

A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Good History Day Paper

by Martha Kohl

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I. Find an interesting and researchable topic that relates to the History Day theme.

Don't choose a topic that is:

- obscure
- vague/unfocused
- too well known
- too big
- historically insignificant (There should be a reason to care about it.)
- unresearchable (There is a shortage of appropriate source material, or it is all in a foreign language that you cannot read.)

Do choose a topic that is:

- clear
- focused
- interesting to your reading audience
- not over-researched
- narrow enough to cover in a ten-page paper
- interesting to you
- researchable (Your paper should include primary sources as well as secondary sources. Primary sources are sources that have not been interpreted by other historians, such as newspapers, diaries, letters and census information. Secondary sources are materials that were written with primary sources and contain some interpretation. They include books, magazine and journal articles, films, etc.)

II. Develop a strong thesis.

See the complete excerpt reproduced on the handout "Formulating the Thesis Statement."

III. Write a well constructed paper.

A good paper has:

- a clear structure
- no mistakes in grammar, spelling or punctuation

It is:

- jargon-free (does not use slang or overspecialized language)
- lucid (clear, intelligible)
- not filled with superfluous (unnecessary) detail
- compelling to the reader

STEP ONE. Organization is the key to a good paper. A well-organized and structured paper has an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Introduction: Your introduction is where you lay out your argument or thesis. The opening paragraph or paragraphs should present the question you are asking, the structure of your argument and your answer. It should be a map for the reader. The introduction is also where

you should explain the connection between your topic and the History Day theme.

Body: The rest of the paper should follow that map. Each paragraph should have a point that is well developed and that addresses the main issue or problem. Ask yourself whether the information that you are providing is really necessary to prove your point. Avoid including extraneous information. Just because something is interesting does not mean it belongs in your paper. Just because you have worked hard to gather information does not mean that it fits into your “map.” In the body of the paper, don’t just tell a story. Analyze and interpret the evidence you have gathered. This is the advantage of asking a “why” question. Answering “why” questions forces you to analyze and interpret your evidence to prove your point.

Conclusion: A conclusion sums up what the readers have learned. It makes them feel the paper has an end.

Hints on essay organization

- Stick to your focus. Make an outline. Breaking your paper down into major sections, paragraphs and, finally, topic sentences, can help you to clarify your thoughts.
- Many writers don’t really know what they are arguing until they finish a draft of their paper. A common trick is to modify the paragraph you wrote for the conclusion and to use it for the introduction. Then, of course, you will need to write a different conclusion and to reshape the body of your paper to work with your new introduction.

STEP TWO: Technical elements/style

- Margins, neatness, spelling, correct grammar, punctuation and syntax. This is the easy stuff. Leave yourself enough time to do it right.

- Punctuation, grammar and style. Try looking in your English composition book for specifics on capitalization, noun-verb agreement, and the other essential elements of clear writing.
- Clarity. Don’t assume that people know what you know. When you mention someone in the paper for the first time, include both the first and last name. Also, make sure you identify who that person is in the context of your paper. For example, instead of writing “Schoemehl recommended a tax increase” write “Vincent Schoemehl, mayor of St. Louis...”
- Transitions. A judicious use of transitional words and phrases like “therefore,” “however,” “thus,” “despite,” “because,” “instead,” “although,” “rather” and “nevertheless” carries the reader smoothly from one sentence or paragraph to the next. Refer to your English composition book for a discussion of transitions.
- Footnotes. It is crucial to document the sources for quotations and ideas that are not your own. Using other people’s ideas without giving proper credit is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is stealing someone else’s ideas (intellectual property), which is at least as serious an offense as stealing someone else’s material property (cars, stereos, etc.).
- Footnotes can also provide an opportunity to talk about information that is not directly related to your narrative and to discuss debates among historians.
- Footnote form. Follow the rules about what information should be included in footnotes and how footnotes should be formatted. See the History Day handouts and recommended style guides for an explanation of these rules.

Hints on getting technical matters right

- To decide what to footnote, look at models. What sort of information did the historians whose books you are reading footnote?
- Use a style guide. If you don't know, look it up. No one likes to look up the appropriate format for footnotes (or how to spell a word, etc.) It is boring. Besides, these matters seem like trivial details. After all, the ideas are what count, right? Well, yes and no. Here are four good reasons to proofread and to take the time to look up technical elements (spelling, footnote formats, tricky grammar and punctuation issues, etc.)

