Guide for Students of History

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In this guide:

Why Study History?

The purpose of any good history course is to help students *understand the past*. University-level courses in history normally seek to foster that understanding by identifying prominent historiographical problems related to the principal themes identified in the course syllabus.

As we identify and discuss those problems, we typically consider the solutions or "interpretations" that historians have proposed to help solve them. Here, "historiography" means the published record of research by historians, so that a "historiographical problem" is one that has been thrown up by the historiography. It is a problem that has been recognized by historians as one worthy of investigation. What makes it "worthy" is something that the historian normally has to demonstrate at the outset of his or her published response to the problem in question. The solution that follows needs to be developed logically, and supported with relevant evidence. Of course, few historians would be audacious enough to claim that they have truly "solved" any given problem in the historiography; the best that most of us can claim is that we have contributed importantly to a better understanding of the particular aspect of the past in question.

The past in all its immensity is largely unknowable. Sometimes we know so little about some part of the past that even to frame a problem worth investigating can be daunting. In framing their problems, and in writing their interpretations, historians therefore rely on (1) the published interpretations of *other* scholars and (2) the written records of contemporaries who witnessed or participated in past events — the authors of what historians call "primary sources." Physical artefacts rather than text may also qualify as relevant primary sources in some cases.

But why bother to learn about the past? Because that is the only way that we can verify — and revise, if necessary — the truth about the memories we carry around about ourselves and about the wider world. Those memories determine how we identify ourselves and make sense of the world we share with others. That is why memories matter: they tell us who we are, as individuals and as communities of individuals. If we get those memories wrong, we risk falling short — perhaps very short — not only in achieving our goals but even in defining them adequately. Our memories will always be incomplete and inaccurate to some

degree, and so they are always in need of refinement and correction. Hence, the continuous effort to understand the past by identifying historiographical *problems* that in turn call forth *interpretations* by historians.

The Four Powers: Reading, Listening, Thinking & Writing

You already know that this course, like all college courses, is meant to convey knowledge of what the scholarly community thinks is important about the subject matter. In the study of history, that means, above all, *interpretations* of the past, but it also includes information about events, concepts, individuals and methods of writing history. But this course is designed to do something more than convey knowledge of history. It will also help you build up what your instructor calls "the four powers" — the power to read, the power to listen, the power to think and the power to write.

As a reader, you will learn to *study* what you are reading *as you read it*. That means, among other things, learning to "find the argument," which is the "game" that scholars of all kinds — from first-year students to seasoned researchers — play every time they pick up a piece of writing. You will constantly be asking yourself three questions about what you are reading: What's the argument? How does the author support it? Is it convincing? For a more detailed guide, see the instructor's "Reading for Knowledge." By "argument," in this context, scholars typically do *not* mean a heated debate or dispute, but a central claim, assertion or affirmation. You are likely to find a central argument, followed by sub-arguments or branch arguments that develop the central argument.

As a listener, you will learn to discipline yourself, to clear your mind of distractions, and to follow the lecturer's presentation attentively. Try to follow the logic of the presentation. Like your readings, the lecture also has an "argument." What's the "big picture" that the lecturer is trying to convey? How does the lecturer present that picture? How does the picture correspond to the readings that you were assigned in preparation for the lecture? Unless you can listen attentively, you cannot take the notes that you will be relying on to prepare for exams. Take orderly notes, ones that record the "big picture" and that will remind you of all the important points. If the lecturer proposes to discuss the causes of something-or-other, or to describe a historical problem, or analyze the way an economic or political system worked, pay careful attention, writing down each of the "causes," or descriptive elements, analytical features or concepts along with their definitions. When you do this, you are in effect recording the keys that you will rely on in responding to exam questions.

