

What is a history paper?

A history paper—just like a paper in any specific academic discipline—has its own unique traits and guidelines. Several different types of papers may be assigned in a history course, including book reviews, primary source analyses, synthesis essays and research papers. Research papers allow you to do the exciting work of historians, studying material from the past and making your own original argument. The following list outlines the key components of a research paper in the field of history.

1. A history research paper is guided by a historical question.

Asking an interesting question is the key to writing a successful paper. Your paper is not so much about a historical topic as it is about a historical problem. Think of your paper as starting off with a problem that you will then address in subsequent pages, aided by the historical evidence available to you.

2. A history research paper makes a historical argument.

Your paper must take a position on the problem you have posed. You are not simply making observations about the material you have read: you are using your observations to craft an argument that teaches us something new about the past. The argument you make might revise a claim made by other scholars, might illustrate a completely new way of looking at a topic or might reveal a point that scholars have missed in previous research.

3. A history research paper is grounded in evidence from primary sources.

Unlike research papers in other disciplines, a history paper relies on primary source material, meaning materials that were produced during the period your paper addresses. They might be letters, diaries, census data, maps, speeches, treaties—any raw material from a historical moment. Primary sources are the key pieces of evidence you will use to support your argument.

4. A history research paper puts itself in conversation with existing scholarship.

You need to show how your paper connects to what other scholars have said about your topic. To do this, you will draw from secondary sources, meaning sources that professional historians have written based on their own studies of primary source material. Your paper will address the main claims made by other scholars, and will show how the argument you are making supports, refutes or complicates the conversations among scholars.

5. A history research paper makes an original contribution to historical knowledge.

Because a history research paper is based on your own analysis of primary and secondary source material, you will be making a new contribution to our understanding of the past. Making an original argument relies on three key ingredients: first, asking a historical question about which you are genuinely interested; two, reading primary sources in new and creative ways; and three, thinking about questions that the extant scholarship on your topic leaves unanswered. Your research paper should offer a fresh and insightful way to think about a historical problem.

For help at any stage of the writing process, visit the History Writing Center online at www.history.ucla.edu/academics/undergraduate/history-writing-center or in Bunche 2165.