

Writing about history

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- History is written based on two kinds of sources: primary and secondary
 - **Primary sources**
 - the basic data of history
 - written (or painted, carved, etc.) by someone close to the subject being described
 - usually someone who lived at or near the time described
 - who had some personal or authoritative knowledge of the subject
 - examples:
 - eyewitness accounts, testimony
 - reports of what eyewitnesses told the author, interview transcripts
 - diaries, letters, speeches, reports of experiments or other events, court decisions, church records, etc.
 - **Secondary sources**
 - written based on other sources, primary and secondary
 - rather than from direct knowledge
 - examples:
 - history books and articles (except for the primary sources they might include copies of)
 - encyclopedia entries, most biographies, textbooks, most websites
- This distinction is sometimes flexible
 - The book *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy is
 - a secondary source about the US senators it chronicles
 - but a primary source for a study about Kennedy's views
 - a more complex example:
 - Herodotus, the first historian, wrote down stories that people told him
 - some were about events that those people experienced during the Persian Wars, or that he himself had experienced
 - these parts of his work really are a primary source
 - but other stories were about events that had happened generations, even centuries, earlier
 - these parts could be considered primary or secondary, depending on one's point of view
 - these accounts are by far the closest we have to the events themselves,
 - but they are not from personal knowledge or interviews with witnesses
 - historians today sometimes use Herodotus's history as a primary source about even these remote events
 - it is testimony about what people of Herodotus's time thought was true about even earlier times
 - but they are careful to recognize that the information is far from direct knowledge, and parts are clearly wrong
 - but in a sense, Herodotus wrote the first secondary source...
- the same is even more true for several Roman historians

- in some contexts, we treat their work as primary sources, since they were far closer to the events than we are
- but we should also consider much of their work to be secondary, synthesizing primary sources that are lost to us today
 - prone to error, exaggeration, propaganda, myth...
- **Tertiary** and other sources
 - Some people reserve the term “secondary” sources for original scholarship based on primary sources
 - usually published as books or journal articles
 - and use “tertiary” sources to describe summaries of these secondary sources
 - such as textbooks, encyclopedia articles, etc.
 - this could also include popular magazine articles, like those in Time magazine
 - these are written by journalists reporting their understanding of what other scholars say
 - often with errors or biases
 - so popular sources are rarely appropriate to use or cite in academic writing
 - and then there are sources that are not **scholarly** or **academic** at all
 - mystical magazines and websites like Gnosis magazine or websites about Goddess beliefs
 - tourism sites written by people who may or may not know anything about their subjects
 - etc.
 - sources like these do not participate in the rules of evidence, argument, citation, and peer review (checking by unbiased other experts)
 - so they are prone to have errors and biases
 - and are rarely appropriate to use or cite in academic writing
 - one way to avoid tertiary, unscholarly, popular, or just flaky sources
 - use **peer-reviewed** sources
 - some of the library databases label sources as peer-reviewed, if they are
 - peer review is a formal process in which journal editors or book publishers send manuscripts out to other experts in the field
 - these experts send back detailed evaluations of the manuscript
 - recommending that they be published, revised, or rejected
 - based on how solid the work is
 - it is not a perfect system; poor work is still sometimes published
 - but most of the poor work, and virtually all the really flakey stuff, does get weeded out
- We saw before that an important aspect of history is critically evaluating sources
 - What Ibn Khaldun called “personality criticism”, asking
 - Should we believe what this author says?
 - Is this author likely to be well informed, or possibly mistaken?
 - Is this author likely to be biased, and if so, how?
 - Historians must critically evaluate every source they use
 - “interrogating” the “testimony” of a source, like a detective interrogates a witness
 - or an investigative journalist pursues a story
 - where and when was it written?

