problem you are trying to solve or if they help establish a case for the point you are trying to make. You also use quotations if you want to show **exactly** how an author made his/her point, in order to criticise, defend or develop it.

Paraphrasing is rewriting an author's ideas in your own words. **Summarising** is a condensed version of the original author's main ideas. Even though you might use your own words in a paraphrase or summary, you must footnote the source of your ideas and/or information.

If you use a statement which refers to a body of literature, e.g. 'some historians have suggested' or 'it has been argued', you will need to provide a corresponding footnote with the relevant details of which scholars you are referring to.

Formatting Quotations

When you use quotations, the Department of History requires that you follow a particular format.

Quotation in the main text (three lines long or less)

Most quotations should be three lines long or less. Quotations that are three lines long or less should remain in the main text and should appear as follows:

As the quotation is less than three lines long, it remains in the main text and is introduced by a comma.

Melissa Harper argues, 'The bush has often been identified as a natural playground for Australian boys, particularly in the context of the development of a 'national type'.'³

The quotation has single quotation marks placed around it.

The footnote number is at the end of the quotation, after the punctuation.

Indented Quotation (more than three lines long)

If your quotation is longer than three lines, the format is slightly different. The format for a quotation that is longer than three lines long appears below:

The long quotation is separated from the main text.

The Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi, however, presents quite a different perspective of the perpetrators:

Long quotations are introduced with a colon ':':

The text of the long quotation is indented further from the margin. Do **not** use single quotations marks around indented quotations.

The last houses in Florence burned by these Ghibellines and the mob because of the doings of messer Benedetto degli Alberti, who was an evil man, and the help of Tommaso di Marco degli Strozzi, who was rash and had little wisdom and others who followed them in creating a disturbance, were the houses of ser Piero di ser Grifo di ser Bruno, who was the notary of the riformagioni of the people and commune of Florence.⁴

The font size remains the same as the main text.

Place the footnote number at the end of the quotation, after the punctuation.

The text is single-spaced.

Avoid lengthy quotations in an attempt to reach the word limit. This will not impress the essay marker, who wants to see your own ideas and arguments.

STRUCTURING YOUR ESSAY

A well-structured essay shows the reader, clearly, logically and step-by-step, **how** you have reached your final conclusion. It does not matter how many thought-provoking ideas and good arguments you have if you present them in an essay that is poorly structured. Arguments have no impact unless they are systematically set out. Think of the structure of your essay as a framework that you have to fill in with the building blocks of your argument. Like a building, a good essay needs to have a solid foundation and an intelligent layout. Every essay you prepare for a History unit of study must have an introduction, a main body and a conclusion.

The Introduction

Even the shortest essay must have an introduction. The purpose of an introduction is to tell the reader what your **essay is going to be about** and **why it is worth reading**. Remember, the introduction will be the first thing that the reader will see and it should give her/him a good idea of what the essay is about. As you write your introduction, you must include the following three components:

- **An orientation to the topic:** To provide the reader with the general background to or the context of the essay topic.
- **Thesis statement:** State the position that will be argued or the proposition that will be debated.
- **Aim/Purpose statement:** To state the purpose of the essay; this statement ties the aim/purpose of the essay to the essay question.

You may also provide the following:

- **Overview:** To preview the stages through which the essay will develop.

Depending on the wording of your essay question, your introduction may be required to provide the either or both of the following components:

- **Acknowledgement of a quote:** If there is a direct quote contained in the essay question, then you must acknowledge to your reader that the quote is the starting point for your essay.
- **Statement of scope:** If your essay question provides you with a choice of areas to cover, you must let the reader know which area(s) you have chosen. Also, if your essay question is one which is wide-ranging, then you might choose to focus on particular areas, and you must let the reader know what these limits are. Finally, if you need to define any important key words/concept/events/methods in relation to the essay question, you should do so in the introduction.

