Dr. Balloffet’s Writing Guide

----------------- A. INTRODUCTION -----------------

This guide explains how I will grade your papers and how you can improve your writing.

I emphasize improving your writing because an ability to communicate in writing is a rare and valuable skill that will enhance your success in almost any career.

To make a strong case you must present and explain historical evidence: relevant information and examples from the past. Please do not confuse evidence with metaphors and analogies to contemporary events or with your own personal experiences and opinions.

------------------------ B. GRADING ------------------------

There are THREE CRITERIA for grading:

(1) Argument: In your first paragraph, you should present a significant and clear argument; in your final paragraph, you should summarize your argument and the supporting evidence. This does not mean simply repeating your introductory paragraph.

(2) Evidence: In the middle (body) of your paper, you must present evidence found in the readings, but especially in the documents, to support your argument.

(3) Writing: Throughout the paper, you must show command of grammar, spelling, and clarity of expression in your sentences. You also must arrange your sentences into coherent paragraphs with a unifying topic sentence. And you need to develop your argument through a series of paragraphs that flow logically from one to the next.

You will be graded for each of the three criteria, which will then be averaged for the overall grade. For example:

(1) Argument: 75 = C

(2) Evidence: 70 = C–

(3) Writing: 85 = B

----------------------------- Total of 230 points divided by 3 = 74 = C (overall).
OVERALL:

(1) Papers should be double spaced, with reasonable margins and font. Number your pages and fasten your paper with a staple or paper-clip in the upper left corner.

(2) Your paper must be your own work expressed in your own words. If you copy or thinly paraphrase the work of others, including a fellow student, you are guilty of plagiarism, which is grounds for prosecution by the student judiciary affairs and can lead to academic suspension.

(3) Each paragraph ought to have a clear progression. A stream of consciousness will not suffice. Start with an introduction: this describes the problem you will address and describes your argument in brief. Then proceed into the body of the paper where you present your readers with evidence intended to convince them that your argument is correct. End with a conclusion where you sum up your evidence and make clear its connection to your argument. This is not the same thing as repeating what you wrote in the introduction.

(4) No one can produce a satisfactory paper in a first draft. After writing a rough draft, you need to revise it to polish your sentences, paragraphs, organization, argument, and evidence. If you write and submit only a first draft, you can expect a failing grade.

PROBLEMS:

[Please note that the numbers before each item will be the key for comments on your papers. In other words, if you find a #1 written on your paper in the margin, it means that you have a weak argument.]

(1) Weak Argument

Solution: Your paragraph or paper must present an argument clearly and concisely stated in your opening paragraph. The first sentence in your first paragraph should state your argument. The rest of that opening paragraph should explain your argument. The rest of your paper should present evidence in support of that argument. An argument is more than a descriptive statement; it must offer an explanation about causation.

An argument answers a why question rather than simply a what question. In other words, a good argument tries to explain the cause of some event or some pattern of thought or behavior in the past.

Example: To write that "The Tupac Amaru Rebellion began in November 1780 in Tungasuca, Peru" is an accurate descriptive statement, but it is not much of an argument. It does not explain the cause of an action.

More pointed and promising is the following: "Local tension between Cacique Tupac Amaru, and the administrator Antonio de Arriaga in the town of Tungasuca, Peru, were the tipping point in a series of conflicts in the region that led to the explosion of the Tupac Amaru Rebellion in 1780."
Of course, you would have to present persuasive evidence that the conflict between Amaru and Arriaga was indeed the tipping point for the instigation of this rebellion.

A good argument focuses on a single, primary cause and does not provide a list of multiple causes.

**Example**: Which of these offers the better argument?

(1) Anger over the exploitative taxation of highlands Indians in Peru caused the Tupac Amaru rebellion to begin in 1780.

(2) Cultural, social, economic, and political reasons caused the Tupac Amaru Rebellion.

Clearly Example (1) is more focused and more specific.