As a thinker, you will learn first to seek understanding of what you are reading and hearing. Ask questions if you don't understand. Re-read the material, not just once but two or three times if necessary. If you have trouble grasping the point of a chapter or a document, it is your duty to come by the instructor's office to ask for help, or to seek help from the teaching assistant. Once you have grasped the arguments of the reading or the lecture, think critically about them. Do they make sense? Do they challenge your own experience or knowledge that you acquired in another course or in your own personal reading? What sort of counter-arguments would you construct? What further knowledge about the problem would you like to acquire? Be prepared to give your views on one or another argument that you read about or hear in lecture.

As a writer, you will learn to state a clear and meaningful objective that controls the whole essay. The objective of the essay will be stated in the form of an argument that you will sustain by producing evidence to support it. As a reader, you will already have learned the importance of the cardinal rules of good writing: Be clear and concise. Write coherently by organizing your presentation. Be logically consistent; don't contradict yourself. And document your sources — tell where you found the evidence you are submitting.

Notice that the four powers are interconnected. Good readers make good writers. Good listeners make good thinkers, and so on.

It is really very difficult to separate your knowledge of history from your capacity to exercise the four powers. You may "know" something about history. But if your four powers haven't been adequately built up — if your power to express yourself in writing, your power to study what historians write, your power to listen to what the instructor says, your power to think critically about what you are hearing and reading are only weakly developed — then your knowledge of the past will be of little use to you. After all, your knowledge of the past will be tested — in exams, quizzes and in class presentations and discussions. So in effect, you will be tested not only on your knowledge of history but on how hard you have worked to build up your four powers.

Reading for Knowledge

Adopt a sympathetic attitude toward the author as you begin to read. If you decide immediately that the author is incompetent and biased, and that the assigned reading is irrelevant, you probably won't be able to offer a reasoned judgment of the work. Assume at the outset that the author will have something valuable to teach you, and that you will find passages and arguments that probably will require more than the usual attention on your part in order to extract meaning from them. Few scholars gain fame for their graceful prose. So expect to come across obscurities, opacities, infelicities of expression, apparent (and real) contradictions, and mind numbing dullness. If you don't encounter them, consider yourself lucky.

Take notes; the more the better. At least jot down the author's stated purpose for writing the article or the book; in the latter case, you will normally find it stated in the Introduction or in the first chapter. Then record the principal argument of each chapter or section of the article, and your own evaluation of the argument: Did you find it convincing? Why or why not? Does the argument advance the author's stated purpose for writing the book? If you take notes on a reading, you won't have to read the book or article again for an exam, a class presentation or a class discussion. Just study your notes!

Expect to find words, concepts, ideas, events, places, and the names of important people that are unfamiliar to you, but which occupy a central role in the author's argument. Plan on doing the extra research necessary to learn what they mean. Read with a dictionary, an atlas and an encyclopedia at hand. When you follow this plan, you are not only deepening your understanding of the assigned reading, you are also making a big investment in your vocation as a scholar. Once you know these terms, you won't have to look them up again, and you will be a more capable reader and critic, able to read more widely and deeply than before.

Read reflexively. As you read, you will want to consciously and deliberately "direct back" to yourself the meaning of what you are reading. You are not just consuming words. You are reading "to yourself." Sometimes this is called "critical thinking" or "critical reading," which doesn't mean that you should read (or think) *in order to* destroy or weaken the authority of everything you read or hear. It means, rather, that you should read for *understanding*. The author's meaning is what ultimately should interest you, and that means paying careful attention to the unfolding of the argument, step by step. As you read, check to be sure you are grasping the author's purpose in writing the book or article, that you understand how each paragraph advances that purpose, that you haven't missed that key sentence or paragraph in which the author sums up the interpretation. Always look for that "clincher" phrase, sentence or paragraph that should logically follow (or sometimes, precede) the presentation of the evidence. Be attentive to the author's *method* of research and exposition; *how* does he or she proceed to convince you of the truth of the argument? Is the argument full of untested or undocumented generalizations or mere ideological preferences? What sort of evidence is submitted? Is the evidence itself relevant to the argument? Is the argument logical? What more could the

author do to make the argument more convincing? Does the argument contradict or confirm your own experience or other readings you have done on this topic?