It is possible that you will write your introduction after you have finished writing the rest of your essay. This is because you may only know what your final thesis is, and how you reached it, once you have finished writing. This is fine, but it is still important to think about your introduction all the way through the preparation of your

essay. If you do write your introduction first, it is advisable to go back and refine it after you have completed the rest of the essay. Repeat the words of your essay question in your introduction - it's very easy to go off on a tangent. It also helps remind your reader of the question you are answering.

Consider the following sample introduction:

Essay question:

How useful is Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* for an historical understanding of the problems caused by urbanisation in nineteenth-century Europe?

An orientation to the topic which provide the reader with the general background to the topic.

Aim/purpose statement which states the aim of the essay and links it to the essay question.

In order to gain an historical understanding of Europe in the nineteenth century, it is essential that we understand the impact of urbanisation. Urbanisation changed the landscape of nineteenth-century Europe. While urbanisation brought many people new work opportunities), it also brought significant problems. Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times* provides a useful source of information about the problems caused by urbanisation. The novel demonstrates that the most significant and negative outcome of urbanisation is the doctrine of self-interest. This essay will examine this doctrine with particular reference to the themes of exploitation and imprisonment(both literal and symbolic) of the working-class inhabitants of 'Coketown', a fictional British industrial centre. In doing so, this essay will consider the extent to which the novel was intended to provide an accurate representation of contemporary events. The novel describes social conditions in Britain in the 1850s, which cannot be representative of the rest of Europe. Therefore, *Hard Times*' usefulness is limited to providing an historical understanding of the problems caused by urbanisation in nineteenth-century Britain, rather than in Europe as a whole.

Thesis statement(s) which states the position which will be argued.

Statement of scope where you state the limits to your essay.

The Main Body

The main body is the heart of your essay. Here, you show the reader, step-by-step, **how** you have come to your conclusions. It is here that you will provide evidence that supports your thesis. Providing such evidence is not sufficient on its own, however. You must make sure that you relate this evidence to your main argument, otherwise it is merely extraneous information. You must critically assess its suitability as well. You may also find evidence that directly contradicts your thesis. As a scholar presenting as well-rounded an argument as possible, you must consider these criticisms and contradictions to your own point of view and, once again, you must critically assess and respond to these points in your essay. Presenting a nuanced argument shows that you understand that history is complicated. This makes your essay more persuasive to the reader. Always keep in mind the overall point or argument that you are trying to make. **Each paragraph you write should remind the reader of the purpose of your essay.**

As your essay has a structure, so too does each paragraph. Paragraphs that are well structured contribute to the overall effectiveness of the essay. A good rule to follow is 'one idea per paragraph'. In this way, you don't end up with too many ideas and too much information in a paragraph which could leave your essay veering into descriptive, rather than analytical, territory. To create a well-structured essay, each paragraph should have a clear link to the next. Think of each paragraph as having the same structure as the essay. There is always a topic sentence to **introduce** what you will be discussing in the paragraph, and often a **concluding sentence** that sums up what you have said and also links the paragraph to the next. Sometimes concluding sentences will also indicate what will be discussed in the next paragraph. The topic sentence and concluding sentence frame the **main discussion**.

Consider the following sample paragraph:

Essay question:

How useful is Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* for an historical understanding of the problems caused by urbanisation in nineteenth-century Europe?

This sentence introduces the particular topic being examined in the paragraph.

An exploration of *Hard Times*'s circulation history reveals that it would have been read by a large, mainly middle-class audience. Originally published in a weekly magazine, the novel reached a much bigger audience than if it had been published as a single entity.¹ Single books tended to be read mainly by members of the leisured classes.² Weekly magazines, by contrast, were read alongside news articles by the middle class and were regarded as a form of journalism rather than as mere entertainment.³ Dickens's position as editor of *Household Words* would have ensured that *Hard Times* was considered as a form of editorial commentary.⁴ Thus, *Hard Times* was read by many middle-class Britons as a penetrating critique of contemporary society.

This sentence substantiates the claim made at the beginning of the paragraph.

