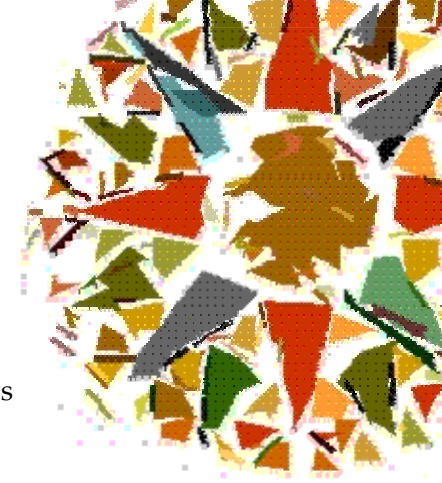


GENERAL COMMENTS AND TIPS ON WRITING

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The following document outlines several important points that are not always fully appreciated by students (even those pursuing the Ph.D.):

1. Bring the Reader Along
2. Editing
3. Apostrophes
4. When Referring to Old Documents, Use the Past Tense
5. Using Evidence
6. Use the Passive Voice Carefully
7. Pronouns and Precedents
8. Quotation Marks, Punctuation, and Note Numbers
9. References to Figures in the Text
10. References
11. Citing Maps

1. BRING THE READER ALONG

The pre-eminent goal in writing an essay is to expound a thesis. To do this, to explain why the topic is relevant, to present the evidence, and to make the argument, the author must lay out each step to the reader. The author cannot make leaps of logic, or take sudden turns, without explaining to the reader what is going on. The author must “bring the reader along.”

In historical writing, this includes, among other things, being clear about the chronology of events that the essay deals with and of the evidence that the author relies upon.

2. EDITING

Edit, edit, edit! There is nothing more annoying to the reader than to find simple errors in a text (e.g., confusing “their” and “there” or misusing apostrophes). Two crucial points to bear in mind are:

- a) do not rely on the spell checker: spell-checking dictionaries can include some egregious errors, while the spell checker cannot help with words that are correctly spelled but incorrectly used.
- b) equally, do not rely on the grammar checker: grammar checkers are indeed

often useful, but they cannot handle all usages and personal styles.

- c) a useful trick is to read the paper aloud. We are trained to read silently, in which case the brain interleaves what is read on a page with what it thinks it wrote. Reading a paper aloud uses different parts of the brain, in particular the aural centers, and prevents spurious memories from getting in the way. Errors should become readily apparent.

Reading a paper out loud also helps the author edit for flow and meaning. The rule here is very simple: if a passage don't sound good, it ain't good! The solution is equally simple: rewrite the phrase, sentence, or paragraph until it sounds good and has the precise meaning that you desire. You should not hand in any work that has not been edited in this way.

3. APOSTROPHES

The apostrophe (') is generally used to indicate missing letters in a verbal contraction or in possessive forms (in which case the apostrophe does actually indicate a contraction).

Verbal contractions such as "don't" or "isn't" should not appear in formal writing.

The one exception to the addition of "'s" to nouns to make the possessive — as in "Newton's" or "Douglass's" — is the pronouns "it." The possessive of "it" is "its"; "it's" is a contraction for "it is" and, as a contraction, should never appear in formal writing.

It is common to write compound dates with an apostrophe, such as "the 1920's" or "the 1700's." The apostrophe does not here indicate a contraction and should be dropped. It is preferred to write simple "1920s" or "1700s."

4. WHEN REFERRING TO OLD DOCUMENTS, USE THE PAST TENSE

It is good practice when writing history to use the past tenses when referring to works produced in the past. For example,

Thomas Salmon wrote that America was a large and "savage" land.

In his maps of North America, Thomas Jefferys represented the continent as a space of natural wealth and opportunity.

On his final draft, Montresor harshly criticized the installation.

Note that this usage runs counter to the common practice of literary scholars, who would employ the present tense ("Salmon writes . . .," "Jefferys represents . . .," or "Montresor criticizes . . ."). However, historians should always remember that they are writing about the past. Moreover, using the past tenses allows the writer to give a clear sense of chronology:

Whereas Thomas Salmon had written that America was a large and "savage" land, Thomas Jefferys subsequently represented the continent as a space of natural wealth and opportunity.

And, after all, maintaining a clear chronology really helps the reader!

5. USING EVIDENCE

It is good practice — whatever the discipline — to do three things with each piece of evidence that is adduced in a paper: the evidence needs to be introduced, it must be given, and its meaning must be explicated.

That is, data should not be just thrown out. The reader needs to expect them and then needs to be told what is the particular meaning of the data. In other words, bring your reader along!