Think about your initial evaluation of the author's interpretation: Is your view of the work a fair one? If it is wholly negative, have you overlooked anything positive about the work?

After you've finished the reading, imagine that the next day, someone will stop you on your way to class and ask, "Did you read that book? What's it about? What's the author's argument? Did you agree with it?" You'll only have a minute to chat. What will you say? If all you can think of to say is that "it was boring," or "the author is a racist, sexist, ethnocentric slob," or "I didn't learn anything," that's a confession of your failure as a reader, not of the author's. Of course, you may well have good reasons for believing that the book was boring, that the author is incompetent, and that reading the book was a waste of time. But, just like the author you are criticizing, you too will have to *give reasons* for your views. That's why it's best to begin more objectively by saying what *the author said* that she or he was trying to do, what the author's conclusion or overall interpretation was ("the Latin American independence movements were really social revolutions," or, "Argentina's main problem until the 1840s was political anarchy and violence, which was the result of the barbaric culture of the gauchos," or, "the main underlying cause of the American Revolution was the desire of the colonists to preserve their rights as Englishmen"). Keep in mind that while there can't be much debate about the author's interpretation (after all, it's right there in black and white, for all to read), there will always be lots of room for different evaluations of the quality of that interpretation. Once you're sure you've fully grasped the argument, then and only then should you feel competent to evaluate it — with the same careful attention to logic and evidence that you expected of the author.

Give sound reasons for your evaluations of an interpretation. Avoid specious and illogical claims that are irrelevant to the quality of the author's argument. For example, the author's "true motivations" for writing the book or article might be interesting to speculate on, but they are irrelevant to an assessment of the soundness of the interpretation. So are personal details about the author's life, other books or articles that she or he may have written, or whether her political or religious tastes are to your liking. A good reason for questioning the interpretation, for example, might be your belief that the author's philosophical premises are faulty and have therefore corrupted the interpretation. But be prepared to give reasons for your argument: Why are those premises wrong? How have they affected the argument? If those premises were corrected, how would they improve the argument? Or, you might argue that the author's sources were biased in a certain direction, or that the logic is faulty, or that the author failed to fully consider other, competing interpretations.

Remember the grand purpose of scholarship: to acquire knowledge, in order to increase your understanding of yourself and the world. The *purpose* of scholarship is not to confirm your prejudices, to entertain you, or to change the world, although all three may well occur as elements of the legitimate consequences of scholarship. Seeking knowledge is a struggle that requires the cultivation of certain virtues or habitual dispositions: patience, self-discipline, generosity of spirit, and perhaps above all, hope — believing that knowledge of the truth is possible and that it will enrich your life, sometimes in totally unexpected ways. Remember where you are, and why: You are a member of a scholarly community whose stated mission is precisely the acquisition of knowledge.

Historiographical Problems & Their Interpretation

You have been assigned to write a paper that identifies a historiographical problem, tells why it is a problem, and then discusses at least three interpretations of the problem by historians or other scholars. Your "discussion" should include (a) a concise report of each scholar's interpretation, (b) a comparison of each interpretation telling how they are alike and how they are different, and (c) your own evaluation of the results,

in which you identify the strong and weak points of each argument and give your own interpretation based on what you have read and reported. The purpose of what follows is to help clarify that process for you.

What is a historiographical "problem?"

A historiographical problem is some significant issue or question about the past. We say "historiographical" and not "historical." Why? Because "historiographical" refers to the record of the past — the product of historical investigation, or what historians have actually written. "Historical" encompasses everything that has ever happened; in the present context, we need a term that is a bit more selective. Usually, and particularly at the undergraduate level, the issue or question posed for investigation is something that historians or other scholars have already investigated and written about. Of course, you might think of significant problems that historians have scarcely investigated, and you might even be able to identify some significant problem that has never even been considered by any scholar, although to do that, you would have to do a lot of reading. But even in those cases, it would be best to think of them as "historiographical" problems because they were ultimately roused by your study of the historiography.

