



Thesis Statement and the History Essay Format

History & Citizenship Education / Contemporary World

Why do history teachers assign essays?

“The chief reason is that no other method provides as effective a means of testing a student's comprehension of a topic. We want you to show us that not only have you acquired a knowledge of the topic but also that you fully understand the topic and the issues raised by it. Essays test understanding by asking you to select and re-organise relevant material in order to produce your own answer to the set question.”¹

Thesis Statement

A **thesis statement** is a single sentence (usually the first) within the introductory paragraph of your essay, which makes a claim or tells the reader exactly what to expect from the rest of your text. It may be your interpretation of what the author or teacher is saying or implying about the topic. It may also be a hypothesis (educated guess) statement which you intend to develop and prove in the course of your essay.

The thesis statement, which is normally underlined, is the heart of your essay and is the most vital part of your introduction. The assignment may not ask that you include a thesis statement because your teacher may assume you will include one. If your assignment asks you to take a position, to show the cause and effect, to interpret or to compare and contrast, you should develop and include a good thesis statement.

Following the introductory paragraph and its statement, the body of your essay should present the reader with organized evidence directly relating to your thesis and must support it.

Characteristics of a good thesis statement

- It is a strong statement or fact which ends with a period, not a question.
- It uses clear and meaningful words.
- It states an analytic argument or claim, not a personal opinion or emotion.
- It must not use a dictionary definition.
- It must not be vague, narrow or broad.
- It must not be a cliché² such as “fit as a fiddle”, “time after time”, “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link”, “all in due time” or “what goes around comes around”.
- It must not be a generalization.

The History Essay Format

Essay is an old French word which means to “attempt”. An **essay** is the testing of an idea or hypothesis (theory). A **history essay** (sometimes referred to as a **thesis essay**) will describe an argument or claim about one or more historical events and will support that claim with evidence, arguments and references. The text must make it clear to the reader why your argument or claim is as such.

¹ Hayward, Paul Antony. “History” (on-line). Lancaster, UK: Department of History, Lancaster University. <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/haywardp/hist213/writing.htm> (January 2009).

² A **cliché** is an expression or saying which has been overused to the point of losing its original meaning; something repeated so often that has become stale or commonplace; “ready-made phrases”.

Introduction

Unlike a persuasive essay where you would capture the reader's attention with a leading question, quotation or story related to the topic, your introduction in a history essay should announce a clear thesis statement and explain what to expect in the coming paragraphs. Include the key facts that are going to be presented in each paragraph. A strong introduction shows that you already know what you are doing before you start to write.

Never write *“I will talk about”*, *“You will discover that”*, *“In this essay”*, *“You will learn”* or other such statements. You are not “talking”, you are “writing”, and don’t say what you will write about, just write it.

Body

The paragraphs which make up the body of your history essay must offer historical evidence to support your thesis statement. Typically, in a high school history essay, there will be as many supporting paragraphs as there are events or topics. Your teacher or assignment outline may ask you to write a specific number of paragraphs. Evidence such as dates, names, events and terms, must be provided to support your key thesis.

The **topic sentence** should tell the reader exactly what the paragraph is about. Do not write *“I will talk about”*, *“I will write about”* or *“You will see”*. Instead, make a clear statement which will reflect the content of your paragraph.

The last sentence of a supporting paragraph can either be a “closing” or “linking” sentence. A **closing sentence** should summarize the key elements that were presented. A **linking sentence** efficiently links the current paragraph to the next. Linking can also be done by using a transitional word or phrase at the beginning of the next paragraph.

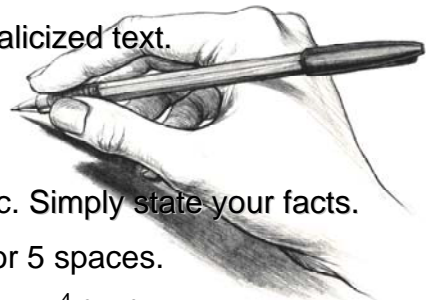
Conclusion

In the closing paragraph, restate your claim or argument and summarize your best evidence. At this point, do not slip in any new information. This paragraph mainly reviews what you've already written. Don't use the exact same words as in your introduction; that shows laziness. This is your last chance to present the reader with the facts which support your thesis statement. Choose your words carefully.

Formatting Requirements

- Use standard letter-sized 8.5”x11” plain white paper.
- Essays should be double-spaced.
- Use a 1.5” left margin, 1” right margin, 1” top margin and 1” bottom margin.
- Essays should be typed using a regular 12-point font such as Arial, Century Gothic, Helvetica, Times New Roman and Verdana.
- Include a cover page with the course name, course number, group number, essay title, the teacher’s name, your name, due date and optionally, the name of the school, its location and logo.
- Number each page with the exception of the cover page and the first page of text.
- When writing an essay, pay special attention to spelling, grammar, punctuation and use of capital letters. Essays should be carefully proofread before submission. Peer editing is recommended.

- Other than your thesis statement, do not underline text.
- Use italics for foreign words. Otherwise, do not use bold or italicized text.
- Do not use headings.
- Do not number facts, use bullets or point form.
- Do not start sentences with “*Firstly*”, “*Secondly*”, “*Thirdly*”, etc. Simply state your facts.
- Indent each paragraph by using a tab of approximately 0.5” or 5 spaces.
- Use the “Chicago Manual of Style”³ or preferably the “MLA Style”⁴ for formatting your works.