- who wrote it?
- who was the intended audience?
- why did the author write it?
- what is the author trying to convince the reader of, or get the reader to think or do?
- what point of view is the author starting from, that is, what assumptions is he or she making?
- does the content agree with other sources?
 - (Not relevant to Assignment 2, since you will use only one primary source)
- in short, again:
 - is this information likely to be correct, or could it be mistaken?
 - is this information likely to be biased, and if so, how?
- You usually need information from other primary or secondary sources to answer these questions
 - other primary sources to corroborate some of the facts
 - secondary or primary sources tell us about the author
 - the author’s positions, roles, loyalties
 - the author’s background, education, class, etc.
 - the author’s stakes in the outcome
 - secondary sources often tell us about the document
 - when it was written, and why
 - who was the audience, what was the intent
 - often comment on how it fits or conflicts with other sources
 - etc.
- You can also use your own insights to figure out possible biases, assumptions, errors, etc.
- Your second writing assignment is an exercise in critically evaluating sources
 - and also in finding sources in the first place, both primary sources and secondary sources
- Discuss Assignment 2: Using a primary source and a secondary source
 - Pick two choices for a primary source on any subject, meeting the criteria in the instructions
 - must not be the one you used for Assignment 1
 - email me the citation, link (if it is online), or one-sentence description (if it isn’t)
 - by midnight, Wednesday, Oct. 23
 - I will check that the sources are appropriate, and approve them in the order I receive them
 - emailing back to confirm which source you should use
 - each student must have his/her own source, so if your first choice is taken, I will approve your second
 - if that is taken, I will notify you that you need to look some more
 - once you have an approved source, find one or more secondary sources that give you information to help in evaluating the source
 - the secondary source must meet the criteria in the assignment instructions
- finally, write a 2-3 page paper that
 - 1. explains the nature of the primary source, using information from the secondary source(s)
 - 2. summarizes what the source says (similar to Assignment 1)

- 3. evaluates the reliability and possible biases of the source, using information from the secondary source and your own thinking
- 4. draws some conclusions about the society, the events or people described, etc.
 - this is what Andrea and Overfield demonstrate in “mining” the letter by Columbus for interpretations about the Indians, Columbus’s motives and values, etc.
 - no thesis is needed.
- See the posted assignment instructions for details
 - including the grading rubric that shows exactly what I am looking for
- Finding sources online
 - browse the links on the class web page
 - very easy, a bit limited, good for finding a primary source
- Using the library to find sources
 - wider selection of primary sources, but more work to find
 - easier and better for finding secondary sources
 - Self-help tutorial videos: mostly 2-3 minutes long
 - from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Library Channel” for some quick videos on how to
 - set up a PIN number to access library resources from off-campus
 - find articles on any subject, many of which you can read online (useful for this class)
 - find books on any subject (also useful for this class)
- Want help finding a source or information for a paper? Librarians are there to help you. It is their job, and what they like to do.
 - just go to the library and ask for help at the reference desk
 - from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Phone” for numbers to call for research help during library hours
 - from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Chat 24/7” to get help from a research librarian (not necessarily from SSU) 24/7 by online chat.
 - from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Email” to send a question; you should get an answer within 24 hours.
- A great feature of many library searches: they give you a formatted citation for the sources
 - more or less correctly formatted by computer
 - for this class, you can copy the Chicago or Turabian style citation, then correct things like the lack or excess of italics, or the order of the author’s first and last names as needed.
 - Turabian style is a slightly simplified version of Chicago style.
 - Starting with computer-generated citations will save you a lot of typing, but you will have to check and adjust them
 - some databases give you just the publication reference, without including the URL and date of access. Be sure to add those.
- Article search
 - the easiest (but not always the best) way to find information (imho): from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click the “Articles” tab, enter search terms, and click “search”

- if you are off campus, you will have to enter your library bar code number (BACK of your student ID card) and a PIN that you have created (see the video above if you don't have one yet)
- this searches Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), which is one of the biggest, broadest databases of articles, but still only includes some of the journals you might want to check
- you typically get a long list of items, most of which are not relevant.
- troll through them, often many pages, to find something that looks promising
- don't just take the first one that turns up; some are short, or don't have information that is useful to you, etc.
- many are available in full text online
- this is a good way to find secondary sources that will give you background information on a primary source
 - just search on the name of the author of a primary source, or the title of a primary source
- pros:
 - easiest to start
 - you might get lucky and not have to do any more
 - most sources available instantly online
 - citations provided in sort-of correct Chicago or Turabian style (Click the yellow page “Cite this article” icon), copy, then fix up to correct style
- cons:
 - limited and not always suitable sources
 - you might have to wade through a lot of useless hits and still have to try a better approach to find what you need
- Database search using QuickSearch
 - the second easiest way to find information (imho): from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Databases”, click a subject area (like “History”), and then click the “QuickSearch” option in the upper right part of the page
 - search for authors, titles, or subjects much as in the Article search, but this will automatically search multiple databases relevant to the subject
 - it shows you a list of databases that it can search all at once, including not only Academic Search Premier, but also others relevant to the field
 - accept the default choices of which databases to search, or add or uncheck some
 - this is a better way to find secondary sources, and may lead to primary sources if you follow up citations in the secondary ones
 - pros:
 - very easy to start
 - wider range of sources and fewer irrelevant ones than in a plain “Article” search
 - most sources available instantly online
 - citations provided in sort-of correct Turabian style (Click the item title to see its details; copy the Turabian style reference in the box on the right of the screen; paste into your paper; then fix up to correct Chicago style)
 - cons:
 - Still a lot of irrelevant or unsuitable results
- Research Guide search