Notice that a "problem" in this context means "a question raised for inquiry, consideration, or solution" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*); it does not mean a difficulty or an unpleasant situation. ("The Indians had a problem with Cortés" is not what we mean here; "Why did so many Indians join Cortés in his war of conquest against the Aztecs?" is an example of what we do mean.)

Another example of a problem is, "What caused the Cristero War?" Others: "How did railroad construction affect the economy of Mexico?" or "Who supported the Liberals during the War of the Reform, and why?" or "Why did Emperor Napoleon III withdraw the French army from Mexico?" or "How did the Mexican Revolution affect the labor movement?"

It should be clear that just stating a topic or theme — say, "the professionalization of the Mexican army" — is not the same as stating a problem. You might be able to write an excellent paper on the professionalization of the Mexican army, but if it were an excellent paper, it would be because it was focused on a problem arising from that theme. An example might be, "What did the Díaz government do to professionalize the army?" This might suggest a related problem that is even more interesting: "Why was the Mexican army unable to defeat the revolutionary forces in 1910-1911?"

Try to avoid choosing problems that depend on a moralistic premise. Doing so may skew your investigation in such a way as to limit the knowledge about the problem that you are likely to gain. Instead of asking "Did the Cuban Revolution end racism?" try, "What was the impact of the Cuban Revolution on race relations?" The first question would force you to begin with assumptions and definitions that really need to be investigated and demonstrated rather than simply asserted. The second question would require you to study the historiography to find out how scholars have actually characterized race relations in Cuba before the Revolution. Only then would you be prepared to turn to the literature on the Revolution's effects on race relations. You will probably discover that changes in some areas were more thoroughgoing than in others. Whether you conclude that some practices were or still are "racist" and others less so, will then depend not only on how you decide to define "racism" but also on the results of your historiographical research. You could substitute "sexism" for "racism" and much of the same reasoning would apply.

Telling *why* you think the problem you have chosen is a problem.

It is important to explain *why* you think the problem you want to write about is really a problem. To do that, you would have to go back to the definition of a problem given in the first paragraph of this document, and carefully consider the word "significant."

Take the examples given above. It would not be hard to think of reasons why they are significant. You could argue, for example, that the causes of the Cristero War is a problem because lots of people died, or because the war changed the way the Mexican state related to the Catholic Church. You could justify the problem of support for the Liberals during the War of the Reform because it would help explain why the Liberals won and the Conservatives lost. You could justify the question about the Mexican Revolution and the labor movement by pointing out that the labor movement became extremely influential after 1920, which naturally raises a question about its relationship to the Revolution. You could justify your question about race relations in Cuba by pointing out that the revolutionary government promised to take action in that area, or that it subsequently claimed to have made certain changes.

Some questions or issues don't qualify as problems because they seem to lack significance. You might be able to make a case for a better understanding of the impact of the telegraph on the newspaper industry in the 1890s, but you would have to show that such an investigation would be worth doing. That is, how would our knowledge of that impact contribute to worthwhile knowledge about the history of the Mexican newspaper industry? Sometimes a problem deals with a significant issue or question, but the solution to the problem is obvious or very well known, and therefore you probably wouldn't learn much by investigating it. An example would be some- thing like, "How did the Mexican government respond to the student protests of 1968?" A related but more interesting problem would be, "Why did the Mexican government shoot down 300 unarmed students in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on 2 October 1968?" or "What were the longterm consequences of the 1968 massacre?"

The best way to figure out whether and why an issue or question about the past is significant is to read about it. You should plan to do a good bit of reading — initially, in textbooks and even encyclopedia articles – and then in monographs and articles in professional journals — as you zero in on a problem.

What is an interpretation?