STEP THREE: Rewrite and Proofread

A good paper results from several drafts. Leaving yourself time to rework your material is extremely important. Why lessen the impact of your solid research by writing a hastily constructed paper? Too much procrastinating may lead to the ultimate nightmare scenario: several anxious, depressing, guilt-filled weeks culminate in an agonizing all-nighter during which you binge on donuts as you lean bleary-eyed over your typewriter. Your final product will reflect the effort that you put into it.

You should write at least three drafts:

- **Draft One:** Get your ideas on paper. Don't worry too much at this point about finding the right word or about spelling and punctuation. Just write.
 - Proof draft one for structure and organization. Do the ideas follow a clear outline? Does the introduction set up the argument? Does the body of the paper do what you said it would in your introduction? (Usually I have to rewrite my introduction after I finish the first draft of a paper). Is all of the detail included in the paper directly relevant to your

argument? Can a reader understand the point and follow the argument easily from paragraph to paragraph?

- **Draft Two:** Focus on organization. Fix all of the organizational problems uncovered by the critique of draft one. At this point, you will probably run into stylistic and grammatical problems that you will want to fix as well.
 - Proof draft two for style. Is the paper well written? Is the language clear? Have you used active verbs? Are there any grammatical problems or spelling errors? Did you vary sentence structure? Are there smooth transitions from one paragraph to the next?
- **Draft three:** Fine-tune your writing. Correct all of the stylistic problems and most of the technical problems uncovered in the critique of draft two.
 - Proof draft three to catch technical errors. Are all the technical elements correct? Are all words spelled correctly? Are all the footnotes complete and formatted correctly? Are the margins, etc., according to regulation?

Four good reasons to sweat the details

1. *Pride of craft*

The details make the difference between a good essay and a sloppy one.

2. *Courtesy to your readers*

Misspelled words, ungrammatical sentences, and footnotes that don't have all the information necessary to find a book aggravate a reader to no end. It is difficult and unpleasant to read something that is sloppily produced. Good spelling and neatness are common courtesies.

3. Looking things up is easy

Do this work when you want to procrastinate about doing the hard stuff (like rewriting your conclusion). You won't feel guilty about slacking off, and your mind will get a needed break from thinking great thoughts. Also, why get "points off" for problems that are easily fixable?

4. Future reference

If you look something up enough, you will eventually remember how to do it right.

Five tricks absolutely, positively guaranteed to make your paper ten times better than it would be otherwise

1. Leave yourself time to write more than one draft.
2. Have someone else read and comment on your second draft.
3. Proofread draft two or three aloud. Proofreading aloud really works. You hear awkward phrases that look okay to your eye. Further, reading aloud forces you to pay attention to every word, so

you can catch spelling and grammar mistakes that you would skim over if you were reading silently.

4. Go through and circle all of the forms of the verb to be (am, is, are, was, were, have been, being, etc.) Try to change them to more active verbs. (More than two linking verbs per page are too many.)
5. Remember, someone is going to read your paper. Do not write to win a contest, to impress someone, or simply to fulfill a teacher's assignment. Write to be read: to inform, entertain, delight or challenge your reader. Ask about every sentence: Will this help me communicate my point to the reader? (If the answer is no, leave the sentence out.)

Martha Kohl is associate editor of Gateway Heritage: Quarterly Magazine of the Missouri Historical Society. She has taught literacy and G.E.D. preparation to homeless adults and tutored high school and college students in English composition.

Making a History Day Poster

Teacher Instructions: Use the simple assignment below after students complete their research and a first draft of their project. It will help remind them of several important items that their research findings should demonstrate, items that are reflected on the final evaluation form and the judge's evaluation form. Some students may think of this activity as "busy work." Tell them that they will incorporate all the text from the poster into their research process paper (entry description), so this assignment is a way to get a head start on writing that piece.

History Day Poster

Make a mini-poster publicizing your History Day topic.

Each poster should contain the following:

1. Paragraph stating and explaining the **thesis**.
2. Paragraph explaining the topic's **significance** in history.
3. Paragraph describing your topic's **relation** to the theme.
4. A graphic image or motif that "sells" or explains your topic.

Each paragraph must be at least 5 sentences.

Each group member must use their handwriting on the mini-poster to demonstrate everyone's involvement.

