Information Fluency in Humanities Writing

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HOW TO WRITE A BOOK REVIEW

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Purpose

- The purpose of the book review is to assess the book for prospective readers. It helps readers decide whether to read the book or not.
- Your evaluation of the book should also give the reader ideas about strengths and weaknesses of the book.

Format

- Book reviews are written as essays and as such they include an introduction, a body and a conclusion.
- The **introduction** should include:
  - Your identification of the book's central arguments (what is the author's goal in writing this book?),
  - and your recommendation (indicate the book's scholarly value).

  Read published book reviews in scholarly journals in your field. This is a good way to familiarize yourself with the format and content of well written reviews.

Body

- The **body** should summarize the main arguments and provide your critique of them.
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments (be specific)?
  - How convincing and authoritative are his/her sources and evidence?
  - Does the author accomplish what he/she set out to do? (Do not critique the book for what it is not!)

A book review is NOT a chapter by chapter summary.

This is a book review, not a book report.

Conclusion

- The concluding paragraph of your review should express your assessment of the book, not repeat the author's final conclusion.

- You can reiterate your position about the value of the book by re-stating your thesis.

Length

- For professional journals the length of a book review is determined by the publisher.
- If the audience is your professor, follow his/her directions.
- A book review can be as short as 500 words and can exceed 25 pages.

Title

- The title of the book review is generally the citation of the book and additional publication information. One of the most common forms of citation in the Humanities is the following.

- Author's name and last name, *The Title of the Book* (Publication place: Publisher, Publication year). Pp. page number. Price for paperback or hardcover, you can add ISBN number [For the Humanities **use Chicago/Turabian Manual of Style**]

For example:

Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004). Pp. 198. Hard Cover $35.00.

Sample Outline for a Book review

A: Introduction:

- State author's goals and main arguments (not more than one or two sentences)
- Indicate the value of the book to the scholarly discussion of the topic

B: Body

1. Briefly summarize the book's central arguments.
2. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the book. This is the most significant part of your essay. For non-fiction books, your critique can be based on (but not limited to) the following:
   - With what particular subject or period does the book deal?
   - How thorough is its treatment of the subject?
   - How is the book organized?
   - What types of sources are used? How extensive are the sources?
   - What is the author's the point of view or thesis?
   - Is the treatment superficial or profound? And why?
   - Who is the intended audience?
   - How are maps, illustrations, charts, etc. used?
   - From what perspective (in the scholarly debate) is the work written?

C: Conclusion

- Tell your readers
  - If the book is worth reading?
  - What intellectual gap it fills?
  - What are its shortcomings?

In Summary

Evaluate the book for interest, accuracy, interpretation, importance, thoroughness, and usefulness to its intended audience.

Checklist

Make sure that:

- You read published book reviews in scholarly journals in your field.
- The citation of the book is accurate.
- The review provides a critique of the book, not a summary.
- The essay contains an introduction, a body and a conclusion.
- The essay remains within the specified page limits.
- The reader has a clear understanding of your evaluation of the book.
- There are no grammatical and spelling errors.

Peer Review of a Research Paper

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Purpose

What is the purpose of Peer Review?

- Peer review improves written work, presentations, and conceptualization of the project.

Who does peer review and why?

- Students revising work for a course
- Scholars preparing work for publication
- Anyone wanting feedback to improve his/her writing

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: The Introduction

- Does the paper open with an engaging first sentence that draws in the reader and identifies the paper's topic?
- If the first sentence is too broad, vague, or generic, how might you offer suggestions for improvement?
- What is the paper's topic?
- What is the author's argument? Is it readily identifiable?
- How would you summarize the paper's subject/goals (in one sentence)?
- Is there a road map that indicates how the paper will be organized?
- Do all of these items appear in the opening paragraphs?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Organization

- Does the paper follow the road map?
- Do the sections appear in an order that makes sense?
- Does the paper have transitions? Do they make sense?
- Are the paragraphs internally cohesive?
- Do the paragraphs/sections follow logically? How might moving some of the paper's material around help with overall clarity?
- Is each paragraph related to the main argument? Or do you find yourself wondering why the author has included a particular paragraph or section?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Sources

- What kind of evidence does the author provide?
- What types of primary sources does the author use? What portion of the paper comes from primary sources? What types of primary documents could you suggest?
- How many secondary sources does the author use? How many academic sources– peer-reviewed books and articles from university publishers?
- When were the books and articles published? Are a significant number of them recently published?
- Is it clear that the author understands the historiographical debates into which the paper enters?
- Does the author use the primary and secondary sources to frame the project in the larger historical context?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Content

- Is the background information helpful in understanding the central topic and is it limited to 10% of the paper?
- Does the paper overuse quotes? Are all direct quotations necessary and justified? Does the author analyze quotations?
- Throughout the essay, does the narrative—or the story being told—come through clearly? Do the sources help to build the narrative?
- Is the chronology clear?
- Overall, does the body of the paper support the thesis in a logical and well-constructed manner?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Grammar and Syntax