In order to "solve" the problem you pose, you will have to read the "solutions" that historians (or perhaps other scholars such as political scientists, anthropologists or linguists) have proposed. Even if you have been assigned to work with primary sources, your papers will always begin by citing scholars' solutions to the problem you pose.

Those solutions are called *interpretations*. There is no "big book" of answers to historical problems. *All the answers to all the historical problems you can think of are nothing more than interpretations proposed by historians, or interpretations that some historians might pose in the future.* Interpretations are almost always tentative, in the sense that they cannot be accepted with absolute finality. That means that most historical problems stay problems forever, though of course their significance can wax and wane. Today, very prominent historians are still getting paid big money (for historians) to write books and teach courses about questions raised by the French Revolution. That means that historians still disagree about the answers to many basic questions. In attempting to master the historiography of any given problem, therefore, you will want to be able to compare their answers, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement.

Even when two or more historians seem to agree on a basic solution to a problem, you will find that their exact interpretations differ in some ways. One might emphasize elements that another ignores entirely or downplays, often because she or he defines the exact problem in slightly different ways. As you read interpretations, even those that seem to be very similar, be sensitive to differences in emphasis and approach.

When you can knowledgeably discuss different interpretations of a historical problem, and the contrasting methods and theories used to arrive at them, you will have taken the first important step toward being able to work the way a historian works. Only after you have mastered the most prominent interpretations of the problem that interests you will you be prepared to work with primary sources to order to devise your own interpretation — always with the help, of course, of other historians' interpretations. It is from a continuous process of comparing, affirming and challenging existing interpretations that new interpretations are developed and new problems identified. All of our knowledge of the past is really little more than the accumulation of interpretations.

This is why, at the college level, a history paper cannot be a mere report of "what happened." That kind of thinking about history is naïve, and has no place in a college-level history course. Here, you learn that "what happened" is what various historians *claim* happened. Therefore, as a student of history, your task to is to seek to *understand* those claims, to *evaluate* them (according to the rules of logic and the validity of the evidence submitted) and to *judge* for yourself how convincing they are.

Citation Procedure

All ideas and words that are not your own must be *documented*.

That means you have to identify their source. You must cite not just the exact words that you quote, but all indirect quotes, paraphrases, and any information that is not very well known. Scholars identify their sources by using footnotes or endnotes. Footnotes go at the bottom of the page; endnotes, at the end of the essay.

Footnotes are numbered consecutively, starting with a superscripted 1.

Footnote numbers can never be repeated. Notice that the number in the text corresponds to the same number at the foot of the page.

The History Department requires students to use "Chicago Style."

Two fine, online guides to "Chicago Style" are http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChicago.html and http://press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html Remember that for second and subsequent references in footnotes or endnotes, just use the author's last name, the first few words of the title, and the page number(s).

Notice that the format for footnotes and the format for bibliographies — the list of sources cited in the paper — are not the same.

For footnote and bibliographical examples of the most common kinds of reference — books by a single or multiple authors, an essay in an edited collection, and a journal article — consult the on-line sources identified above, or:

> Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

A copy of Turabian is available at the reference desk of the university library. If you are a history major, you should own one.

Please pay special attention to the order of punctuation and footnotes in the body of your text.

For example, if you want to cite a particular quotation that you have inserted into your paper, you would do it this way:

> According to one historian, the weapons "were completely useless in that climate."[5]

Notice that the period comes first. Then the quote marks. And finally, the superscripted footnote.

You *must* cite *all* ideas and words that are not your own.

That doesn't mean you need to put a footnote after every sentence. If you have organized your paper properly, with paragraph divisions indicating shifts in units of thought, you normally won't need to use more than one or two footnotes per paragraph. The footnote must come *after* and not before the material you are documenting with the footnote reference. In other words, if all the material in a particular paragraph is drawn from the same two pages of a book, then place the note after the last word of the paragraph. If the material in the first half of the paragraph comes from source "X," place a footnote after the last sentence that makes use of that material. That signals to the reader that what comes after that sentence is drawn from a different source, which you will have cited at the end of appropriate sentence. If you want to be sure that the reader understand that you are shifting from "reporting" another's interpretation to stating your own views, make that clear by writing, "In my opinion . . ." or some such language. If you don't make it clear, somehow, that the views you are expressing are your own, the reader will wonder why you didn't document them.