These sentences elaborate on the topic introduced at the beginning of the paragraph.

This last sentence provides the reader with the writer's conclusion. Sometimes concluding sentences also indicate what will be discussed in the next paragraph. In this case, the next paragraph might discuss some of these criticisms, relating them to the writer's examination of the themes of self-interest, exploitation and imprisonment and her/his overall discussion of the usefulness of *Hard Times* as an historical source. A question that might be posed in the following paragraph is 'why was the middle class an ideal audience for Dickens' novel?'

By presenting a detailed and thoughtful argument (rather than relying on broad generalisations), you will produce a more persuasive essay. An essay must possess a well-substantiated argument that persuades the reader. Remember, an essay is an **argument**, not simply a story.

¹ Joseph Butwin, 'Hard Times: the Novel and the News', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 32, no. 2 (September 1977), p. 170.

² Angela Carter, *Nineteenth-Century News* (Bradford: Burnham Brown Press, 1999), pp.109-10.

³ Butwin, 'Hard Times: the Novel and the News', p. 168.

⁴ Carter, *Nineteenth-Century News*, p. 134.

The Conclusion

The conclusion is where you remind your reader what your essay **has been about**. As the introduction is the first thing that your reader will see, so the conclusion will be the last. By this stage, your reader will have had the chance to consider your arguments in light of the evidence you have used. The conclusion provides the last opportunity to make your argument convincingly.

N.B. Your conclusion is not your introduction re-arranged! Your reader, who is also your marker, will recognise right away if you do this.

As with the introduction, there are two components that must be included in your conclusion:

- **Summary/overview of your main argument:** Summarise and/or comment on the arguments and evidence you have presented, particularly in relation to the position you stated in your introduction.
- **Restate your thesis:** Confirm the position you stated in your introduction.

Your conclusion might also contain two other components:

- **Qualify your thesis:** Qualify your thesis/position in light of any evidence that does not support your thesis, or if there are any limits built in to your response.
- **Rounding off statement:** Round off your discussion with a closing statement. You might also close with an idea that points the way for future research.

Consider the following sample conclusion:

Essay question:

How useful is Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* for an historical understanding of the problems caused by urbanisation in nineteenth-century Europe?

Outline of the argument(s) presented in the essay.

Hard Times' portrayal of life in the fictional mining town of Coketown provides a stinging critique of the consequences of one of the most important developments in nineteenth-century Europe, namely urbanisation. For Coketown's working-class inhabitants, their exploitation by their masters is suffocating; a prison from which there is little opportunity to escape from the social conditions created by a doctrine of self-interest. *Hard Times* explores the consequences of the 1834 Poor Law and the policy of profit above all else. Our examination of these concerns demonstrates *Hard Times*' usefulness for a historical understanding to the period. The novel does have its limitations, however. Other European nations urbanised more slowly and gradually than Britain. So *Hard Times*' description of urbanisation in Coketown (i.e. Britain) tells us little about urbanisation in, say, Russia during this period. Therefore, *Hard Times* is most useful for providing a historical understanding of the problems caused by urbanisation in nineteenth-century Britain, rather than in Europe as a whole. Despite this limitation, *Hard Times*' demonstrates a literary source's value for historical study. It challenges historians to broaden our definition of what constitutes a 'historical' source. As Charles Dickens would have certainly agreed, *Hard Times* is both a literary and an historical source.

Restatement of the main thesis of the essay.

Qualification of the thesis presented, including a discussion of its limitations.

Concluding statement which ties everything together and takes the essay in a thought-provoking direction.

SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY

For information on preparing footnotes and the bibliography, please see the Department of History Essay Presentation Guide, <<http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/history/docs/historyreferencingguide.pdf>>.

Listed below is a sample bibliography for you to use as a guide. All the **secondary sources** listed are by staff and students of the Department of History at the University of Sydney. HINT: Use this bibliography to find out more about current research projects within the Department of History.

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