- the third easiest way to find information, and perhaps the best for this class (imho): from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click “Research Guides”, then “Social Sciences”, then “History: Finding Primary Sources”, or “History: Finding Secondary Sources”
- pick one of the databases, like “Virtual Reference Library (Gale)”, or “Oxford Reference”
- search for your author’s name, or the source title, or relevant words
- if you don’t find what you need, try one of the other databases listed
- these databases are particularly good for finding compact but informative, authoritative secondary sources
- also can lead to primary sources
 - search on subject words
 - most hits will be secondary sources, but the citations may lead to primary sources
- pros:
 - decent range of sources
 - many sources are likely to be relevant, detailed enough but not too long, etc.
 - most sources available instantly online
 - citations provided in various formats, depending on the database. Copy and correct to good Chicago style.
- cons:
 - Requires the most clicking and thinking to start (but still not much)
 - May require doing the same searches over again in several databases
 - you have to work a little more to find and correct the citations into good Chicago style (but still not too hard)
- Book search
 - the fourth easiest way to find information (imho): from the library home page (<http://library.sonoma.edu>), click the “Books” tab, enter a few words, and click “search”
 - this works similarly to the Articles search, but it turns up books
 - many longer primary sources are available as books
 - you can pick a few pages that interest you to use as your primary source
 - the library also has books that are collections of shorter primary sources
 - find these by searching for subject words
- pros:
 - very easy to start
 - decent range of sources, but sometimes limited
 - if you find a good book, it often has a wider coverage of information and may be better for your purposes
- cons:
 - you have to go to the library to pick up the book
 - you have to figure out how to cite the book in Chicago style all by yourself
- Acceptable sources
 - are usually published, with an author and/or translator indicated
 - usually as books or academic journal articles
 - peer-reviewed articles are particularly reliable

- secondary sources may also include reference works like published encyclopedias
- online material that is not copied from such a source, with the full bibliographic information, is not reliable and cannot be cited
- Wikipedia is never an acceptable source. Never cite it, and never depend on its contents.
 - it changes constantly, and often contains errors
 - it is useful for orienting yourself, getting background, and finding information
 - but then search for a published source that contains the information you need, and cite that
 - never use any information from Wikipedia that you cannot find in a real, citable source
 - because it might be wrong
- Citations and Chicago style
 - proper citations are necessary so that your reader
 - can know where your “facts” came from
 - can check to see if you correctly reported what the source said
 - can check to see if your source is reliable
 - can follow up to get more details or related information
 - the Chicago style is only one of several that could be used
 - but it is the standard for history papers, so you need to learn to use it
 - this was a major point of the first assignment
 - a boiled-down explanation with examples is posted under “Handouts” on the class website, as “Chicago Style for History 201”
 - endnotes show where a particular bit of information came from, including page numbers
 - the bibliography summarizes all the sources used
 - as you know from Assignment 1, when something from a book or journal is posted on the web, you cite it as if you had it on paper, but add the URL and date accessed to show that you really looked at someone’s online version of the source
 - the original publication data gives the source credibility
 - without the publication data, the material could be anything some crank made up
 - the URL and date make it accessible and absolve you of responsibility for any errors that crept in when it was copied into web form
 - Note that web pages and publications often have parts written by different people
 - often a primary source by some long-dead author
 - plus introductory or explanatory material by a historian
 - plus more comments added by whoever made the web page
 - be careful to indicate the correct author when you cite such material
 - you only look silly if your reference for a fact like the birth and death dates of an ancient author is something written by that author
- Citations
 - facts
 - every fact that is not common knowledge must be cited with an endnote, showing where it came from
 - if everything in a paragraph comes from the same few pages of a source, one note for the paragraph is enough