The Oral Presentation of Your Historiographical Paper

The oral presentation occurs before you submit the paper, so you should see this as an opportunity to share the ups and downs of your research experience with your peers, to invite comments and questions that can help you improve your paper before you submit it, and of course to teach your peers something new. Similarly, as you listen to the presentations of other students, be prepared to ask questions and offer suggestions to improve the final product.

With that larger purpose in mind, you will therefore want to take advantage of the oral presentation to explain to the class and the instructor:

1. The historical context and background needed to understand the problem you chose to investigate, and the significance of the problem you chose. Why is it important, in the context of the subject of this course?

2. How you settled on the three interpretations of the problem that you intend to present in your paper. What methods of bibliographical research did you use in identifying your sources? Did you shift the focus of your research after you began? Why?

3. The ***names*** of the three scholars, with ***synopses*** of their conclusions regarding the problem you chose to investigate. Also, briefly discuss the formats of their research: Journal articles? Essays in published

collections? Monographs? When was this work published? What kinds of sources did your authors use? How did the timing of their research affect their conclusions?

4. How you intend to ***compare*** the findings of your three scholars in your paper, discussing the similarities and differences among them. Were there serious disagreements in their interpretations? Or were the differences matters of emphasis?

5. How you expect to ***evaluate*** the three interpretations in your paper. Which of them were more convincing? Why? What were their respective strengths and weaknesses?

6. Your own personal conclusion regarding the problem you chose, based on your reading of the three scholars. Justify your conclusion with evidence drawn from your reading. What further avenues of research do you think should be explored in connection with the problem you chose?

7. What would you do differently, were you to undertake a similar assignment next semester? What is the most important thing you learned about doing research? About the subject of the course?

After your talk, be sure to invite questions and comments. Propose specific questions designed to stimulate discussion.

Creativity in presenting your material is encouraged. You may display slides, short videos or mind maps, or supply handouts, *as long as* they are aimed at responding to the guidelines listed above.

If you use PowerPoint, please do not load your slides with textual matter. Slides should be used as guides: i.e., as vehicles for headlines, key concepts, maps, or other illustrations; or for displaying a particularly choice quotation. The slide content should be tightly integrated with your oral presentation. It should not distract the viewers with irrelevant material. Learn to use the "animation" feature in individual PowerPoint slides so as not to overwhelm your audience with too much information at once.

Be sure to clearly identify the names of the scholars and the titles of the works that you will be discussing, at least by writing them on the blackboard if not in handouts or in slides.

Your instructor will suggest an appropriate minimum and maximum period of time for the presentation.

Do not read from a prepared script. Of course, feel free to consult notes. Rehearse.

Working With Primary Sources. Doing the PIE

When historians refer to a "historical document" or just to a "document" they are usually speaking of a "primary source." The source is called "primary" because it was usually produced by an individual *who participated in or witnessed* the historical events that the text deals with. So you could call such writings "documents," or "primary sources" or "primary source documents." A "secondary" source would be the book or article that the historian writes concerning those events, typically using primary sources as evidence.

If you were assigned a Problem Interpretation Exercise (PIE), the result should be an essay that compares the response of a single primary source and a single secondary source to the same historiographical question – which *you* devise. Here are the steps you should follow in completing the assignment.