- Is the paper free of common errors? What suggestions do you have?
- Common errors to watch for include: spelling errors, errors in punctuation (especially confusing plurals and possessives), passive voice, and misuse of words (typo and/or wrong meaning) and incomplete and run-on sentences.
- See Strunk and White, *Elements of Style* for more help.
- Does the paper use colloquial expressions, contractions, or other informal language that should be avoided in a formal essay?
- Is the paper written clearly, concisely and in proper English?
- Does the paper follow the technical aspects of the assignment's instructions?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Referencing

- Does the paper use Chicago style footnotes and do they follow the standard format?
- Are there errors in form, and if so, what are they?
- Does the author cite all of his/her sources? If not, where do you think the author may need citations?
- Did the author include a Chicago style bibliography?

Questions for the Peer Reviewer: Conclusion

- Does the conclusion reiterate the paper's thesis and goals clearly?
- Does the conclusion introduce new information? If so, should that new information be incorporated into the body of the paper? Where?
- Is the conclusion vague? Is it choppy?
- How articulate is the conclusion?

Final Comments

Provide your peer review partner substantive comments. Be sure to begin with praise. Everyone appreciates knowing what he/she did well. Then, provide further comments that address the questions listed above and will help the author improve his/her paper. In these comments you should address larger issues of thesis clarity, organization, content, historical context, and grammar. Your comments should touch on each of the five categories, but you do not have to address every one of the questions listed above. Rather, use the questions to help you think about where the paper has been most successful and what still needs the most work, and then respond accordingly. Specific comments intended to help in the revision process are the most useful.

Checklist

- How well does the introduction articulate the paper's topic, thesis, goals and structure (road map)?
- What are the paper's organizational strengths and weaknesses?
- How well does the paper interpret primary and secondary sources and does it effectively interpret these sources in a coherent, historical narrative?
- What types of grammar/syntax should the author watch for as he/she continues to revise?
- How well does the conclusion reiterate the paper's central argument and goals?

How to Write a Historiographical Essay

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Purpose

- What is historiography?
- What is a historiographical paper?
- Why do we write historiography?

What is Historiography?

- Historiography is the history of the history or the state of the art.
- It is the collective literature on a historical subject.

What is a Historiographical Paper?

- A historiographical paper is an essay that discusses what and how other historians have written about a subject.
- It compares and contrasts the arguments and evidence made in those secondary sources.
- It compiles a survey of the historical questions that professional historians have asked and their conclusions.

Why do we write historiography?

Historical writing reflects the interpretations of the historians working in the field. Writing historiography helps to:

- Identify the historical debates between those historians.
- Identify the historical questions and areas of research that still need to be investigated.

Common Misconceptions of a Historiographical Paper

- It is ***not*** a collective book review of all your sources.
- It is ***not*** a narrative of a historical event.
- It is ***not*** a paper based on original (primary) research.

It ***is*** a literature compilation of the work other historians have produced.

Before You Start Writing

- Choose a broad historical topic

- Determine the feasibility of your topic
  To do that:
  - Conduct a literature search for secondary sources
  - Check academic databases for publications on the topic
  - Narrow your topic based on the pertinent sources published

Selecting Sources

- Use secondary literature
  - Books written by professional historians. Most often, these will be published by academic (university) presses
  - Historical articles published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals
- Your sources should be in dialogue with each other, meaning their topics should be similar enough that there is something to compare and contrast
- Do ***not*** use:
  - Textbooks, encyclopedias, or on-line reference sources
  - History-themed articles written for a general audience
  - Book reviews

Selecting Sources, Continued

- Things to consider when selecting your sources
  - Look for other historiographical essays on your topic.
    - These will help you identify possible sources and the historical debates.
  - Are the sources you identified a collection of recent and canonical publications?
    - Canonical works are considered classics or standards in the field. Reading other historiographical essays will help you identify those works in the canon.
    - Using recent publications will make your historiographical essay more complete, relevant and useful for other readers.

Content: Introduction

- It should identify your topic and the major debates in the historiography.
- It may introduce the titles and authors assessed in the body of the paper.

An introduction **should not**:

- It should not ask an original research question.
- It should not evaluate the historical quality of the scholarship analyzed in the body of the paper.

Content: Body

- Identify the thesis of each of your sources. It should ***not*** review or simply summarize the source.
- Discuss how each source contributes to the larger debates.
- Identify new debates (if any) proposed by recent publications.
- Compare and contrast the arguments in your sources.
- Your sources will largely dictate the order in which you discuss them. Pay attention to publication date as later works are influenced by previous works even if the authors disagree.

Content: Conclusion

- Your conclusion should evaluate the evolution of the debates in the field based on the works examined.

