**Tips for Writing Assignments in History 140 On-Line**

There are a few helpful tips that students should consider before writing their papers in this class. Put together, these will make the process of producing the weekly response papers simpler. Remember that it is always possible to contact either the professor or the teaching assistant if you have any questions.

1. Watch all of the videos assigned for each unit, as well as the video introduction to the readings.

2. Read all parts of the assigned readings for the unit, then review the previous readings.

3. Consider the question carefully with a goal to understanding what it is asking. All of the questions for this course have one major theme, and your first goal should be to identify that theme.

4. Think about the different readings for the unit. How do they relate to that theme? What different topics emerge when you think about the broad theme in the question as it concerns the readings?

5. Make a list of the topics that come to mind and find relevant passages in the source texts which speak directly to those topics. Record the page numbers and precise citations that you will use for evidence.

6. Consider how you will approach answering the question in your paper. Your most general thoughts will comprise your introduction.

7. Begin by writing the three or four body paragraphs of your paper. State the topic first (in a topic sentence), then give some context or explanation about that topic and how it relates to the specific source you will cite. At the end of the paragraph, cite the evidence from the sources that directly supports the assertion that you made in your topic sentence.

8. After writing your body paragraphs, conclude by briefly summing up your topics and by moving your analysis slightly deeper. Your conclusion will necessarily be short, and perhaps suggestive of the broader themes that came to mind as you reflected on the question.

9. Go back to the beginning to write your introductory paragraph. Start by announcing the general theme of the paper, but keep your statement focused on what the question seeks. Gradually move from generalization to specific topics, listing the topics that you have stated in your body paragraph topic sentences towards the end of your introductory paragraph to serve as a guide to the reader.

10. Proofread your work. Use a spell-check first, then re-read your work to make sure each word makes sense and is spelled correctly. Be sure that there are no grammatical errors and that your words say what you mean.

**Sample Essay**

**Question:**

Our course in World History considers several forms of historical writing. Memory is indeed one of the central characteristics of human thought, but it is often a weak tool. Consider the sources that we have read which deal with history—that is, times prior to the moment in which the texts were produced. What can we learn about history and memory by reading these ancient historians? What do their sources reveal about the function of historical writing? Compare the writings of three different ancient authors in which you detect a historical consciousness.

**Answer:**

Some of the oldest documents that have survived to the present record events from times far further in the past. These sources reveal that humans have long endeavored to write down their memories so as to preserve some knowledge of the past for future generations. The purpose of such efforts has been to legitimate those who produce history, to commemorate virtue, and to instruct readers. These three functions are clearly shown in the earliest historical documents, examples of which will be given here.

One of the basic functions of history is to account for the present state of affairs. Rulers, therefore, were keen to produce records that showed their legitimate place within a line of succession. Even more important for those rulers would be to demonstrate that their inheritance of power came, whether immediately or at some remove, from a supernatural source. The epic of Gilgamesh provides a good example of this type of history writing. When describing Gilgamesh’s trip to the netherworld, the author claims that he identified inside a “house of dust” former rulers of times past, as well as those whose tales were legendary. He clearly see himself as part of this company when he mentions “all those who once wore crowns and ruled the world in days of old … and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to Heaven in the days of old.” (10)

Another reason for writing history, according to our sources, is to preserve the names of those who practiced virtue. One of the texts that we have read speaks directly to this desire. With regard to the civilization of Ancient Egypt, the text known as the “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” discusses how the regular order of the universe, ma’at, was ensured by the virtuous and those individuals deserve to be remembered by future generations. “For ma’at will endure until eternity / And go down to the grave with him who performs it”, this source insists, continuing to state that, “He will be buried, and the earth will enfold him / But his name will never vanish upon the earth, / For he will be remembered because of his goodness.” (22)

Of course, the remembrance of things past also served as a warning for proper behavior in the present. In other words, history can also serve to instruct the living about the problems caused by incorrect actions in the past. It can teach by remembering the deeds of the good just as well as by recalling the flaws of the bad. The Book of Documents, written during the Shang Dynasty in China, gives many good examples of this when it discusses the “Mandate of Heaven”. This concept relates to the approval of the supernatural forces of a given ruler. The lessons that one learns from history, according to this source, are that a ruler must behave correctly in order to enjoy the Mandate of Heaven. Such behavior has to include proper reverence for the past, such as when Yi Yin “sacrificed to the former king, and presented the heir-king reverently before the shrine of his grandfather.” But Yi Yin was not content perform this pious gesture, he also instructed his heir on the importance of knowing the past: “He said, “Oh, of old the former kings of Xia cultivated earnestly their virtue, and then there were no calamities from Heaven. … But their descendants did not follow their example, and Heaven sent down great calamities.” (33/34)

These three examples show that history served to legitimize, explain, and caution the present by using the past. The past was thus present in the minds of our most distant ancestors, serving many of the same functions for them that it does for us.

# **Paper Writing Tips**

Here are a list of suggestions for things to include and things to avoid when writing your assignments. Please read this document carefully, even if every suggestion does not apply to you.

1.      When writing your assignments, please keep in mind that all assignments start out with an initial grade of 0, not 100. In other words, as your assignments are read, the instructor assigns points for clear, well-supported arguments, good use of evidence, well-structured paragraphs, etc. You do not start out at 100 and lose points whenever you do something the instructor does not like. Because of this, it is imperative that you use your two pages wisely. If you are leaving a large part of your second page unused, you’re missing that many more opportunities to impress upon the reader how well you’ve understood and how much you’ve thought about the material. By the same token, if you are writing more than two pages, you are giving yourself an unfair advantage over your classmates. In the future, any material extending onto a third page on a two page assignment will not be read, in the interests of ensuring that students who follow the length requirements are not disadvantaged.