1. Choose any ONE document from the collection indicated by your instructor. In choosing your document, consider the following questions, the answers to which you will probably need in order to write your essay:

    a. *Who* wrote the document you selected?

b. What is the *title* of the document?

    i. NOTE: Since the documents you will consider have all been published in various collections of documents edited by modern-day historians, those historians gave the document a title, and that is what you should use. If the author of the document gave it a title, it may be close to or identical to the title that editor gave it. A personal letter or a speech, for example, won't have an original title but the editor of the collection in which the letter was subsequently published will probably give it one, and for the purposes of this assignment, that is what you should use.

c. In what *year* was it written?

d. *Where* was it issued? Does it refer to a specific place? If so, what place is it?

e. What *kind* of document is it? Some common *examples:*

    i. A personal letter

    ii. A law or decree

    iii. A speech or general proclamation

    iv. A report on, or a study of, some event or situation

    v. A government order

    vi. NOTE: If the document was a published book or article (or is an *excerpt* of a published book or article), tell the reader the title of the book or article and the year it was first published.

f. What is the *purpose* of the document? (*Why* was it written?)

g. *What* question or "historiographical problem" does it help you answer? You will likely be able to identify *more than one* question or problem that your document responds to. Pick only ***one.*** If necessary, review this guide book's discussion of "historiographical problems" above.

h. *How* does the document answer the question? This is the heart of your essay.

2. How does your assigned secondary source (perhaps one of the course's required secondary-source readings, or the course textbook) answer ***that same question?***

    a. Another way of saying this is: What is your secondary-source author's *interpretation* of the problem or question that your document responds to?

3. Write an essay following the assigned word length in which you:

    a. State the historical problem you have devised, explaining why in your view it is a significant problem, worth investigating.

    b. Identify the document (by author and title) you have chosen to help you resolve the problem.

    c. Tell *how* the document helps to resolve the problem.

    d. Discuss the interpretation that your secondary-source author proposed in response to the same problem. Tell *how* their interpretation helps to resolve the problem. *Don't forget to give the page numbers on which you found the interpretation, citing the source in footnotes using Turabian/Chicago style.*

e. Now **compare** the responses of your two sources to the problem you devised. Do they contradict one another, in whole or part? Are they complementary? Do they both resolve the problem in the same way? Which is more convincing? Why?

f. What aspects of the problem you chose deserve more research? Why? What steps would you take to continue your research?

Evaluation of Student Essays: The 12-Key System

Student essays are graded in two areas — presentation and content. The overall grade earned for the essay will be a *weighted* average earned in those two areas, with "presentation" weighted at 40% of the final grade, and "content" at 60%.

The following sections analyze "presentation" and "content" as if they were independent of one another. However, it should be obvious that the two cannot be rigidly separated. For example, "organization" could reasonably be considered under either rubric. Here, it is placed under "content" because a poorly organized paper can put even the best material out of reach of the reader, effectively nullifying it.

Please note that a "presentation" score may not be computed at all in case of plagiarism or in the event of a flagrant disregard for some important aspect of the assignment. For example, the failure to cite any sources at all, packing the essay with direct quotations, or completely ignoring the assigned topic may result in a single score of, say, zero, or 20, regardless of the quality of the presentation.

It should also be clear that not every item discussed below is equal in value. For example, one or two misspelled words, or a misplaced comma here and there, won't hurt your presentation score much. But if your syntax is frequently confused, or different words are regularly misused, the impact on your presentation will be more serious. On the content side, the presence of numerous, major inaccuracies, or the failure to consistently document your sources, would outweigh any points you might earn for clarity and coherence.

Presentation (40% of overall grade): Six keys

1. Format

Did the student follow the format instructions received from the instructor? Formatting includes maximum and minimum page length, size of margins, binding, font size, neatness, readability, and so on.

2. Spelling

Standard English spelling rules apply; the authority is *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

3. Punctuation

A fairly standard system of marks and signs is used to clarify meanings and to separate words and other units of written English. Conquer the apostrophe: Know the difference between "its" and "it's," the "classes" and the "class's."

4. Grammar

This refers to the system of rules that governs the structure of a language, such as

- the classes of words (*parts of speech*),
- the forms they take (*inflection*), and
- the way that words and phrases are put together in a sentence (*syntax*).

