

CHAPTER 1

Don't Panic!

Let me guess. You just started the semester and picked up this book along with the others your history instructor assigned. You have taken a glance at your syllabus and see a deadline for “research paper” looming. What’s worse, it’s going to count for a good percentage of your final grade for this class. And it’s long—maybe as long as eight to ten pages. You’ve never written that much before. And this is only one of several papers that you need to write this semester. Of course this isn’t the only course you’re taking. Is it too late to drop the class and return this book? You consider running back to the bookstore and checking the return policy posted on the window. But the course is required of all first-year students. Or, you need to take a history course at some point. So you really don’t have a choice. You need to write that paper somehow.

Keep the Big Picture in Mind

It is entirely normal to feel anxious right now as you contemplate this project. Unless you are a seasoned researcher, I would be really surprised if this project didn’t make you anxious. Take some comfort in the fact that most of the students in your class probably feel the same way.

A little anxiety can help motivate you to get moving. You have already done something right in that you have noted what is likely the major assignment on your course syllabus. Now, channel that anxiety into

positive, constructive energy and get started. Don't wait until the last minute.

You do not need to produce a literary masterpiece. First-year history instructors do not expect their students to write a PhD or Master's thesis. They also do not expect anything approaching a perfect history paper. At the introductory level, this would be an unfair and unreasonable expectation. Instead, instructors want their students to put reasonable effort into each part of the process, and not wait until the last minute. (You will see "avoiding the last minute" as a recurring theme in this book.) At this level of instruction, the research process is just as, if not more, important as the final paper. At each step, you will be challenged to make new connections, overcome obstacles, and be resourceful.

You will use research skills and strategies again in other classes. Many students overlook the fact that what they do in one class can help them succeed in other classes, as well as in their future careers. Even if you stumble along the way in this process (and you likely will), you will still benefit in the long run from the experience. So try to remember to look beyond the grade itself to what you're actually learning by making the effort.

How College Papers Differ from High School Papers

With these ideas in mind, let's take a look at the kind of writing you'll need to do in this course and contrast it with what you might have done in high school.

If you've written research papers in high school, or in the context of other history classes, you might have a head start. Some students I worked with had extensive experience doing research. But I have learned to take the word "experience" with a grain of salt.

"Research paper" could denote many types of writing, not all of which correspond to what your college instructor wants you to do. Here are the major characteristics of a historical research paper assigned at the university level, together with descriptions of how they likely differ from what you did in high school. Now, I am making generalizations here, so if your high school experience doesn't match up with what is described below, please excuse the discrepancies.

Description vs. argument- or thesis-driven research. Sometimes, students equate "research" with gathering facts about the past. In this sense, "research" means taking notes and assuming that what you read and write

Research Papers in High School vs. College

ELEMENT OF PAPER	HIGH SCHOOL	COLLEGE
What is “Research?”	Descriptive	Argument/thesis-driven
Style of writing	Reporting/summarizing	Critical and argument-based
Level of detail	Superficial/basic facts	Greater focus, more detail
Primary sources	May use some or none	Variety of primary sources required
Historiography	Not usually considered	Important
Scholarly sources	Recommended, perhaps not required	Required

down is accurate and should not be questioned. This might have worked in grade school, and perhaps even for some high school papers. At the college level, however, students writing historical papers don't just write down whatever they read and submit a chronology of historical facts as their history paper. In short, a college history paper is not a Wikipedia article.

Instead, students are encouraged to ask questions like “why” or “how” as they relate to the historical events they are studying. They *investigate* the past more critically, and look for sources that corroborate the data they initially found. They form their own conclusions about the past and defend them. Research at the college level calls for much more active engagement on the part of the student, as opposed to passive absorption of information.

College instructors require an *argument* or *thesis* at the heart of your research paper. Rather than just describing an event, as in an encyclopedia or other reference work, developing a thesis means that you ask a question about an event or person and try to answer it in your own way. The answer that you come up with is your argument, or *thesis*. The thesis puts forth a particular interpretation of an event or series of events, or explains the relationship among multiple events.

This difference between description and argumentation is distilled in the very word “essay” itself. I wrote just now that, in university research essays, you will be expected to “try to answer” a question about the past—and in fact the word “essay” comes from the French verb *essayer*, meaning “to try.” Every essay, then, should be an attempt—an attempt to persuade your reader of the plausibility of your argument, and an attempt (to refer

to the title of this book) to solve a puzzle. At the college level, you should no longer just be describing “what happened” in the past, or even just describing the solutions to a particular puzzle about the past that previous historians have put forward; instead, you should be advancing your own particular solution to a puzzle from the past and trying to convince others to accept it.

Descriptive writing vs. analytical writing. The second difference between high school- and college-level papers follows logically from the first. As you would expect, if your notion of “research” needs to shift in college, so does your definition of what “writing” means. In high school, on the one hand, you might have been able to get away with doing much less original thinking. College-level history papers, on the other hand, call for critical thinking and writing skills. In high school, if your assignments asked you to “report on” an event or “describe” an idea, chances are good that your instructor did not ask you to put forth your own interpretation or understanding of a topic. College-level history papers will require you to take a stab at making your own point about a topic.

Now, it’s important to point out that *all* historical writing incorporates descriptions of events: it’s impossible to write a research paper in college without first telling your reader “what happened.” The difference in college-level writing is that this description is *in service of* a larger argument, while in high school the description might have been all that you were asked to do.