2.       The most important element in a successful assignment is a clear and well-supported argument. An argument is any contention with which a reasonable reader might disagree. For example, “Babylonian civilization thrived in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers” is a statement. An argument would be a claim, such as: “While Babylonian legal codes purported to defend justice for all, their unequal treatment of members of different classes reinforced social divisions.” Because the second example is an argument, you would need to provide evidence from Hammurabi’s Code or another primary sources to support your claim. For example, you could cite or quote the passage which requires different penalties for striking a peasant versus a noble.

Because your goal in these assignments is to craft a well-supported argument, summarizing background information that is not relevant to proving your arguments is a poor use of your limited space. In particular, avoid using Profs. Andrea and Overfield’s introductions to the documents in *The Human Record*. If you are repeating the editors’ arguments and not making your own, it is difficult to write a successful assignment. After all, you are being graded, not Profs. Andrea and Overfield. The more we see of your own arguments, supported by primary source evidence, the more credit we can give you. Finally, when citing evidence from the primary sources, please simply use page numbers rather than the name of the editors or the title of the textbook.

3.       Thesis statements and topic sentences are very important to successful assignments. A clear thesis statement in your introduction serves to give the reader an idea of your overarching argument and how it connects to the prompt you’ve selected. You will be assessed according to how persuasively you prove your thesis in the rest of the assignment. Therefore, if you have a vague or poorly-defined thesis, it will be difficult for you to prove it with evidence and thus harder for your assignment to be successful. What a thesis statement does for your assignment as a whole, a topic sentence does for each individual paragraph. Make sure you have a topic sentence in each paragraph stating an argument connected to your overall thesis that you will attempt to prove in the rest of the paragraph. So, in a body paragraph, you’re citing evidence that supports the argument you make in your topic sentence, which in turn supports your thesis. Therefore, your entire assignment is coherent and connected. With that in mind, if you’re writing about something that doesn’t help prove your thesis, it’s something you can and should omit in favor of something directly connected to your thesis.

4.       Avoid comparisons to today’s world. One of the goals of this class is to understand the past on its own terms; that is, trying not to interpret past events solely in terms of modern values and concepts. Particularly when addressing a prompt like the first one for assignment 1, comparison to today’s world muddles your analysis by introducing an object of analysis (the present day) outside the scope of the assignment.

5.       Never cite clichés (for example: the ends justify the means) as part of your analysis.

6.       And finally, be sure you are proofreading your assignments after you’ve finished writing. Our purpose here is not to test you on your knowledge of English grammar and occasional mistakes are understandable. However, if you have very many grammar and spelling mistakes to the point that it is difficult to follow what you are saying, you may be marked down. If your work contains many mistakes, it is usually a sign that you did not devote sufficient time or attention to the assignment. Proofread your assignments multiple times and read your assignment out loud to catch awkward sentences. If a sentence is hard to say out loud, it’s usually hard to follow on the page. When in doubt, try to express yourself in as clear and simple language as possible. It is far better to write simply and to be understood than to use overcomplicated language or grammatical constructions that read awkwardly and make it difficult for your reader to follow your arguments.

# **Further Writing Tips**

From the experience of a former Teaching Assistant, Mr. Brian Van Wyck:

The first thing I’d like to talk about is comparisons. Many of the questions you’ll be answering this semester will ask you to make comparisons and there are a few important things to keep in mind when writing a comparative assignment. First, just because an assignment is comparative doesn’t mean you don’t need an argument. Simply stating that three things are different is not sufficient in these assignments. For example, Greek beliefs were obviously different from Israelite Judaism, which in turn was obviously different from Vedic Brahmanism. This is true by definition, because if they weren’t different, they’d all be the same religion. Your job is to explain to the reader why these differences matter. Why did these differences arise? What effects did they have on adherents of these systems of belief? Answer these questions with a well-supported argument and you’re on your way to a good comparative assignment.

Secondly, think about the structure of your comparison and make sure you’re comparing like to like. That is, if you’re comparing Judaism to Hinduism, there are any number of potential things you could compare: style of ritual dress, artistic representations of deities, number of gods, etc. etc. Select only a few things to compare. For example, you might have compared Greek to Vedic Brahman sacrifices and discussed how the two reveal different ideas about the hierarchical ordering of the world.

Finally, consider arranging your comparisons thematically. If you’re comparing three aspects of three different belief systems’ rituals, rather than having a paragraph on each religion, have a paragraph on each aspect you’re comparing, with evidence drawn from multiple religions. This accomplishes two things. Firstly, it builds the comparison into the structure of your assignment, thus ensuring you don’t relegate the comparison (one of the main points of the assignment) to a final paragraph. Secondly, it helps you avoid the temptation to spend time on unnecessary introductory information, e.g. “Vedic culture was found in what is now modern-day India.”

Also, a common comment I’ve made on many assignments has to do with summary versus analysis. This guide [here](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/summary-using-it-wisely/) does a better job explaining the distinction between the two than I can and has concrete suggestions for how to tell if you’re summarizing too much. If that’s a comment I’ve given you on one of your assignments, I strongly urge you to take a look at the guide before writing your next assignment.