English is a highly standardized language; very few constructions escape the standard rules of grammar. For those that do, a manual of usage or style should be consulted to avoid inconsistency. Do not use slang or conversational language.

The History Department faculty have adopted the usage recommended in *The Chicago Manual of Style* or its more convenient and shorter version, Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. More abbreviated versions of "Chicago style" can be found in various shorter manuals, such as Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* or Jules R. Benjamin's *A Student's Guide to History*.

5. Diction

Choose your words carefully. Check the definition of words whose meaning you are unsure of before you use them; do not wait for your instructor to write "diction" in the margin.

6. Documentation

All notes, and the list of Works Cited, must follow "Chicago" style (see above) or any special instructions issued by the instructor.

Content (60% of overall grade): Six keys

The main content-evaluation problem is always, "How well does the paper respond to the question (if an essay exam) or to the assignment (if a paper)?"

In the case of an essay written in response to an exam question, you should be sure you fully understand the question. Any ambiguities you detect should be clarified with the instructor before you start to write.

In the case of a term paper or seminar paper, be sure you understand the assignment before you start to do the research. Normally, the instructor will have required you to submit a paper proposal or prospectus before you start doing any research. Follow the plan approved by your instructor. If you have any doubts, or if you encounter problems in the course of research or writing, or wish to change your topic, meet with your instructor for guidance well before the paper deadline. When the instructor grades your paper, he or she will be guided by the proposal that he or she actually approved, and not by one that you may have decided to adopt subsequently, on your own.

A paper or exam essay that responds well to the question or assignment is one that, among other things, will be:

1. *Well documented.* Sources of words and ideas that are not your own will be cited (with footnotes) by page number and quotation marks will be placed around words that are not your own. Notice that this point is distinct from the exact format of the citations and the list of Works Cited, which is dealt with above under "Presentation." As a matter of "content," your citations will be weighed according to their actual content and appropriateness of use rather than style.

2. *Clear, concise and coherent.* Your paper should be *well organized.* State your purpose, tell the reader what you are going to do, in what order, and then do it, a step at a time.

> a. The purpose that you state should be the controlling force behind the paper. A successful paper is one that achieves the objective you state for it at the beginning. Disorganization impedes comprehension, and if your reader can't follow your argument, the argument will fail and so, inevitably, will your paper.
>
> b. Use paragraphs to separate units of thought.

c. Don't repeat yourself. Every experienced instructor has a finely-honed "padding detector" that automatically peels off points when aroused.

3. *Well supported with evidence* that backs up your contentions and illustrates your arguments.

4. Reasonably *complete and well developed* in responding as fully as the sources, lectures and other relevant material allow. Relevant explanations and examples as well as appropriate commentary by you, the author, will be offered. No significant part of the assignment or the test question will be left unanswered, but irrelevant material will trip the padding detector.

5. *Accurate* in the reporting of basic facts and interpretations and *logical* in argument; avoid contradicting yourself.

6. *Your own work*. Evidence of plagiarism will be submitted by the instructor to the University Hearing Officer for appropriate action. A grade of "F" will be assigned for the course. If you have any doubts or concerns about how to avoid plagiarism, consult your instructor or the university's published rules regarding academic dishonesty.

Grading

To assist you in interpreting your grade, the following chart shows the equivalents of "Presentation" and "Content" points in standard percentage terms. Thus, a "content" score of, say, 51, would be equivalent to an 85% and a "presentation" score of 37 would be about a 92%; adding them would yield an essay grade of 88.

Presentation	Equivalent Score	Content	Equivalent Score
40	100%	60	100%
38	95%	57	95%
36	90%	54	90%
34	85%	51	85%
32	80%	48	80%
30	75%	45	75%
28	70%	42	70%
26	65%	39	65%
24	60%	36	60%
22	55%	33	55%
20	50%	30	50%
18	45%	27	45%