MA Global History

Guidelines for Research Papers

For full credit (10 ECTS), you will need to write a course paper in most modules. Based on the themes and issues that came up in class, you are expected to develop your own topic and research question. Please discuss your ideas with the course instructor during her/his office hours. Choose a question that really interests you (more on questions below).

Please read these guidelines carefully. A central part of the historian's craft is writing in a comprehensible and engaging way. There is no way of making a point beyond the language in which you convey it. It is hard to overestimate the importance of your writing.

Bear in mind that your instructors read many papers in different fields, so do not assume them to know everything about the topic you have chosen. Take your reader by the hand, but do so gently and subtly.

Ideally, plan ahead so that you have sufficient time for getting feedback on your ideas and a draft version of your paper from your peers. Also, make sure to set aside extra time for final revisions. For non-native speakers, if possible, ask a native speaker to proofread your paper. Most students and scholars rely on another person for this, and we would like to encourage you to ask your fellow students for help. In a recent survey, it emerged that most native English speakers in our program would be happy to support non-native speakers in this process. Please note that proofreading is important for all scholars, even if English is your native language. Essentially, proof-reading is essential for every student/scholar in three ways. Firstly, it helps you with the organization of your writing towards a specific deadline: Secondly, getting correctional feedback from peers will help you to avoid slips of the pen, allow you to add information or to rewrite sentences/paragraphs that were apparently difficult to understand and will increase the chance of a better grade. Last but not least, it demonstrates respect for your reader who then is able to focus on the content of your paper rather than possibly be upheld with several remarks on style and sentence structures.

I. First things first: Your tools for academic writing

Most of our students do not know that the university provides software for free.

- For instance, Microsoft Office Pro (incl. Word) is available for free as long as you are matriculated.
- As historians, we also deal with a vast amount of literature and different kinds of sources. In order to help you do your research, synchronize your findings, keep notes and organize your bibliographies, we strongly recommend using a literature management program such as Endnote, Citavi (both with FU License) or, Zotero (for free). Most of these programs instantly create references and bibliographies for any text editor such as Word, LibreOffice, and Google Docs.

II. Formal Aspects

Length

- 6,000 words, including the footnotes, but excluding the bibliography.

Deadline

- Winter term: March 31
- Summer term: September 30
- Please note that if we do not say otherwise, this is the final deadline. No papers will be accepted after that date.

Organization:

- Title page with: paper title, seminar title, module name, instructor, date of submission, name, email address
- Table of contents
- Page numbers (please note, that page one starts on the first page of the introduction)
- Chapters divided by numbers and with subheadings
- Bibliography

Paper format:

- Choose a standard font, such as Times New Roman, Arial, and size 12
- 1.5 spaced
- Right margins: 4 cm
- Footnotes font size 10, 1.0 line spacing

III. Topics

Most papers begin with a topic that the author finds interesting. A historical topic here means something like a case study, which typically consists of three parts: a place, a time, and either a phenomenon or a group of actors. For example, “The Environmental Movement in Western Germany in the 1970s” is a topic and so are “Labor Migration and the State in the Late Soviet Union”, “Violence, Gender, and the 1947 Partition of India” or “Intersectionality in 1960s and 1970s Black Feminist Thought in the United States.” “Decolonizing the Body” or “Language and Imperialism” is not a topic, but something else. A good paper title (see below) clarifies the topic after the colon.

Instructors disagree over whether a topic can be too broad or too narrow. Those teachers who want you to draw on primary sources (see below) are likely to advise against very large topics. On the other hand, extremely narrow topics can make it difficult to develop an interesting research question (see below). The precise nature of your topic must be discussed with your course instructor during his or her office hours.

Research Question

Choosing an interesting and viable research question has momentous consequences for the quality of your paper. It lends your writing a sense of purpose. It guides your preliminary research. It determines the literature with which you engage. In addition, it generates the structure of your paper.

Some students may begin the process of thinking about their paper with a clear question in mind, but more often, they struggle to transition from a topic to a good question. As they go along, they will find that they have to modify their initial question. This is an entirely normal process. Only by the time you write down your paper will you make it look as if your question had been clear all along.

