

Tips on writing essays - History Day Kickoff Event – Fall 2016

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I. Be thoughtful re topic choice

- * Do a topic that *interests* you.
- * Don't do something that is primarily visual in nature.
- * Don't do a topic that cannot be adequately done within word limit- narrow to doable topic.
- * Do not pick a topic where you cannot be objective.
- * Don't do a topic where you don't understand the material e.g. complex philosophy or science; either really learn it or move on to another topic.
- * Don't do a topic where there are simply not enough sources.

II. Read and re-read rules

- * Essay format is the norm but *can* be creative (fictional diaries etc.) but must follow rules.
- * Minimum 1,500 and maximum 2,500 words. Each word or number paper counts as one word. This includes student-composed text as well as quotes from primary or secondary sources.
- * Have all required components
 - Title Page - **includes accurate word count** along with title of entry, name(s) of the student(s), contest division and category. No illustrations on title page
 - Proper formatting: margins, page numbering, 12 pt. font
 - Annotated Bibliography: broken into primary and secondary; explain what was useful and how helped understanding of topic
- * Provide proper citations throughout for specific ideas as well as direct quotations. Acceptable formats: 1) Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers* OR (2) Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

III. Elements of a good essay

* **Organization!!!**

- Clear and explicit introduction: set the context and explicitly state thesis points.
 - Divide argument into paragraphs: each paragraph should relate to one key argument or point. If you change focus or topic - start a new paragraph (but no paragraphs less than 3-4 sentences.)
 - Strong summary conclusion – restate your key thesis points. THIS IS KEY – need to ensure you leave the reader with powerful restatement of your thesis point(s)
 - * **Have a clearly articulated thesis point (or points) that clearly relates to the theme – *Taking a Stand in History*.**
 - * **Have proof for assertions** – support with examples, facts, figures, quotations (primary quotes or words of another historian claiming the link). Cannot just make assertions. Provide illustrating examples and specific proof of the cause and effect links you are arguing.
 - * **Write in an objective and formal manner (not biased).**
- * **Do not over quote – brief, powerful quotes that reinforce and/or prove your assertions, but not long blocks of quotes that make up a large portion of your essay.**

*** Edit carefully. Eliminate unnecessary repetition and above all - proofread!!!**

IV. Pitfalls/mistakes to avoid

Research

- * Do not confuse primary and secondary sources
- * Do not do minimal primary research – one or two sources is not enough
- * Avoid reliance on secondary sources that provide generic information (Wikipedia, encyclopedias). These are perhaps good starting points but need **much more** developed research in the form of focused, scholarly websites, eBooks, and journals or detailed print sources

Writing and Argument

*** Do Not Plagiarize**

- * Avoid rambling organization – outline your essay!
- * Avoid long, run-on sentences, awkward phrasing, use of double/triple negatives!
- * Don't make sweeping statements (avoid using words like: *no one, everyone, all, none, greatest, worst* etc.)
- * Don't forget to ***use*** quotes from primary sources found – integrate, enliven your story; **but don't rely too heavily on quotes**
- * Avoid vague pronouns (*it, he, they*)
- * Do not be one-sided, biased.
- * Do not include lots of appendix materials (read the rules on this); if the information is important, integrate.
- * Don't write in chatty, informal manner; no "I" voice! This is a *formal* essay.
- * Avoid using rhetorical questions that are not answered in the essay.
- * Do not write in the passive tense, it is ***far*** less engaging for the reader. Examples:
The crew paved the entire stretch of highway. (active)
The entire stretch of highway was paved by the crew. (passive)

Ellen read the novel in one day. (active)

The novel was read by Ellen in one day. (passive)

(From: Your Dictionary website "Examples of Passive and Active Voice"

<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-active-and-passive-voice.html>)

V. Samples of Bad Writing Look at examples of bad writing to know what to avoid

Sources:

Mantex website (company with tutorials, resources on writing)

<http://www.mantex.co.uk/shop/improve-your-writing-skills/bad-writing/>

University of Minnesota, Duluth "Snippets – examples of bad

writing" http://www.d.umn.edu/~schilton/Courses/Snippets.html#N_2

West Valley College Instructor Page <http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/writsamp0.htm>

HCH Resource Links <http://hi.nhd.org/resourcelounge.htm>