**(2) Vague Writing**

**Solution**: Explain your ideas in careful detail. History is a discipline for organizing details of events, settings, and people into coherent explanations for change over time. History writing requires careful attention to the specifics of time and place. For all of your examples identify their location in place and time. Vagueness is the bane of history writing.

**Example**:

*Vague*: Life was economically difficult for the highlands Indians.

*Specific*: Between 1772 and 1779, the Spanish crown raised the *alcabala* tax three times, making economic subsistence for highlands Indians nearly impossible.

*Vague*: Tupac Amaru was not the first to fight against Spanish authorities.

*Specific*: Prior to the 1780 Tupac Amaru Rebellion, the 1760s and 1770s were a period of increasing revolts in Andean communities and resistance to Spanish authority. For example, 1777 marked the first revolt against the La Paz Customs House, and in 1778 Tomás Katari traveled to Buenos Aires seeking justice for his people.

**(3) Lack of Examples/Evidence**

**Solution**: After making an important statement, you should immediately provide an example or a piece of evidence. If you just keep piling on assertions, you will fail to persuade your reader.

**(4) Excessive Quotation**

**Solution**: Short, relevant quotes can be invaluable to illustrating your points but you should avoid the excessive use of quotation. Some students write papers where most of the words are not their own but quotations from their reading. Only use quotations to illustrate points that you have just expressed in your own words. Avoid long quotations. A single-sentence quotation is usually more effective. Only use a quotation which vividly and precisely illustrates your point.
Be careful to introduce each quotation by identifying the author and the context.

(5) Failure to Introduce a Quotation

Solution: You should always introduce a quotation by identifying the author of the words. Ideally, you will also specify a date for the quotation.

Example:

Poor: “I have instructed my priests to harass, reprimand, and to preach continually against the rebels.”

Good: “In 1780, in a letter to the Viceroy, Bishop Moscoso sought to reassure the authorites of his loyalty: “I have instructed my priests to harass, reprimand, and to preach continually against the rebels,” he wrote.

(6) Insufficient or Inaccurate Citations to your Sources

Solution: Footnote your quotes and your use of information or ideas derived from any other writer. Too many students mistakenly believe that they only need to provide citations for quotations. Always locate your footnote number at the end of a sentence, never in the middle. Your citation to a source should provide the name for the author of the document; the title for the document; and the author and title of the reader; and the specific page or pages.

Examples:

Citation for a document:


Citation for a book:


NOTE: Do not use pp. or pg. in front of page numbers. They are unnecessary and distracting.

Citation for a lecture:

Lily Balloffet, History 212 Lecture, Nov. 5, 2016.

NOTE: You should rely primarily on the documents for your evidence. You should only draw on lectures to provide some context.

(7) Sloppy Editing
Solution: Proofread your paper before you submit it. Correct your typographical, spelling, and punctuation errors. Refer to your dictionary when in doubt. If you are sloppy, your grade will be lowered to reflect this.

(8) Incomplete Sentence

Solution: Every sentence must have a subject (in front of the verb); a verb (in the middle); and a direct object (following the verb).

Note the following sentence "King Charles III oversaw reforms."

"King Charles III" is the subject; "oversaw" is the verb; and "reforms" is the direct object. Often students write sentence fragments, generally by omitting a verb.

(9) Excessive Use of the Verb “To Be” (is, was, were, would be)

Solution: “To be” is an inert verb that conveys little meaning. Too often students use this one verb over and over in sentence after sentence. This makes for very tedious reading. “To be” also traps writers into clunky and wordy convolutions that cloud your meaning. Instead of “to be,” you should use action verbs, which means all other verbs. A few examples include: wrote, spoke, ran, fought, led, argued, insisted, resembled ... Sometimes “to be” is (as here) the only appropriate verb. But most of your sentences should employ an action verb (such as “employ”!).

(10) Passive Voice

Solution: Here we have the very worst form of “to be:” combined with a past participle. You need to weed the passive voice from your writing. By reversing the more natural order of agent-action-goal, passive sentences cripple the clear flow of information.

Examples: "Rebellion plans were coordinated by Micaela Bastidas."

