

## The Cloues Condensed “Writing in History” Guidelines\*

1. You must have a thesis statement that answers the essay question prompt. If there is not a prompt, your thesis states what you will prove in your essay.
2. It is more important to use documents/evidence effectively than to use many of them.
3. Use documents/evidence within the context of your essay – explain WHY you use it and HOW the evidence adds to your thesis.
4. Don’t make assumptions – ASSUME your reader knows nothing!
5. There is a very narrow line between your opinion and your opinion backed with EVIDENCE.
6. Be objective in your writing in almost all cases. Avoid pronouns such as I, we, our, etc.
7. Avoid stating the obvious. Ex: “This quote perfectly states....” Just say what you mean to say!
8. An introduction should give the reader a glimpse into your evidence/examples you are using in the body of the essay.
9. Historical writing is based on fact. Check to make sure every statement you write is a fact.
10. Write in the past tense. Since all historical events took place at some point in the past, write about them in the past tense.
11. Avoid vague generalizations. Historians value specificity, not equivocal phrases like “once upon a time” or “people always say that....”
12. Resist the temptation to relate all historical arguments or concerns back to the present. Rather, investigate the past on its own terms.
13. Paraphrase if you can, quote if you must. Many students rely on quotations as a crutch, missing an opportunity to develop their skills of historical analysis. Instead, quote sparingly. When you do quote, introduce the source and context of every remark for the benefit of an unfamiliar reader.
14. Provide necessary context. You are responsible for interrogating sources, interpreting evidence, and reporting your findings about the interplay of text and context.
15. Write in a formal, academic voice. Avoid using the first or second person (e.g., “I,” “our,” or “you”). Phrases such as “I think” or “in my opinion” are redundant in expository writing.
16. Avoid making “absolute” statements. For example, the fire was *the most* important event....
17. Never, ever, use the words on the STA Blue English Poster, plus other words such as....”basically, etc.” These are “dead” words and add no weight to your writing.

18. When referencing a person in your writing (either a historical subject or an author), use their whole name the first time in your writing, and then reference just their last name from then on forward.

19. Read your writing out loud! Make “every word do work.”

20. Let your writing rest. Procrastination does NOT lead to efficiency in writing! You must plan your writing, plan when to write, and plan to review your writing before submission.

\*Several of these guidelines are from the [Harvard College Writing Center](#)