There are no eternally valid yardsticks as to what makes a good question, but a few rules of thumb usually apply.

a) A good and precise question tells you what you are looking for during the research for your paper. “Who was responsible for the Irish famine of 1845?” means you are seeking to identify specific historical actors, dynamics and developments. For the same reason it is often a good idea to formulate your question as an actual sentence that ends with a question mark. On the other hand, “How did attitudes towards crossing the ocean among nineteenth-century Hindus change?” is largely a reformulation of a topic (“ocean crossing in nineteenth-century India”). The question does not guide your research very much, except to restate that everything in relation to your topic can be of potential relevance.

b) Refrain from questions to which you (or worse, you and your readers) know the answer already, such as “Was the Ku Klux Klan a racist organization?” The reader will realize that this question is only a fig leaf to write something (but what?) about the KKK.
c) Questions beginning with “why” are often the most productive. They mean that you start with a finding that you think worthy of an explanation. For the same reason they are also good at structuring your paper, the individual sections of which can then be headlined by possible candidates for an explanation.
d) Try to avoid composite questions, as in “Why was the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882, and what were the implications for US-Chinese relations?” You are now looking for two separate sets of clues to what are two different questions (and topics, really). Such composite questions tend to confuse your choice of a topic and a question, likely resulting in an incoherent paper.

Once you have laid out your question in your paper’s introduction (see below), the main part of the paper has to consist of elements that contribute to an answer. This is why the question is so crucial: It allows you to discard the sections that do not speak to your question. In other words, your question becomes the benchmark of what is relevant and superfluous.

Many papers suffer from including too much information or narrative that has no obvious bearing on your question, a problem that can turn into a veritable ordeal for impatient readers. Be ruthless about cutting everything that is not identifiably relevant to your question.

Primary Sources

Many, but not all, teachers ask you to draw on primary sources for your paper. The definition of a primary source depends on your topic. Alexander Gerschenkron’s writings on “comparative backwardness” can be a primary source if you are writing about the language of modernization theory in the 1960s, but they are still considered secondary literature for some aspects of nineteenth-century European economic history. *New York Times* articles about the German inflation of 1923 would be considered a primary source if your main topic is what American public opinion made of that inflation, but not necessarily if your story is about this economic episode in itself. Whether or not you should consult primary sources and which ones are most promising is again something to be discussed with your instructor.

IV. Paper Composition

Paper Title

In contrast to common practice in the U.K., here title and question are not the same. The title should contain information on your topic (see above), but other than that you are free to come up with something you find telling or catchy. If you use a quote from primary sources for your main title (for example “’The most beautiful cause.’ The Cuban Civilian Mission in Angola, 1975-1991,”

make sure to provide a reference for and an interpretation of this quote at some point in your seminar paper.

Introduction

Every paper must have an introduction in which you say what you are going to do. This includes the following: circumscribing your topic, laying out your question, explaining its purpose, describing the relationship of your paper to the existing scholarship in your field of choice, and outlining how you are going to go about answering your question. Aim for achieving all this in 10 or 15 (and not more than 20) percent of your paper's overall length.

Defining your topic (or empirical case) early on in the introduction is crucial. This includes the items above: a place, a time, and either a phenomenon or a group of actors. Bear in mind that your topic and your question are not the same thing (see above). Questions that are merely reformulated topics typically descend into a mere narration or description of something that happened, for no particular purpose. You should make explicit what your overarching interest and research question is. This should be formulated in response to the existing research literature (what light does your case shed on the mainstream arguments of the field?) and/or certain theoretical debates and concepts (e.g. how helpful the concept of subalternity is in analyzing peasant protest; what actor network theory can contribute to our understanding of environmental knowledge). If you like, you can anticipate the answers to your question or your findings in your introduction, as in: "I argue that sharecropping arrangements in the US South differed greatly from those in South Africa because…". However, in contrast to the conclusion (see below), it is not necessary to do so in the introduction.

At the very end of the introduction, it is a good idea to explain the structure of your paper; that is, how you are going to proceed in order to answer your question. Once you are done with the announcements, keep further glaring signposting at a minimum (see below).

Main Part

The main part of your paper is where you present your empirical material in a way that is conducive to answering your question. It will typically be 80 percent of the paper's overall length and has a subdivision of 3 to 5 points/chapters/subchapters, each being roughly equal in length (the structure).