In most cases such passive sentences can be corrected readily to construct an active statement where the subject becomes a person (or persons) performing the action. Often this simply involves reversing the direct object (Micaela Bastidas) and the subject (Rebellion plans) of the passive sentence:

"Micaela Bastidas coordinated rebellion plans."

Passives hide the responsibility for an action. For example:

"The letter was written in a dull style." (Wait… who wrote the letter in that dull style???)

To clarify, employ an action verb after the human subject: "Bishop Moscoso wrote the letter in a dull style." (Ohhhhh… now I get it!)

(11) Present Tense
Solution: When writing about an event that occurred in the past, use the past tense. This seems simple, but many students never stray from the present tense.

Examples:

Present Tense: "The Spanish crown continues to increase taxes."
Past Tense: “The Spanish crown continued to increase taxes.”

Some students shift from past to present and back to past tense within the same paragraph (or even within the same sentence) while describing the same people and events set at the same moment in the past.

For example:

"The Spanish crown seeks many reforms. King Charles III oversaw the reforms. The reforms raise the alcabala sales tax. These ‘Bourbon Reforms’ meet resistance in the Andes where there were many revolts.”

The result? The previous sentences are clunky and grammatically incorrect. Stick with the past tense throughout!

(12) Long and abstract sentence subjects

Solution: In addition to a verb in the middle, every sentence needs a subject at the start. Clear writing favors concise subjects (such as Clear writing - only two words - at the start of this sentence). If your subject involves more than 3 words, you probably need something shorter. In most sentences your subject should be an agent of action. This usually means a human being or a human group.

Example:

Abstract / Too Long: “The passion for justice toward colonial Indian subjects of Tupac Amaru was the reason that he rose up in rebellion.”

Concise: “Tupac Amaru rose up because of his commitment to Indians in colonial Peru.

(13) Intruding a clause between your subject and your verb

Solution: A sentence works best when the subject leads directly into the verb (“Micaela Bastidas coordinated...”). Subordinate clauses work best either at the start of the sentence, to modify the verb, or at the end, to modify the direct object.

Examples:

Intruding Clause (Less Clear): “The farmer, angry over the death of his favorite sheep herd, chased the rebels.”
More Clearly: “Angry over the death of his favorite sheep herd, the farmer chased the rebels.”

NOTE: The improved version places no words between the subject (“the farmer”) and the verb (“chased”).

(14) Rambling Sentences

Solution: Avoid long, complex, convoluted, multi-clausal sentences. Many students mistakenly believe that good writing requires long sentences with multiple clauses. In fact, such long and complex sentences confuse and bore your readers.

As a rule, express only one idea per sentence. Use a sequence of sentences to develop the subtleties of your idea - instead of stuffing the whole lot into one overburdened sentence. When proofreading, if you encounter a long, overly complex sentence, devise a way to break it into two or three shorter statements. Avoid sentences that ramble on for more than 3 lines.

To achieve clarity, eliminate unnecessary words - especially in the core of a sentence: the combination of subject-verb-object.

Example: The most beautiful and effective sentence in U.S. literature is the immortal: "Jane chased Spot."

Why? Because it has a human subject (Jane) engaged in an action (chased) involving a direct object (Spot) and because there are no extraneous words in between the three. (By the way, “Spot” is a dog).

Try to keep the core of your sentence clean by adding your qualifications and clarifications as phrases attached to the front or the rear of that core. For example:

"Angry over the soiled carpet and armed with a rolled-up newspaper, Jane chased Spot, a mangy dog with a bladder-control problem." is far better than "Jane, angry over the soiled carpet, chased, while armed with a rolled-up newspaper, a mangy dog with a bladder control problem, Spot."

(15) No Topic Sentence for a Paragraph

Solution: Every paragraph should have one dominant idea expressed in a single "topic sentence" that controls the remaining sentences in that paragraph. A topic sentence works best as the first sentence in the paragraph. It conveys to the reader what the paragraph is about. The rest of the sentences should clarify or demonstrate that one key idea. If a subsequent sentence in the paragraph is unrelated to the topic sentence, it does not belong and should be removed.