- if the paragraph contains information from multiple sources, or different parts of the source, each chunk of information needs its own endnote
- quotations: avoid them!
 - every quotation must also be cited, right at the end of the quotation
 - not lumped with other citations at the end of the paragraph
 - so it is absolutely clear where the quotation came from
 - papers should consist of YOUR writing, based on what the sources say
 - so summarize and use the information in the sources, don't quote it
 - too many quotations makes your writing look insecure, as if you are hiding behind some other author's work
 - if you use many quotations, it is often not clear what you want the reader to conclude from them; it seems that you are just repeating parts of the source
 - decide what you mean, and say it in your own words
 - like: According to Herodotus, there were professional embalmers in Egypt.¹
 - or: Embalming was a profession in Egypt.¹
 - in this class, the limit is a maximum of one quotation per page, and no quotation more than two lines long.
 - it would be better yet to use no quotations at all.
- Example of evaluating and interpreting a primary source
 - In the reading by Andrea and Overfield
- The reading by Marius goes far beyond what you will do in Assignment 2
 - but is excellent advice for Assignment 3
 - the skills you practiced in Assignments 1 and 2 will fit into this larger framework of a full paper
 - Expectations of a history paper (from Marius reading)
 - 1. It has an argument (not needed in this class until Assignment 3)
 - it tries to convince the reader of something
 - a thesis that the paper supports and defends
 - find something puzzling in the evidence, then convince the reader that it is a puzzle, or solve the puzzle
 - ask a question about some subject, then answer it, convincing the reader that you are right
 - 2. It has a sharply focused, narrow topic
 - do a good job with a limited topic
 - example from a previous History 201 class: The varied uses of cabbages in Rome
 - 3. It is based on primary sources
 - critically evaluated, as you do in Assignment 2
 - with help from background information often found in secondary sources
 - 4. It is written to catch the reader's attention and carry it to the end
 - the argument and direction should be clear
 - but it should build from a beginning to a conclusion
 - 5. It gets right to the point
 - no need for the flowery introduction you were probably taught to write in high school

- just take a stand, state the problem, or grab the reader’s attention with something specific
- 6. It has a good title
 - the title should convey the main point and content of the paper
 - if you can’t come up with a good title, you may not be clear on what your point is yourself
- 7. It builds a case step by step, based on evidence
 - like proving a case to a jury in a courtroom
 - based on evidence
 - rule of thumb: when you make a generalization, immediately follow it with specific information that illustrates or supports it
- 8. Its sources are documented
 - in this class, with endnotes and a bibliography in Chicago style
 - shows that you know the sources and can be trusted to say something reasonable
 - avoids any possible charges of plagiarism – intellectual theft
 - ALWAYS credit your sources, whether you summarize them or use their words as quotations
 - NEVER use the words of a source without putting them in quotations marks.
 - better is to rephrase the ideas in your own words
 - but still give the source of the idea or fact
- 9. It is written dispassionately
 - don’t add in emotions or value judgements
 - let your reader come to those conclusions on his/her own
- 10. It contains original thoughts, not just reports of others’ thoughts
 - have some confidence in yourself
 - your original thought can be small, as long as it is new and you can support it with evidence
- 11. It is aimed at a specific audience
 - consider what the audience already knows
 - write so clearly and completely that your roommate would understand the paper, and find it convincing, even interesting
 - or your mother
 - try having your roommate actually read it, and get some feedback
- 12. It takes contrary evidence into account
 - by acknowledging evidence against your claims, you show that you are not just ignorant of it, and that you are honest, not hiding it
 - that makes you seem more trustworthy and convincing
 - also, you can handle the evidence on your own terms, addressing why it is not enough to destroy your argument
 - if you don’t mention it, anyone who thinks of it will conclude that you had no reply or defense, and so your argument is wrong
 - that is: be honest with your argument
- 13. It is grammatically and stylistically correct
 - use a spelling checker
 - proofread!

- spelling checkers often substitute the wrong word for a mistyped one
- you can easily mess up sentences when editing them
- spelling errors, grammar errors, and punctuation errors make you look like a careless, uneducated bozo. Not good for getting a raise at work.
- 14. It has a final paragraph that mirrors the first one
 - get back to the question, example, etc. that you started with
 - but now with a conclusion or answer established