A good structure goes a long way in holding together your paper, so you want to plan carefully here. In a nutshell, a good structure is one that serves the purpose of your paper (the purpose being answering your question). It will also help you avoid repetition, so be wary of structures that do not allow you unmistakably to allocate the things you want to say to one of the subheadings of your main part.

Aim for subheadings that are functional equivalents (1. Apples, 2. Pears, 3. Bananas, 4. Oranges). Stay away from subheadings relating to preliminary (of the what-happened-before-my-paper-begins kind) and definitional (of the what-do-the-terms-of-my-title-even-mean kind)

considerations, unless your main part is entirely theoretical. For instance, a paper on the question of whether nationalism in mid-twentieth-century Guinea was chiefly state-constructed or driven by poor people should not begin with "1. Guinea's colonial history" followed by "2. Postal clerks as proselytizers." In this example, point 2 is obviously relevant to your question, point 1 is not. To the extent that you need colonial history here, fit it in where you need it, instead of decoupling it. Likewise, this paper should not begin with "1. Is Guinea a useful unit of analysis?" If the answer is no, Guinea should be neither in your title nor your question. Nor should it begin with 1. "What is nationalism?" You may have to discuss such issues as you go along (alternatively, you can add a paragraph or two in the introduction), but they should be subordinated to your main question, not form a separate point. Outsourcing preliminary considerations in such a way often stems from students' sense of obligation towards ideals of accuracy and conceptual diligence, but they are likely to test your reader's patience, as you will be hard pressed to deal with them in a way that makes obvious their direct relevance for your question.

You should stay away from announcements of what you are *not* going to do. Papers often contain sentences such as "it would also be interesting in this context to look at xy, but for reasons of space this paper will concentrate on xx." If it is really interesting (i.e. indispensable) to look at the other thing to effectively answer your question, then you have to make the space. If it is not, you should not waste the little space you have on announcements of no consequence. You do not solve this problem by cramming the sentence in a footnote either. As the author, it is your job to decide what is important for your reader to know and what is not—the latter should stay out of your paper.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, you summarize the findings of your main part and state what larger conclusion you draw from them. It may be a good idea to come back to the existing literature once again and point out how your paper has contributed to it. You should also pick up your overarching question here.

V. Formalities

References

A key ingredient of scholarly writing is that you reference the sources of your information and argument properly (on plagiarism see below). There are two kinds of references: 1. in brackets in your main text (Harvard Style); 2. in a footnote. The latter is far more common among historians, so the following assumes that you use footnotes. If you are confident enough in using the Harvard Style properly, feel free to do so.

Where do you put a footnote in the main text? A footnote always comes after the punctuation. One footnote can deal with several citations or issues mentioned in the sentence or even the paragraph that precedes the footnote.

When do you need a footnote? Footnotes reference the origin of a) factual information, b) a literal citation, or c) someone's argument. Not all factual information requires a footnote. It is well known that World War II ended in 1945, so you do not need to reference it, nor do you need a footnote to say that Switzerland borders Germany. However, you do need a reference to the source of the information that the Bavarian population grew by x percent between 1900 and 1914.

A literal citation always requires a footnote. You should, however, use literal citations sparingly. In particular, avoid conveying factual information in literal citations. "He came with eight horses, fifteen soldiers, and twenty muskets," does not require a literal citation, unless you want to convey the linguistic flair of the source of information. In particular, try to avoid literal citations stretching over several lines, unless you want to analyze in depth the passage of a literary work. Usually, it is best to flag the source of the literal citation in the main text, in addition to the footnote, as in: "When asked about 'Western civilization', Gandhi allegedly replied: 'I think it would be a good idea.'" Or: "As John McNeill argues, 'ecological changes […] shaped the fortunes of empires.'" This makes it clear who said what and is a useful device of distancing yourself from your sources. It does not, of course, eliminate your obligation to reference the Gandhi quote or John McNeill's *Mosquito Empires* in the subsequent footnote—including the page number!

Except when you wish to convey specific terms or the linguistic flair of something, the arguments of other scholars should be paraphrased, not cited literally. Again, you need a footnote after that. In rare cases, you might refer to ideas or arguments that are simply around, not attributable to any particular source, as in: "Historians used to take the nation-state as their standard unit of analysis." This does not require a footnote and in fact, it would be strange to pick any particular author as an example here, but it is a device that should be used sparingly, too.

