

Ten History Essay Tips

Pearce, Robert

from **History Review**, a journal for English students reading the History A-level [hence the use of English idioms & spelling (instead of American)]
http://www.historytoday.com/historyreview/article/article.cfm?article_id=159

Essays are no longer the be-all and end-all of history assessment; but the ability to write a good essay is still vital.

Writing a good essay involves the sort of verbal craftsmanship which can only come from long periods of hard practice. There is no short-cut to success and no foolproof formula to follow.

Hence what follow are tips not commandments. Nevertheless they are worth thinking about.

1. Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. You can only score marks if you are being relevant, so take your time, before plunging into the writing, to think clearly about the meaning of the essay title and to make an essay plan. Many teachers advise students to look for the 'key words and phrases' in a title – but it is as well to remember that every word serves some function and therefore is important.
2. Be direct and explicit: don't leave it for the marker to puzzle out the relevance of what you are writing. That means giving a relevant argument: if you're not arguing a case, you're not answering the question.
3. The first paragraph is vital if you are to avoid the two commonest pitfalls, being irrelevant and writing a narrative. Try to do three things: a) analyse the question, defining its meaning and establishing its parameters; b) sub-divide the question into smaller areas (on each of which you will subsequently have a paragraph); and c) outline an argument or, perhaps, several alternative interpretations. By all means have a dramatic first sentence – to shock the reader from the stupor that prolonged marking invariably induces – but do not merely 'set the scene' or begin to 'tell a story'. There's no time for this.
4. The final paragraph is also vital. Do not bring in fresh factual material, and do not address the 'next' topic (for instance, what Hitler did after 1933 once you've answered the question by explaining why he came to power). Instead, return to the actual wording of the question and answer it as directly and succinctly as possible – and make sure it's consistent with what you've written earlier. It may seem perverse, but it's worth experimenting by writing the conclusion to an essay first: then you'll know exactly where you are heading.
5. In the middle paragraphs, deal with one relevant issue per paragraph. Each middle paragraph should have an argument (or interpretation or generalisation) supported by evidence. You must always give both. Try to give the argument in the first sentence(s) and then to 'prove' it with the best possible selection of details. (Philip Larkin once wrote that modern novels consist of a beginning, a muddle and an end. So do many student essays, so beware of the pitfalls.)
6. Give real facts and evidence, not just historians' opinions. Quote the evidence the historians quote, not the historians themselves (unless, that is, they have expressed themselves with real flair or unless you find it necessary to discuss their particular interpretations). Remember that history is the reconstruction of the past on the basis of the surviving evidence: it is not a just a collection of opinions. Also, give the evidence in the essay proper: don't hide it away in footnotes or appendices in a foolhardy attempt to make your essay seem 'academic'.
7. The correct balance is vital. Give most space to the most important issues – importance being assessed in relation to the question set. Remember that it is all too easy to spend a disproportionate amount of time/space on the first issue you deal with, so that others have to be

dealt with hurriedly. For this reason, it is probably best not to leave your most important ideas to the end of an essay, especially in an exam, when you may run out of time.

8. If you are required to do so, give references to your quotations, and don't forget the all-important page number. Never try to pass off other people's work as your own: plagiarism, even of phrases, is generally easily spotted and heavily penalised.
9. For term-time essays, presentation is important. If you word-process, use double-spacing and a decent sized font; if using a pen, try to make your handwriting legible. Spread your work out, in order to leave room for comments, and number the pages. Check spelling and grammar, and strive - and strive again - for clarity of expression. If you fail to express yourself clearly you will inevitably penalise yourself. In exams, your work will be all the better for the trouble you've taken in essays beforehand. Good habits are almost as easy to acquire as bad, so work hard to express yourself well and don't be satisfied with your second-best.
10. Write several versions of your essay. Kipling used to write a short story and then put it away for a minimum of two years: when he went back to it, he was able to spot imperfections very easily and make improvements. You can't follow his example, but you should be able to spread your work out over several weeks. You'll only get the best out of yourself if you give yourself time to do so. So revise your work, strike out that irrelevant passage, rewrite that ambiguous sentence, reorder the material to better advantage. If you're easily pleased, it's virtually certain that your examiners will not be.

Ten Essay Tips

Adapted from an article by Pearce, Robert

from **History Review**, a journal for English students reading the History A-level
http://www.historytoday.com/historyreview/article/article.cfm?article_id=159

Writing a good essay involves the sort of verbal craftsmanship which can only come from long periods of hard practice. There is no short-cut to success and no foolproof formula to follow.

Hence what follow are tips not commandments. Nevertheless they are worth thinking about.

1. Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. You can only score if you are being relevant, so take your time, before plunging into the writing, to think clearly about the meaning of the essay thesis and to make an essay outline. Many teachers advise students to look for the 'key words and phrases' in a thesis – but it is as well to remember that every word serves some function and therefore is important. Figure out what questions must be addressed in order to prove the thesis argument.
2. Be direct and explicit: don't leave it for the reader to puzzle out the relevance of what you are writing. That means giving a relevant argument: if you're not arguing a case, you're not answering the question.
3. The first paragraph is vital if you are to avoid the two most common pitfalls, being irrelevant and writing a narrative. Try to do three things:
 - a) analyze the question, defining its meaning and establishing its parameters;
 - b) sub-divide the question into smaller areas (on each of which you will subsequently have a paragraph); and
 - c) outline an argument or, perhaps, several alternative interpretations.

By all means have a dramatic first sentence – to shock the reader from the stupor that prolonged marking invariably induces – but do not merely 'set the scene' or begin to 'tell a story'. There's no time for this.

4. The final paragraph is also vital. Do not bring in fresh factual material, and do not address the 'next' topic (for instance, what Hitler did after 1933 once you've answered the question by explaining why he came to power). Instead, return to the actual wording of the question and answer it as directly and succinctly as possible – and make sure it's consistent with what you've written earlier.

It may seem perverse, but it's worth experimenting by writing the conclusion to an essay first: then you'll know exactly where you are heading.

5. In the middle paragraphs, deal with one relevant issue per paragraph. Each middle paragraph should have an argument (or interpretation or generalization) supported by evidence. You must always give both. Try to give the argument in the first sentence(s) and then to 'prove' it with the best possible selection of details.
6. Give real facts and evidence, not just historians' opinions. Quote the evidence the historians quote, not the historians themselves (unless, that is, they have expressed themselves with real flair or unless you find it necessary to discuss their particular interpretations). Remember that history is the reconstruction of the past on the basis of the surviving evidence: it is not a just a collection of opinions. Also, give the evidence in the essay proper: don't hide it away in footnotes or appendices in a foolhardy attempt to make your essay seem 'academic'.
7. The correct balance is vital. Give most space to the most important. Remember that it is all too easy to spend a disproportionate amount of time/space on the first issue you deal with, so that

others have to be dealt with hurriedly. For this reason, it is probably best not to leave your most important ideas to the end of an essay, especially in an exam, when you may run out of time.

8. If you are required to do so, give references to your quotations, and don't forget the all-important page number. Never try to pass off other people's work as your own: plagiarism, even of phrases, is generally easily spotted and heavily penalized.
9. For term-time essays, presentation is important. Check spelling and grammar, and strive - and strive again - for clarity of expression. If you fail to express yourself clearly you will inevitably hurt yourself. In exams, your work will be all the better for the trouble you've taken in essays beforehand. Good habits are almost as easy to acquire as bad, so work hard to express yourself well and don't be satisfied with your second-best.
10. Write several versions of your essay. You'll only get the best out of yourself if you give yourself time to do so. So revise your work, strike out that irrelevant passage, rewrite that ambiguous sentence, reorder the material to better advantage. If you're easily pleased, it's virtually certain that your readers will not be.

Acquiring the Right Study Skills

Pearce, Robert

http://www.historytoday.com/historyreview/article/article.cfm?article_id=17

from **History Review**

Study Tips

It is impossible any longer to avoid the urge to pontificate. Below are my top ten study tips.

1. There's no short cut to success in History. So, if you want to do well, you have to pay the price: and that means putting in the hours and concentrating hard. So face up to this fact and budget your time accordingly. A positive, realistic attitude to your studies should pay dividends.
2. Doing well at History involves, above all else, expressing yourself well on paper. So make sure you can write well. Don't bother about any particular 'style', bother about clarity. The way to achieve this is by not being satisfied with your second-best. Write and re-write your essays, being as self-critical as possible. And remember that if you can spell accurately and write grammatically, you'll immediately be raised above the majority of examinees.
3. There's an incredible variety of History books on offer. Don't stick with ones you can't understand or enjoy. Find ones that are right for you. You may even end up hooked on one of the most enduring and harmless of all life's satisfactions – reading for pleasure.
4. Experiment with different forms of note-making until you find the one(s) best suited to you.
5. Keep a separate list of short and memorable quotations. Always have more from primary sources than of historians' views. Use them in your essays to spice things up. Strive to be interesting and lively.
6. Don't automatically accept the interpretations you read. Instead, try to think things out for yourself. If you do this, you will be well on the way to generating the intellectual self-confidence which will enable you to argue a case in essays.
7. Don't just read books and make notes. Use the evidence you've gathered. Explain issues to friends, or give lectures to an imaginary audience on historical topics. This will be good preparation for essays and exams.
8. Reflect on your experience. Ask why the notes you took six months earlier are useless now. Puzzle out why your teacher wrote that caustic comment or gave that particular grade – and if the answer is not clear, be prepared to ask.
9. Don't leave all your exam revision till the last minute. Revise several times over several months. Mud sticks.
10. Try to apply what you know about the nature of History to your practice of the subject. For instance, if you realise how fragmentary historical evidence often is and that History is not a totally objective subject, you will avoid simplistic interpretations. If you realise that History is pieced together from primary sources, you will avoid quoting secondary sources as evidence.