



Working with Sources and Writing About History

This handout offers students an introduction to how academic writers in a particular discipline work with the texts of other writers. We suggest that students new to writing in this academic field carefully review this introduction and discuss any questions it prompts with your instructor or with a writing specialist in the Hixon Writing Center.

Introduction

Much of history is written by looking at texts and objects created in the past and trying to understand what they mean, the conditions that led to their production, and the effects that they may have had in their world. Over time, historians will produce diverse interpretations, and new historians will have to understand and negotiate these competing interpretations of history.

Types of Sources

Like their colleagues in literature, historians use the terms “primary” and “secondary” to categorize types of sources. For historians, unlike scholars in literature, primary sources may not always be texts in the stricter sense of that term. Primary sources include all records created during the historical period the historian wishes to understand, and they may be written, oral, physical, or visual. Most obviously, primary texts like letters, diaries, books and manuscripts, newspapers, legal documents, and governmental records are examined by historians. Photographs, drawings, and other images may also be seen as primary texts. Objects, like a dress, a building, or a farming tool can also be important primary sources for historians. In general, the most common primary sources in history are written ones, and this is especially true for student writers, who will rarely have the chance to travel to museums, archives, or other locations to examine objects.

Secondary texts are those created by historians, and they attempt to present and explain something about the past. Secondary texts will often refer in depth to other secondary texts written about the same period, in some cases agreeing with them and extending their work, and in other cases pointing out their limits and correcting mistakes.

The line between primary and secondary texts may be blurred in cases of a work of history created in the past. One example would be a history of classical Greece written in Italy during the Renaissance. In such cases, the nature of the historian’s project would determine whether it functioned as a primary or secondary text.

There are also many “tertiary,” or reference, texts in history which offer novices an introduction to the consensus about a historical period. A novice historian must recognize that some tertiary texts may present issues as settled fact that in reality are active areas of debate among historians. A librarian can help you locate reference texts, and your professor can help you determine if and when they should be used and what limits they have.

Bringing other texts into your writing

Historians write in a variety of modes, including narration, description, and interpretation. Each of these modes will incorporate texts in different ways for different ends.

Narration relays what happened in the past, presenting a series of events to tell a story. It will most often rely heavily on presenting findings from research on primary sources. The nature (type, provenance) of these sources may be focused upon explicitly in the text itself or referred to implicitly via citation, depending upon the goals of the writer. For example, imagine that a fire that

burned down a movie theater in Atlanta in 1955, killing several people. A historian's account may narrativize the event, and the only way a reader knows *how* the historian knows about the event is by following her citations, which point to various newspaper articles written about the fire. In another case, the historian writing about the fire may have some interest in the discrepancies about how the fire was discussed in various newspapers at the time. We can imagine, for example, that fire was thought to be set by someone protesting the fact that African-Americans had to sit upstairs at the theater, while white patrons sat downstairs. The event was covered differently by different newspapers. In that case, the nature of the sources—their audiences and biases—will become central to the content of the writing rather than being sidelined to the citations.

In terms of how sources are used, description will be similar to narration, except that it stops the progress of time to focus on a particular person, place, thing or idea.

A historian is always doing interpretive work when writing narration and description, making choices about how much detail to give the reader and how to deal with gaps in evidence or contradicting accounts. But a new kind of interpretation enters the writing when the historian attempts to determine not just what happened, but also why it happened. In this work, a historian will usually discuss secondary texts, examining how other experts on the period have explained a particular occurrence. Writers who wish to offer a new interpretation will typically explain explicitly and at length how their interpretations align with and depart from those offered by previous writers on the topic. Writers will also offer evidence from primary sources to persuade the reader that their interpretation is credible.

Citation practices

Historians generally favor citation systems that rely on footnotes or endnotes, such as Chicago style. Using a footnote or endnote-based style allows for narrative prose that relies on many sources to read cleanly, while still giving the reader easy access to the sources of that information. There are two types of Chicago style: Notes-Bibliography (NB) and Author-Date (AD). The former is likely to be used by historians. Chicago style (NB) uses footnotes or endnotes for in-text citation, and the full citation for each work appears in the note. (The citation appears in full the first time it is referenced, but repeated citations of the same work can use the term “*ibid.*” to indicate citation of the same work as above.) A complete, alphabetized bibliography follows at the end of the paper. A common variant of Chicago style adapted for student use is called Turabian. In some cases, students may be asked to utilize other styles.

Links to detailed information about style systems can be found on the Hixon Writing Center website: <http://writing.caltech.edu/students/handouts>

What to look for in examples

Students new to history should see historical writing as a rich tapestry of sources that is woven together by the historian. As a novice, you should closely examine how all those individual strands are brought together to make a coherent whole. Pay attention to how (and how often) authors cite the same source if it is being used frequently. Look for how and why the author of a source enters the text and is discussed. Note when citation exists to suggest that a historical claim should be accepted as based in fact. Notice that some passages focus on primary sources, others on secondary, and others on both. Try to determine what the relationship is between what a historian is saying and how he or she brings sources into their writing.