Due: _____

History Day Poster Evaluation Rubric

Name(s):

Total Score: _____ / 40

	Misses Standard	Approaches Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
General Design Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Segmentation and orientation (three sections)- Symmetry and neatness- Use of white space- Names and title displayed	2	3	4	5
Design Skills: Motif or Image <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Appropriately enhances understanding or appreciation of topic- Clearly executed	2	3	4	5
Explanation of thesis	5	7	8	10
Relation to History Day theme	5	7	8	10
Significance in History	5	7	8	10

Preliminary Paper or Sentence Outline

Note to Teachers: *The instructions and assessment form were developed by high school teachers to guide their students through the process of picking a topic, doing research on it, developing a thesis, and drafting written support for that thesis. This assignment can be modified as you see fit. Some teachers, for example, prefer to have their students write an essay rather than a sentence outline. Whether outline or paper, a student who produces a solid product at this stage is prepared to create a final History Day paper, exhibit, documentary, performance, or website that will meet National History Day guidelines.*

ASSIGNMENT: As an individual, you will produce a three- to five-page sentence outline that demonstrates that you have:

- selected a significant topic related to this year's National History Day Contest theme
- become an expert on it through your research
- developed a thesis that shows your topic's significance in history
- supported that thesis with evidence drawn from primary sources
- explained the topics context in history with the use of appropriate secondary sources.

Your sentence outline serves as an important preliminary step in the process of preparing an effective presentation to the public.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS: Your sentence outline must follow the general rules of the National History Day Rule Book. For instance, your outline must make use of primary sources and the style for citations and bibliographic references must be consistent with one of the allowed citation styles (MLA Handbook or Turabian).

THEME: Be sure you can demonstrate that your topic is significant in history and is clearly related to this year's National History Day theme.

PROCEDURES: Martha Kohl in her article, "A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Good History Day Paper," offers good advice. You must follow each of the following steps to progress satisfactorily.

_____ 1. GET STARTED.

_____ a. Choose your topic.

_____ b. Do a thorough search of the historical resources available on related topics.

Create a **working bibliography** by listing each possible source on a separate 3 x 5 card (or as a correctly alphabetized entry in a word processed document that will become your **annotated bibliography**). Follow the appropriate format.

_____ c. Skim several sources. If a source seems to be helpful, complete a History Day Research Source Evaluation for it.

_____ d. Turn in two (2) completed History Day Research Source Evaluations.

_____ e. Use each History Day Research Source Evaluation to create an annotated bibliography card. In other words, add a paragraph (an "annotation") to your bibliography card to explain what it says on your topic and evaluate the author's credibility.

_____ f. Turn in the annotated bibliography cards (or annotated bibliography) for at least the five best sources you found. Label each card "primary" or "secondary" or divide your list into those two sections.

_____ g. Review STEP ONE of Ms. Kohl's article. Turn in your "Research Status Report."

_____ 2. BECOME AN EXPERT ON YOUR TOPIC.

_____ a. Actually read the best sources you have found.
_____ b. As you read, think of a question you want to answer.
_____ c. Begin to take notes on 4 x 6 cards or on computer to record the most important information that might help you answer your question -- especially from sources which you must return, to the library. Be sure to follow the standard method for showing the exact source of the information.

_____ 3. DEVELOP A STRONG THESIS.

_____ a. Review Ms. Kohl's six steps in developing a strong thesis (STEP TWO).
_____ b. Turn in your "Sample Thesis Statement Exercise."
_____ c. Turn in a statement that includes: your thesis statement (limit yourself to **one** sentence); and three main arguments or pieces of evidence that support your thesis

_____ 4. ORGANIZE YOUR SENTENCE OUTLINE.

_____ a. Turn in a topic (sometimes called a "phrase") outline. Place your thesis statement at the top of the first page.
_____ b. Turn in your History Day Mini-Poster.
_____ c. Turn in your **ten** most useful note cards. Be sure to follow the standard method for showing on the card the exact source of the information. CHECK: Note cards are **NOT the same as bibliography cards!!**

_____ 5. WRITE, REWRITE AND PROOFREAD THE SENTENCE OUTLINE.

_____ a. Convert your topic outline into a sentence outline. Place your thesis statement at the top of the first page.
_____ b. Review steps three and four of Ms. Kohl's article.
_____ c. Length of the sentence outline must be between 750 and 1250 words or three to five typewritten, single-spaced pages, using twelve point font and one inch margins.
_____ d. Documentation must conform to the rules in the MLA Handbook.
_____ e. Turn in the final draft of your Annotated Bibliography. List primary and secondary sources separately. Conference with reviewer.
_____ f. Turn in the final draft of your sentence outline. Conference with reviewer.

_____ 6. STAPLE TOGETHER AND TURN IN YOUR FINISHED PRODUCT: title page, sentence outline and Annotated Bibliography. Do not enclose it in a folder.

EVALUATION: Your sentence outline will be evaluated according to the criteria listed on the evaluation chart given you. Check with your teacher for the point value for each check and for the final product.