- Propose new questions for historical research based on gaps in the historiography presented.
  - Those gaps may be:
    - research questions asked in the sources presented that are not fully answered
    - spin-off questions from previous studies not yet addressed
    - research based on evidence never before explored

Checklist

- Is your topic narrow or broad enough that you can find sufficient sources to evaluate?
- Did you examine other historiographical essays on the topic?
- Have you identified canonical works and recent publications?
- Have you identified the major debates in the field?
- Did you avoid reviewing or over summarizing the sources?
- Did your essay create a conversation between the sources?
- Have you presented new research questions?

Publishing in Peer-Reviewed Journals

By
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Who Publishes in Scholarly Journals?

- Students who must provide writing samples for admissions packages for Ph.D. programs
- Ph.D. students who will soon be on the job market
- Tenure-track faculty preparing their tenure folders
- Active scholars in the field

Evaluating your work for publication

- Seminar papers to published work:

  Classroom work must be revised before publication. Additional research and writing frequently precede acceptance for publication.

- Clear, concise thesis:

  Published manuscripts require more than a "good story." It is not enough to suggest that the topic "has never been studied." A well-developed thesis provides an analysis of the factual evidence. You should be able to state your thesis in one or two sentences.

Evaluating your work for publication, continued

- Thesis grounded in the current literature:

  A well-crafted historiographical survey places the author's thesis within the context of current debates and provides the reader with an insight into the origins of thesis and the contribution it makes to the field.

- Adequate primary sources:

  Journal editors are skeptical of manuscripts that are dependent on a few sources or online sources. Review your documentation critically and complete additional research in archival collections.

Choosing a Journal

- Evaluate journals critically: which is right for you?
  - Topical emphasis
  - Average length of time from submission to publication
- One journal at a time
  - Submit your manuscript to one journal
  - If your manuscript is rejected, you may submit to a second journal
- Looks matter
  - Sloppy manuscripts suggest sloppy scholarship: misspelled words, syntax, passive voice, and repetition are common errors.
  - Send what the journal requires. Check the journal website for format and style guidelines.

Submit and Wait!

- Submission and acknowledgement
  - Editorial office will notify you by card letter, or email that your manuscript has been received.
- First read
  - Some journals do an “in-house” reading of the manuscript to determine if the work meets the journal requirements. If this is the case, you may receive a second notice that the manuscript has been sent out for review.
  - If your manuscript is rejected, the editor will provide you with an explanation for the rejection. While not what you hoped, the explanation can assist you in revising the manuscript for another journal.

Referees

- **What referees do**
  - Manuscripts are refereed through a double blind process in which only the editor knows the identity of both the authors and the referees.
  - Referees are chosen for their expertise in the subject of the manuscript.
  - Manuscript will be reviewed by several referees, typically 2-6 and the process requires a minimum of 6 weeks.
- **Evaluating referee comments**
  - Referees suggest the course of action for editors: publish as is, publish with minor revisions, publish with major revisions, or do not publish.
  - Referee reports include comments on the manuscript. Even if your manuscript was rejected for publication, read the referee comments carefully. Their comments will help you improve your work.
  - If your manuscript was rejected, revise, and send it to another

Your article has been accepted! Now what?

- Revise! Revise! Revise!
  - You are not required to make every change, but you must explain to the editor those changes you do not make.
  - Adhere to the deadline the editor sets. If you cannot meet the deadline, inform the editor immediately.
- Images, maps, and tables
  - Obtain permission to print for all images and maps to be published.
  - Submit images in the format required by the journal.
  - Provide captions and attributions for images, maps, and tables.

Almost there!

Copyediting

- All manuscripts are copyedited before publication.
- Copyediting removes spelling, syntax, or grammatical errors.
- Copyediting formats the manuscript to conform with journal requirements.
- You will receive the copyedited copy with a quick turn-around date.
- Read the copyedited manuscript carefully to be sure editing and formatting changes did not alter the meaning.
- Return the copy with changes clearly marked by the deadline date.

Page proofs or blue lines

- Some presses send page proofs and/or blue lines for final approval.
- Make only essential changes; changes other than spelling or grammar corrections at this stage are costly.
- Return the copy by the deadline to avoid publication delays

Important Note

- Copyright

  The journal owns the copyright to your article. Many journals now require that you sign a contract acknowledging that your work is based on original research and that the journal holds the copyright. If you use the material from your article in a monograph or other publication, you must obtain permission from the journal editor. In most cases, permission is granted without charge, or for a small fee.

Checklist

- Evaluate your work
  - Thesis?
  - Historiography?
  - Sources?
- Choose a journal
  - Matched to your needs?
  - One journal at a time?
  - Looks matter
- The referee process
  - Read the comments carefully
- Revisions
  - Complete revisions in a timely manner
  - Permissions, captions, and attributions for images, maps, and tables
- Copyediting
  - Read copyediting and page proofs carefully
  - Limit changes to essentials
  - Return all copy edits and page proofs to meet deadlines