



# Writing Advice for American History

Mr. Broach

## General Advice:

- Always follow directions! Ask yourself: Did I address all issues completely? Did I answer all questions?
- Plan your writing and organize! The following are general components of this process:
  - Have a thesis - a main idea that effectively addresses (or answers) the entire topic.
  - Plan a good introduction that introduces the topic, presents a thesis (main idea), and "sets up" the ideas and information that you will address in the body of the paper.
  - Organize an outline of the information you plan to use in the body of the paper, and organize it in a way that will clearly support your thesis or main idea.
  - Plan a conclusion that wraps up your argument and does not simply repeat previous statements.
- When including information in the body of your paper, tell why that information/evidence is important or significant to the thesis. For example: don't just mention the Election of 1860, tell how it was a final breaking point that led to the Civil War (and why).
  - All history papers and essays must include both **evidence and analysis**. Evidence includes specific historical facts that will support your argument, and analysis is telling how and why those events relate to your main idea.
- Be specific when introducing or explaining information; never assume that the reader will know what you are referring to ("I know the history, but I may not know that you do").

## Grammar/Writing Mechanics:

*Just a few reminders... (including some common student mistakes). Note that items highlighted in yellow automatically result in point deductions on paper assignments. Repeated errors of other items not highlighted may also result in point deductions.*

- **Spelling** - proper spelling is required in school. (Use spell check, check homophones, etc.)
- **Capitalization** - proper capitalization is also required. This is, unfortunately, becoming a more common error.
- **Do not use 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person in formal writing** (this includes the plural form: we, us, our, ours)
- **Use ACTIVE voice, rather than PASSIVE voice**. Example:
  - **ACTIVE VOICE:** Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence to include the ideas...
  - **PASSIVE:** The Declaration of Independence was written to... (the action verb "to write" is missing its actor!)
- **Use past tense for history**. Also, when possible, use simple past tense and not past progressive. Example: past tense - I walked; past progressive - I was walking.
- **Use last names in formal writing**. Use Andrew Jackson first, then Jackson thereafter.
- **No Contractions**. They aren't necessary (an attempt at humor).
- **Avoid being conversational**. You are not writing a personal letter to your teacher. Do not write as you speak!
- **Do not use slang or clichés**. Avoid colloquialisms unless the inclusion is necessary and appropriate.
- **Number Agreement** - know the rule, follow the rule! Examples below:
  - INCORRECT: "Each Senator voted their conscience..."; CORRECT: "Each Senator voted his (or her) conscience"

- **Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement in Person:** see the example below (SOURCE: Baugh, 10):
  - INCORRECT: "The programmer should know BASIC thoroughly. Otherwise, you will have trouble writing programs." (of course, you should not use 2<sup>nd</sup> person in formal writing either)
  - CORRECT: "The programmer should know BASIC thoroughly. Otherwise, he or she will have trouble writing programs."
- **Avoid Long Quotes.** I want to read your understanding of the history, not what a historian has written. In most cases, points will be deducted and the final score greatly affected for those papers that use mostly quotations.
- **Avoid action verbs when describing events, or things that are not human.** Example: "The Civil War pushed..." (The Civil War cannot push anything!)
- **Avoid choppy sentences.** Good organization will prevent this and allow you to compose more fluid sentences that will convince the reader of your argument.
- **Do not claim more than you can prove!** You should make an educated interpretation, supported by proper evidence. History is non-fiction, please keep it that way!
- **Be specific.** "Be more or less specific" ☺ Fully explain your argument using concrete examples. Do not over-generalize.
- **Avoid common spelling errors or word usage errors.** Examples: **affect/effect** (affect = verb; effect = noun); **their/there**; **accept/except**; **apart/a part** (apart = separate of; a part = belonging to); **capital/capitol**; **it's/its** (it's = it is; its = belonging to "it"); **that/which** (see example below); **you're/your** (you're = you are; your = belonging to you)
  - Example of "that/which" (SOURCE: Baugh, 136):
    - That - introduces phrase or clause (not separated by commas); Example: "The shipment that arrived yesterday"
    - Which - "used to refer to a specific noun or pronoun and to introduce a phrase or clause not essential to the meaning of the sentence" (usually set off by commas)
      - Example: "We ate fifteen donuts, which were..."
      - Example 2: "The shipment, which arrived yesterday, had to be returned."
- **Keep sentences clear and to the point, with the subject and verb close together.**
- **Make a clear decision about what you are writing; avoid using these words in your analysis: seems, appears, might, maybe, perhaps. Be BOLD!**
- **Avoid "purple prose."** For this rule, Dr. Dale Clifford has the best advice:
  - "When you are telling a story, the temptation to sensationalize is difficult to resist. But when you use highly emotional words, especially adjectives dripping with connotations, your reader will become so suspicious of the exaggeration that your work will lose its impact. Never claim more - even in the choice of words - than you can prove" ([www.unf.edu/~clifford/ca/ca1.html](http://www.unf.edu/~clifford/ca/ca1.html)).
- **Do not repeat yourself!** Proofread your writing carefully to ensure that you fully explain your thesis without simply repeating the same idea over, and over, and over again! Repeating information in a speech may be acceptable, but not in writing. Some consider redundancy an insult to the reader. Please do not make me cry. Thanks.

## Plagiarism/Proper Citation Method

Students are expected to understand how to cite properly in MLA format, when to cite and how to appropriately paraphrase. All students received instruction in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade on how to do this properly.

**DO NOT PLAGIARIZE.** "If you are in doubt, cite it anyways! It is better to cite than not to cite." If you are unsure about the proper citation format, consult your writing handbook. Since history papers require a large amount of factual information, many citations are expected.

**Any information gained from an outside source, whether quoted or not, must be cited properly both in-text and on the works cited page.**

How to avoid plagiarism:

- Never copy and paste text from the internet. This is a dangerous method and usually leads to plagiarism, whether intentional or not.
- Organize your paper and instead of having the actual sources in front of you when writing, have notes or note cards instead. By taking notes on your research sources, not only will you learn more from those sources, but it will help you organize your writing and avoid plagiarism.

To serve as an example of citing information, below are the two resources I used in preparing this document:

Baugh, L. Sue. Essentials of English Grammar: A Practical Guide to the Mastery of English. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: Passport Books, 1993.

Clifford Ph.D., Dale. Clifford's Advice on Writing. 9 September 2004.  
<<http://www.unf.edu/~clifford/ca/ca1.html>>

**CITATION METHOD:** Bishop Kenny High School uses the MLA citation format. Therefore, this shall be the prescribed format for this class. Each formal writing assignment must include both **in-text** citations and a **works cited page**. Please consult your writing handbook for the proper format of both. (Also: do not include long URL addresses in the in-text citations, read your Writers, Inc. text for the proper format)

## Closing Remarks

The key to a well-written paper or essay is proofreading. I advise you to proofread many times, and allow someone else to read your writing. Usually someone removed from the actual writing process will find the errors that you did not notice. If someone else is not available, try reading your paper aloud. Finally, I recommend the following web sites as additional resources:

**Writers Inc:** [www.thewritesource.com](http://www.thewritesource.com)

**Again, Dr. Clifford:** [www.unf.edu/~clifford/ca/ca1.html](http://www.unf.edu/~clifford/ca/ca1.html)

\* Dr. Dale Clifford is Associate Professor and former Chair, Department of History at the University of North Florida.