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## How To Write a Good History Essay

By [Robert Pearce](#)

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The former editor of *History Review* Robert Pearce gives his personal view.

First of all we ought to ask, What constitutes a good history essay? Probably no two people will completely agree, if only for the very good reason that quality is in the eye – and reflects the intellectual state – of the reader. What follows, therefore, skips philosophical issues and instead offers practical advice on how to write an essay that will get top marks.

### Relevance

Witnesses in court promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. All history students should swear a similar oath: to answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. This is the number one rule. You can write brilliantly and argue a case with a wealth of convincing evidence, but if you are not being relevant then you might as well be tinkling a cymbal. In other words, you have to think very carefully about the question you are asked to answer. Be certain to avoid the besetting sin of those weaker students who, fatally, answer the question the examiners should have set – but unfortunately didn't. Take your time, look carefully at the wording of the question, and be certain in your own mind that you have thoroughly understood all its terms.

If, for instance, you are asked why Hitler came to power, you must define what this process of coming to power consisted of. Is there any specific event that marks his achievement of power? If you immediately seize on his appointment as Chancellor, think carefully and ask yourself what actual powers this position conferred on him. Was the passing of the Enabling Act more important? And when did the rise to power actually start? Will you need to mention Hitler's birth and childhood or the hyperinflation of the early 1920s? If you can establish which years are relevant – and consequently which are irrelevant – you will have made a very good start. Then you can decide on the different factors that explain his rise.

Or if you are asked to explain the successes of a particular individual, again avoid writing the first thing that comes into your head. Think about possible successes. In so doing, you will automatically be presented with the problem of defining 'success'. What does it really mean? Is it the achievement of one's aims? Is it objective (a matter of fact) or subjective (a matter of opinion)? Do we have to consider short-term and long-term successes? If the person benefits from extraordinary good luck, is that still a success? This grappling with the problem of definition will help you compile an annotated list of successes, and you can then proceed to explain them, tracing their origins and pinpointing how and why they occurred. Is there a key common factor in the successes? If so, this could constitute the central thrust of your answer.

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The key word in the above paragraphs is *think*. This should be distinguished from remembering, daydreaming and idly speculating. Thinking is rarely a pleasant undertaking, and most of us contrive to avoid it most of the time. But unfortunately there's no substitute if you want to get the top grade. So think as hard as you can about the meaning of the question, about the issues it raises and the ways you can answer it. You have to think and think hard – and then you should think again, trying to find loopholes in your reasoning. Eventually you will almost certainly become confused. Don't worry: confusion is often a necessary stage in the achievement of clarity. If you get totally confused, take a break. When you return to the question, it may be that the problems have resolved themselves. If not, give yourself more time. You may well find that decent ideas simply pop into your conscious mind at unexpected times.

You need to think for yourself and come up with a 'bright idea' to write a good history essay. You can of course follow the herd and repeat the interpretation given in your textbook. But there are problems here. First, what is to distinguish your work from that of everybody else? Second, it's very unlikely that your school text has grappled with the precise question you have been set.

The advice above is relevant to coursework essays. It's different in exams, where time is limited. But even here, you should take time out to do some thinking. Examiners look for quality rather than quantity, and brevity makes relevance doubly important. If you get into the habit of thinking about the key issues in your course, rather than just absorbing whatever you are told or read, you will probably find you've already considered whatever issues examiners pinpoint in exams.

### **The Vital First Paragraph**

Every part of an essay is important, but the first paragraph is vital. This is the first chance you have to impress – or depress – an examiner, and first impressions are often decisive. You might therefore try to write an eye-catching first sentence. ('Start with an earthquake and work up to a climax,' counselled the film-maker Cecil B. De Mille.) More important is that you demonstrate your understanding of the question set. Here you give your carefully thought out definitions of the key terms, and here you establish the relevant time-frame and issues – in other words, the parameters of the question. Also, you divide the overall question into more manageable sub-divisions, or smaller questions, on each of which you will subsequently write a paragraph. You formulate an argument, or perhaps voice alternative lines of argument, that you will substantiate later in the essay. Hence the first paragraph – or perhaps you might spread this opening section over two paragraphs – is the key to a good essay.