6. USE THE PASSIVE VOICE CAREFULLY

In regular sentences, verbs take the active voice in which the subject of the verb (the doer) is distinct from the object (the doee). For example:

| | | |
|-----------------|--------|----------------|
| Thomas Jefferys | mapped | North America. |
| (subject) | (verb) | (object) |

In the passive voice, the subject and the object of the verb are the same:

| | |
|----------------------|------------|
| North America | was mapped |
| (subject and object) | (verb) |

The problem with the passive voice is immediately apparent from this example: unless care is taken, the passive voice hides and obscures the agent; who is actually doing the action? The passive voice can therefore be used to preclude proper understanding of a situation. When using the passive voice, the author must therefore take great care in specifying the agent:

| | | |
|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| North America | was mapped | by Thomas Jefferys |
|---------------|------------|--------------------|

n.b. instructors use the passive voice as a **red flag** because it usually indicates that the student does not fully understand the subject matter!

(Much of this document is couched in the passive voice; but here the agent — the writer, the student, you — is understood.)

7. PRONOUNS AND PRECEDENTS

It is very common in English to use the pronouns “this,” “these,” or “those” as the subject of a sentence, as in

This caused a problem.

In such cases, you must ensure that the reader will clearly and easily understand what it is that the “this,” “these,” or “those” refers to. That is to say, the author must be certain that the reader will understand the pronoun’s precedent. If there is any doubt, clarify the reference, as in

This technical failure caused a problem.

n.b. this is a particular problem for me when I write; I have to take great care to always ask myself, “which ‘this’ is this?”

8. QUOTATION MARKS, PUNCTUATION, AND NOTE NUMBERS

In American practice, punctuation is generally placed within the quotation marks at the end of a quotation:

“You can’t do that,” he said.

He exclaimed, “How could you do that!”

The exceptions are for the colon (:) and semicolon (;). Thus:

Isaac Massa provided an important insight on his 1611 map, “Caerte van’t Noorderste Russen”: . . .

The only three directions identified on the compass were: “northeast”; “north-by-northeast”; and “south.”

Note numbers follow punctuation and quotation marks:

In 1795, Mathew Carey published the first atlas in the U.S.A.²²

As Skelton opined, “Sometimes a map is just a map.”²³

Note that British practice is generally to put punctuation outside of the quotation marks:

As Skelton opined, “Sometimes a map is just a map”.²³

9. REFERENCES TO FIGURES IN THE TEXT

It is usual for illustrations to be referenced by a consecutive number and to be labeled as “Figure 1,” “Figure 2,” etc. It is usually not necessary to refer explicitly to each illustration in the text (“the map reproduced as figure 1 is ...”). It is sufficient to say, for example,

Adam Olearius’s 1634 map of the Volga (Figure 1) demonstrates the great emphasis placed on rivers and the little attention paid to the intervening lands on Russian maps before 1700.

10. REFERENCES

References should be provided in note form. Notes allow the author to give further information about a source, such as about its reliability or about its republication, etc. Notes are also more flexible than other forms of referencing (e.g., author-date or MLA-style) when dealing with newspaper articles and archival sources. For these reasons, notes are the preferred form of providing references in historical writing. Full information on this “humanities style” is

available in the *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

The first time that a work is cited within a note, a full and complete citation is provided:

1. Thomas Jefferys, *The American Atlas: Or, A Geographical Description of the Whole Continent of America* (London: Robert Sayer and John Bennett, 1775 [i.e., 1776]), reprinted as *The American Atlas, London 1776*, Series of Atlases in Facsimile, 6s 6 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1974).

Thereafter, a “short title” citation should be provided, comprising the last name of the author(s) and a meaningful short title:

3. Jefferys, *American Atlas*, map 7.

Multiple citations — both short and full; with or without commentary — can of course be placed within one note:

30. This point has been discussed at length by Josef W. Konvitz, *Cartography in France, 1660-1848: Science, Engineering, and Statecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 123-45, and more recently by Mukerji, “Cartography, Entrepreneurialism, and Power,” 250-55.

31. Mukerji, “Cartography, Entrepreneurialism, and Power,” 260-75; Monique Pelletier, *Cartographie de la France et du monde de la Renaissance au Siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2001).

Use of *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*, and other Latin abbreviations, are generally discouraged nowadays because too few people know how to use them properly. (Indeed, too few know what they actually mean!)

It is only very rarely necessary to use “p.” or “pp.” for “pages” or “vol.” for volume.

Precise citation styles for notes and bibliography are provided in the **Style Guidelines**.

11. CITING MAPS

Maps — like any other piece of evidence — must be cited when they are used. A map in an atlas can be treated like a book chapter; a separately published map can be treated like a book. When using rare maps (as with books and other evidentiary sources), it is important also to specify the physical location of the work that was consulted; this comprises both library name and call number. This last information is also essential when citing a manuscript work.

Precise citation styles for notes and bibliography are provided in the **Style Guidelines**.