Quotes, Footnotes and Bibliography

Quotes

Quotations should be used sparingly and for special reasons. Students tend to use too many quotes and could lose marks for doing so. It is better to read the text, understand it, close the source (book or web site for example) and then to condense it using your own words. Simply paraphrasing someone else’s work is still considered to be plagiarism. If you quote often, do not quote at great length.

For quotes of three or less lines, simply place the text between double quotation marks. For longer text, indent the left and right margins by an additional 0.5”, single-space the text and do not use quotation marks. Use a footnote, similar to those used in this paper, to cite your source.

Use single quotation marks for quotations within a quotation and use three ellipsis points (...) when leaving part of the quotation out. Do not use ellipsis at the start of a quotation.

Footnotes

Footnotes are used to cite your quotation source or to provide additional tidbits of information such as short comments.

“Treat Internet sources as you would printed sources. Use footnotes or endnotes to document all quotations from the Internet, providing the author’s name, the title of the work, the full title of the site (if the work is part of a larger site), the date of publication, and the full URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of the document that you are quoting from. It is also useful to indicate the date on which you consulted the source: websites are often short-lived.”⁵

Bibliography

Unless otherwise specified by your teacher, always include a bibliography on a separate page which lists the sources used in preparing the essay.

The list should be sorted alphabetically according to the authors’ last name. The second and subsequent line of each entry of your bibliography should be indented by about 1” or 10 spaces.

Refer to the “*The MLA Style Manual*” or the “Other” page of our class web site for formatting instructions.

³ More information on the “Chicago Manual of Style” can be found at <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>.

⁴ More information on the “MLA Style Manual” and “Guide to Scholarly Publishing” can be found on the *Modern Language Association* web site at http://www.mla.org/style_faq1. Guides can be ordered online for \$25 to \$35 dollars.

⁵ “History and Classics: Essay Writing Guide” (on-line). Edmonton, Alberta: Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta. <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/historyandclassics/essaywritingguide.cfm> (January 2009).

“History and Classics: Essay Writing Guide” (on-line). Edmonton, Alberta: Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta. <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/historyandclassics/essaywritingguide.cfm> (January 2009).

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Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of cheating in which part or all of someone else’s work is passed as one’s own. For useful guidelines to help you avoid plagiarism, consult the following document: www.uottawa.ca/plagiarism.pdf.

Depending on your teacher and circumstances, penalties for plagiarism may include a mark of zero for the assignment or the course. It may also result in the teacher reporting your case to the Vice Principal, Principal or other faculty administrator for further steps to be taken at their discretion.

Basic Essay Conventions

- Dates: a full date should be formatted as August 20, 2009 or August 20th 2009. The comma and the “th” separate the day from the year.
- Dates: a span of years is written as 1939-45 (not 1939-1945).
- Dates: no apostrophe is used for 1600s, 1700s, etc.
- Diction: use a formal tone for an academic audience. Use more sophisticated language.
- Numbers: In Canada, do not use commas to separate groups of three digits in numbers. For example, ten thousand should be written as 10 000 (notice the space).
- Numbers: spell out numbers less than and equal to 100.
- Numbers: spell out round numbers (e.g., 10 thousand, 5 million).
- Numbers: use digits for successive numbers (e.g., 11 women and 96 men).
- Percentages: spell out the word “percent”; don’t use the symbol % unless listing successive figures. When listing many figures, use the symbol % and be consistent throughout your text.
- Pronouns: avoid the pronoun “I”; you do not need to refer to yourself in a historical essay unless you are writing about “taking a position” or making a “citizenship” statement relating to yourself.
- Pronouns: avoid the pronoun “you”; you do not need to address the reader directly.
- Tone: do not nag, preach or give advice.

Use of Capital Letters

Use capital letters where necessary using the following guidelines.

- The first word of a sentence
- The names of the days of the week and of the months of the year
- The names of languages
- The names of disciplines and school subjects are not capitalized unless they happen to be the names of languages
- Words that express a connection with a particular place must be capitalized when they have their literal meanings. For example, “French” must be capitalized when it means “having to do with France”
- Words that identify nationalities or ethnic groups must be capitalized
- The words “black” and “white”, when applied to human beings
- Proper names (such as “John Smith” and “Pont Jacques Cartier”) are always capitalized
- The names of distinctive historical periods such as “Middle Ages”
- The names of festivals and holy days
- Many religious terms such as “God” and “Sikhs”
- The title or name of a book or other media
- The first word of a direct quotation
- The brand names of manufacturers and their products
- Roman numerals (e.g., **XIV**)
- The pronoun **I** (e.g., “I am happy.”)

Miscellaneous Tips

- Create an essay plan and/or complete a graphic organizer to collect your facts.
- Use a word processor such as Microsoft Word or a free downloadable processor from www.openoffice.org.
- Spell-check your work using the word processor and have someone verify your work.
- Use the same verb tense throughout your essay. Refer to the following document: <http://www.lbpearson.ca/~mmansour/documents/other/verbtenses.pdf>. Remember that every sentence must have a verb.
- Avoid lengthy paragraphs.
- Watch your punctuation – use periods, commas, semicolons and colons to break down or separate sentences.
- Avoid street or Internet messaging jargon such as “:)” , “lol” or “bc”.
- When writing, constantly refer back to the thesis statement to ensure that your text remains on track.
- Be neat and take pride in your work.