On reading a good first paragraph, examiners will be profoundly reassured that its author is on the right lines, being relevant, analytical and rigorous. They will probably breathe a sign of relief that here is one student at least who is avoiding the two common pitfalls. The first is to ignore the question altogether. The second is to write a narrative of events – often beginning with the birth of an individual – with a half-hearted attempt at answering the question in the final paragraph.

### **Middle Paragraphs**

Philip Larkin once said that the modern novel consists of a beginning, a *muddle* and an end. The same is, alas, all too true of many history essays. But if you've written a good opening section, in

which you've divided the overall question into separate and manageable areas, your essay will not be muddled; it will be coherent.

It should be obvious, from your middle paragraphs, what question you are answering. Indeed it's a good test of an essay that the reader should be able to guess the question even if the title is covered up. So consider starting each middle paragraph with a generalisation relevant to the question. Then you can develop this idea and substantiate it with evidence. You must give a judicious selection of evidence (i.e. facts and quotations) to support the argument you are making. You only have a limited amount of space or time, so think about how much detail to give. Relatively unimportant background issues can be summarised with a broad brush; your most important areas need greater embellishment. (Do not be one of those misguided candidates who, unaccountably, 'go to town' on peripheral areas and gloss over crucial ones.)

The regulations often specify that, in the A2 year, students should be familiar with the main interpretations of historians. Do not ignore this advice. On the other hand, do not take historiography to extremes, so that the past itself is virtually ignored. In particular, never fall into the trap of thinking that all you need are sets of historians' opinions. Quite often in essays students give a generalisation and back it up with the opinion of an historian – and since they have formulated the generalisation from the opinion, the argument is entirely circular, and therefore meaningless and unconvincing. It also fatuously presupposes that historians are infallible and omniscient gods. Unless you give real evidence to back up your view – as historians do – a generalisation is simply an assertion. Middle paragraphs are the place for the real substance of an essay, and you neglect this at your peril.

## **Final Paragraph**

If you've been arguing a case in the body of an essay, you should hammer home that case in the final paragraph. If you've been examining several alternative propositions, now is the time to say which one is correct. In the middle paragraph you are akin to a barrister arguing a case. Now, in the final paragraph, you are the judge summing up and pronouncing the verdict.

It's as well to keep in mind what you should *not* be doing. Do not introduce lots of fresh evidence at this stage, though you can certainly introduce the odd extra fact that clinches your case. Nor should you go on to the 'next' issue. If your question is about Hitler coming to power, you should not end by giving a summary of what he did once in power. Such an irrelevant ending will fail to win marks. Remember the point about answering 'nothing but the question'? On the other hand, it may be that some of the things Hitler did after coming to power shed valuable light on why he came to power in the first place. If you can argue this convincingly, all well and good; but don't expect the examiner to puzzle out relevance. Examiners are not expected to think; you must make your material explicitly relevant.

## **Final Thoughts**

A good essay, especially one that seems to have been effortlessly composed, has often been revised several times; and the best students are those who are most selfcritical. Get into the habit of criticising your own first drafts, and never be satisfied with second-best efforts. Also, take account of the feedback you get from teachers. Don't just look at the mark your essay gets; read the comments carefully. If teachers don't advise how to do even better next time, they are not doing their job properly.

Relevance is vital in a good essay, and so is evidence marshalled in such a way that it produces a convincing argument. But nothing else really matters. The paragraph structure recommended above is just a guide, nothing more, and you can write a fine essay using a very different arrangement of material. Similarly, though it would be excellent if you wrote in expressive, witty and sparkingly provocative prose, you can still get top marks even if your essay is serious, ponderous and even downright dull.

There are an infinite number of ways to write an essay because any form of writing is a means of self-expression. Your essay will be unique because you are unique: it's up to you to ensure that it's uniquely good, not uniquely mediocre.

Robert Pearce is the editor of History Review.

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