

Brief suggestions for Writing History

By Shannon King

Getting Started

Writing a historical essay, regardless of the length, requires you to ask a series of questions about the topic, known collectively as the research question, that helps focus, ground, and organize your paper. To refine and pare down your research question, you often have to read broadly about the topic in order to get a sense of what others have written. But even after you settle on a set of questions, through more research and writing, you might have to refine your questions again. Through the process of researching, writing, and refining your question, you will discover and develop your argument—the answer to the research question or better articulate the objectives of the essay.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians rely on primary sources, that is, contemporaneous artifacts, written and objects, of a given time and place to best reflect the period under investigation. Primary sources might include newspapers, oral histories, autobiographies, and memoir as well as photographs, music, and poetry among other kinds of cultural artifacts. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are usually texts produced from primary sources, such as books, essays and articles—that are not contemporaneous with the given period.

Historiography

When historians and other scholars speak of historiography they are referring to the scholarly writings on a particular historical period or topic over the course of time. More than a listing of recent scholarship, historiography revolves around historical debate as well as how new approaches or new sources help to ask different questions on old and new topics.

A historiographical essay or section on the civil rights movement might include works on Martin Luther King, Jr., such as David Garrow's *Bearing The Cross* (1986), on case studies, such as Hasan Jeffries's *Bloody Lowndes* (2009) or beauty politics, such as Tanisha Ford's *Liberated Threads* (2015). Historians, however, might also center regions. Consider a historiographical study on local civil

rights movements outside the South. Consider Matthew Countryman's *UpSouth: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (2006) or Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*.

A historiographical essay or section might be organized topically, geographically, and/or according to periodization. You want to begin with the oldest book and end with the most recent. So, if you used the five books mentioned above, you would begin with Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* and end with Ford's *Liberated Threads*. When writing on a particular book, you want to provide a basic summary of the book and its argument. Thereafter, you want to tailor the remainder of the writing on that book to the topical/categorical focus and assess the ways it transforms, challenges, and/or reinforces previous scholarship in that area. By doing so, you will highlight significant shifts in historical debates as well as conceptual approaches that bring about interesting ways of understanding new and old topics.

Narrative

The narrative, which might be organized chronologically or thematically or a combination of both, is basically the story you tell from beginning to end. To construct a historical narrative, you will use your primary sources, as well as a strategic use of secondary sources, to tell your story.

Are there personalities or characters that might be used as a thread to tell the story? Of course, the “character” may not necessarily be an individual but an ideology, such as Marxism or an historical phenomenon, such as gentrification.

Are there memoirs, autobiographies, or oral histories that might help you tell the story? Are there individuals and/or events that help you weave a story? How might these help you explain the significance of that particular period? Or, perhaps more significantly, offer an alternative interpretation of that period?

Remember, you are weaving a series of short stories to build the larger narrative of the essay or even an I.S. Also in addition to characters be attentive to plot, which speaks to causality as well as change and/or continuity over time.