

How to Tell if You've Written a Good History Paper

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	<i>Better than average</i>	<i>Worse than average</i>
Thinking	You began to think about it right away, and you've been mulling it over constantly ever since.	You didn't have time to think about it until the week it was due.
Research	You discovered (and read through) a lot more sources than you could cite.	You cited everything that you found.
	Your notes are far more extensive than your final paper.	You don't have many notes.
	You have the sense that there is more material on your topic than you could ever read.	There wasn't much information about your topic.
Interpretation & Argumentation	You have a clear and specific research question, which leads into the evidence.	You don't have a research question, or the question that you do have is unclear or too general, or can't be answered with the evidence at hand.
	You have a strong thesis.	You don't have a thesis (even if you do have some facts or opinions).
	You've provided arguments in favour of your thesis, and arguments against other competing theses that your readers might plausibly hold.	You read about your topic and wrote about what you found out.
	You evaluated (or interrogated) your sources. You asked questions about the author of each, their biases, motives, and intended audience. You compared sources with other contemporary accounts, and situated each in its historical context.	You took your facts from your sources.
	You've thought about your own biases and you tried to compensate for them.	You left out things that didn't support your point of view.
	You're aware of the kinds of fallacies that plague historical writing and you have managed to avoid them.	What?
	Documentation	You've correctly cited all of the evidence that you used.
Writing Drafts	You've written and rewritten a number of drafts.	You handed in the first thing that you wrote.
Final Version	You've proofread the final version of your paper a number of times. You've read it out loud. You've checked the spelling, the formatting, and all of your citations.	
	Your argument is precise, concise and explicit. Your prose is lively, a joy to read.	

Fortunately, historical practice is just that, a practice. Here are some books to help you refine your skills. Start by reading (or rereading) some basic guides. You might try Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004) or Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992). The best way to really learn how to do history is to study the practice of the historians that you most admire. There are also good general discussions of historical thinking in Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage, 1953); E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997); and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002). An excellent source for techniques of library research is Thomas Mann, *The Oxford Guide to Library Research* (New York: Oxford, 1998). To avoid 'post hoc, ergo propter hoc' (and all the others) try David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper, 1970). The bible of documentation is the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003). For style, however, you might prefer to turn to Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001); or Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).