(16) Confusing Organization

Solution: Be careful about the sequence of your paragraphs. If you pulled out all the other sentences in your paragraphs, leaving only the topic sentences, they should make a natural and coherent chain of ideas that could serve as a synopsis of your entire paper. If they do not, you
need to reorder your paragraphs and/or improve the clarity and cogency of your topic sentences. It is very helpful to make and follow an outline of your essay/argument.

In history, chronology matters. Avoid jumping back and forth in time. It works best to discuss early events and developments before discussing later ones. For example, it works better to discuss the Discovery of the New World before writing about the later Conquest Wars.

(17) Repetition

Solution: Make a point clearly once. Avoid repeating the same idea over and over again in varying words.

(18) Factual errors

Solution: Check your facts, dates, and spellings of names carefully. History writing requires accuracy.

(19) Weasel words

Solution: Some students seek safety in such “weasel words” as “maybe” or “perhaps” or “might have been.” Such qualifiers render your writing almost without meaning. Avoid history in the key of “maybe.” Instead, make an argument for what “probably” happened. To do so, you will need to present evidence.

(20) Warm-up sentences

Problem: History students often prove slow to get to the point, preferring to begin papers with global formulas such as “Ever since the dawn of time...”

Solution: Get to your own point immediately and stick to the topic of your paper throughout.

(21) Lack of dates for events, quotes

Solution: When you mention an event or introduce a quotation, specify the year. This provides the reader with a sense of place in time.

------------------  THE SIMPLE SECRET ------------------

Economy of Language: Good writing explains clearly. Simple, short sentences facilitate clarity. Please note my use of short, direct sentences. Throughout this writing guide, most of my sentences occupy only one or two lines. I build my points through a series of concise sentences. Several brief sentences work better than one long, rambling sentence with multiple clauses. Please also note that I use action verbs (like “use”) instead of “to be” in most of my sentences. I also use very concise subjects, usually human (like “I” in this sentence). I avoid placing any words between my subject and my verb. Sometimes you have to break these rules, but you
should strive for a clear and concise style in most of your sentences. You can achieve this if in most of your sentences you do the following 3 things:

(1) Use a human subject  (2) Use an action verb  (3) Intrude no words between your subject and your verb

------------------ SUGGESTIONS ------------------

(1) Before you start your rough draft, prepare a scratch sheet (or two or three) of ideas that you want to express. At this point do not be concerned with their order. Just write your ideas down as fast as they come to you. This is the point in the process to be creative and disorganized!

(2) Then go over the scratch sheet(s) to choose which ideas are important, which are useful but subordinate, and which are unimportant or incompatible (and therefore should be discarded). Look for connections between your points and figure out the best possible sequence.

(3) Draw up an outline, a skeleton of the order in which you will present your ideas and your evidence and examples drawn from your reading.

(4) Prepare a rough draft.

(5) Carefully proofread that rough draft, correcting and improving every sentence.

If you get bogged down, consult me in office hours, or utilize on-campus writing resources such as the WaLC (see the end of this guide for details). Bring along your scratch-sheet and your paper outline!!

(6) After I return your graded paper, please consult with me in office hours if you are unsure about how to revise and expand for the next installment. Come to our meeting prepared: bring your first paper with you and demonstrate that you understand the criticisms. I am always prepared to explain comments and to help you to improve; but I do not renegotiate grades.

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EXTRA HELP: For extra writing help you can also seek extra help from student tutors at WCU’s Writing and Learning Commons (WaLC). WaLC offers free one-on-one writing tutoring for students at any level and at any point in the writing process. While drop-ins are welcome, secure the time you want by making an appointment on their website (https://www.wcu.edu/learn/academic-success/tutoring-services/services-resources/writing-support/index.aspx). To make the most of your session, bring the writing prompt for the assignment and a paper copy of your draft. The WaLC website also provides many other online resources for college writing.

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Attribution: This writing guide was originally developed by Dr. Alan S. Taylor for use in introductory history classes.
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