Focus and depth vs. superficial accounts of the past. High school papers can often cover a very broad topic in rather limited depth. As is possible with much descriptive writing, it’s acceptable to write in broad strokes and make big generalizations about the past. University-level writing asks you to explore a topic in detail, much more so than you did in high school. You need to be able to take a broad topic, narrow it to a manageable size, and then research that topic in greater depth than you have in the past. Your goal in a university-level research paper is not to figure out how much of a broad topic you can cover, but to delve deeply into one specific issue and extract its riches.

My college students had questions that highlight this difference in expectations: On many occasions, they asked how I could possibly expect them to write ten pages on a particular topic, because they’d be finished writing by page five. Or, as one of my high school students asked when discussing a research topic for a five-page paper, “Why should I concentrate on a five-year time span of history? I could discuss a half-century.”

Both of these questions reflect the assumption that the student's chief task is "covering ground," rather than "digging deeply."

Professional historians choose one issue and explore it from all sides, or as many sides as they can access. They look beneath the chronology presented in an encyclopedia article and ask questions of why and how. They are skeptical of their sources. Doing historical research is akin to playing the detective who tries to solve a mystery. Your instructor doesn't expect you to have the expertise or experience of a professional historian but does want you to practice using those skills when you write this paper.

Reliance on primary sources. Descriptive writing relies chiefly on secondary sources, which are produced by historians or others who are far removed from the historical period they are writing about. But college-level research papers require you to wrestle with primary sources, which are those artifacts or documents produced during the time frame you're writing about.

What's the difference? Primary sources are critical to any research paper at the college level because they represent the voices of those you're studying. You cannot formulate a thesis about a topic if you have not consulted primary sources. While the number of primary sources you're required to use will vary depending on the topic you've chosen, typically your instructor will want to see a few types of sources used, or a few perspectives represented. In other words, if you are studying the 1920s, you might consult a few magazine articles, newspaper stories, and pictures from the period. If you are studying diary entries collected from the Civil War era, you might select those from enslaved people, enslavers, and abolitionists. The precise combination of sources is up to you, but they should be documents that you actively incorporate into your research.

Attention to historiography, or the historical conversation on your topic. You don't hear too much about historiography in most high school classrooms (though there are some exceptions). In a college-level research paper, you are usually expected to have some knowledge of what other scholars have written on the topic you have chosen. Historians call this "historiography." For instance, if I'm studying some local leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, I'd want to take a look at some of the historical literature that has been written about those individuals thus far. Have any biographies been published on someone from the community on which I'm focusing? What about more general texts that can tell me a little about what else was going on in that community at the time? Is there a topic or theme that seems to be controversial among historians? If so, what side do I support?

Historiography refers not only to the conversation taking place on one topic in a particular time period, but also to the way in which that discussion has evolved *over time*. Our understandings of events change as time passes, as we gain the greater perspective afforded by chronological distance from an event. Let's return to the example of the Civil Rights leaders. As you'd expect, the way that historians wrote about them in the 1970s is far different from what was written in 2010 or is being written today. Though history itself hasn't changed, our interpretations of the past are always changing. That's why publishers update American history textbooks periodically.

Just as Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein argue in *They Say/I Say*,¹ writing a college-level paper implies that you are sitting down at a table with a group of scholars, each of whom has written on your topic (or a related topic). You share your own perspective not in a vacuum, but in response to theirs. When you are capable of describing your own perspective on an event in relation to what other historians have said, you dramatically increase your credibility as a writer. Acknowledgment of others' opinions shows that you are well-versed on the scholarship (or historiography) on your topic. We will address this topic further in Chapter 9.

Use of scholarly source material. Students I taught at the college level often told me that when they wrote papers for high school classes, they could find all of their information online. They typically meant that they did a Google search and found everything they needed. (At that time, at least, the reliability of websites did not seem to be as much in question.) For college-level papers, you should start with the university's library catalog. Most of your secondary sources for a college-level history paper will be books (or e-books) that you get from your library's collection. Later, once you have a better sense of your topic and what your argument might be, you will probably be able to find some scholarly journal articles on your topic when you peruse your library's research databases.

Why do you need to retrieve books from the physical shelves, when for several years you've managed to complete everything with just a couple of Google searches? The scholars who have written on your topic express their viewpoints primarily in books published by university presses, and in journal articles that have been *peer-reviewed*. What does this mean? Unlike what you might find on websites intended for general audiences, the materials you will find in peer-reviewed sources have been vetted by scholars in

1 *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 2014).

the field for accuracy, or at least legitimacy. The review process for historical writing is very rigorous. Authors must have the appropriate academic credentials and their manuscripts are reviewed by other scholars before publication. By the time you get those items off the library shelves, they've been reviewed and edited a number of times to meet a set of strict criteria.

This isn't to say that there aren't reliable websites that come up in your Google searches. There are many. But you have to know how to find them. Virtually anyone can pose as a "historical expert" online, and the array of disinformation to be found on the internet and in social media often makes it hard to distinguish truth from fiction. When doing research at the college level, we first access the sources that have already been vetted, rather than trust ourselves to make that judgment.

With these main differences in mind (all of which will be discussed in more depth later in this book), we turn to the next chapter, where we talk about the fundamental goal of research papers in history courses and the skills you hone as a result of working on this type of project.



See Online Companion Exercises for Chapter 1
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