Reference Style

There are many admissible styles of referencing in English, but you should pick one such (existing) style and stick to it. Our recommendation is to follow Chicago Style: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html. On this webpage, you find all the instructions you need. This is also the style followed by *The American Historical Review*, meaning you can also copy the style that articles in that journal use.

Quotations are put into quotation marks. Citations of more than three lines should be separated from the text and indented with quotation marks as a block quote. Any quotes within the citation/block should thus have single quote marks.

Bibliography

Please include a full bibliography at the end. In it, you list all publications that you have referenced in your paper. If you read a publication during your research for the paper but did not reference it in your text, do not include it in the bibliography. All the references in the bibliography, which is ordered alphabetically by author surnames (and not sub-divided into journal articles, books, etc.), must be complete. The list of secondary references is preceded by a list of primary sources that you have consulted, if you have used primary sources.

As your seminar paper is expected to build on the conversations that you had in class, your bibliography will typically include some of the readings that were assigned and discussed in that

class, to the extent of course that they are pertinent to your argument and to the historical and historiographical contextualization of your topic.

Please note: For a research paper of this length, we **recommend that you read and cite at least fifteen titles** (journal articles, essays in edited books, monographs) of secondary literature alone. A research paper that builds, for instance, on only six titles will most likely run the risk of being less convincing in several ways (see, section: “Criteria for grading”). If you are unsure about the respective secondary literature (or, sources, of course) ask your instructor, s/he will be more than happy to point you in the right direction.

VI. Academic Integrity (Code of Conduct)

As in all university courses, students are required to vouch for the integrity of their written work. Any instances of plagiarism will result in failing the course. Plagiarism includes submitting a paper written or significantly revised by someone else, appropriating ideas or words from sources without giving credit, quoting without the use of quotation marks, or any other borrowing of materials or writing skills without appropriate acknowledgement. Please come and see us if you are ever unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or how to avoid it.

VII. Language and Style

Paragraphs

Write in paragraphs. Paragraphs are the basic building blocks of your paper and they should be solid for that reason. Each paragraph is a (small) thematic unit; it consists of a main statement, which is further elaborated, illustrated, differentiated, or substantiated, in the remaining part of the paragraph. A good paragraph contains a topic or thesis sentence early on, signaling to the reader the main point of the coming lines and clarifying its relationship to the preceding paragraph. Thus, a paragraph standing in opposition to the previous one will often begin with “However.” One that supports the previous paragraph or adds more supporting information can begin with “In addition.” Such subtle connectors greatly help the reader’s orientation. By contrast, a paragraph that in itself has more than two “buts” or “howevers” will likely be confusing because the main point is diluted or muddled.

Paragraphs should be of roughly equal length to lend a steady rhythm to your writing. They should be neither too long, nor too short. If you read journal articles or books in your field, you will see that ten to twenty lines are a reasonable average.

Conceptual Precision and Jargon

Aim for conceptual precision and avoid jargon. This means, for instance, that when you write "the church," you actually mean the church, not religion, or a specific group of monks. Precision is also important in relation to simple adjectives. For example, if you want to say, "it is wrong to assume that French colonial practices were less racist than those of the British," then do not write, "it is illogical to assume…" Aim for simplicity without being simplistic. For the same reason try to avoid jargon and be particularly wary of grandiose trans-historical terms that could mean virtually anything. You may have found a wonderful concept in the secondary literature, which captures exactly what you want to say. In that case, it is a good idea to use that concept, but make sure you introduce it in an understandable fashion and do not let it slip into a catchall category.

Non-Sequiturs

When you introduce an example or narrate a story in your paper, make sure the reader can discern what it stands for. Conversely, the example must support the argument that you derive from it. Check your use of "therefore," "hence," "thus," and the like. Does the passage that comes after these words really follow from the preceding statements? Likewise, take care that the antecedent of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns is clear. If a sentence begins with "This implied a steady stream of arbitrary government measures," it must be clear to what "this" refers. If a sentence opens with "This notion never found many believers in the church," the preceding passage has to be about something that can be understood as a "notion." If the previous sentence was really about a law, then your reader will wonder what "notion" you mean now (which relates again to conceptual precision).

Grammar / Style

You should aim for grammatical correctness; find the right tone and choice of words appropriate to academic writing. As mentioned before, we recommend proofreading your paper, or having it proofread by someone, if necessary. Here are a few specific words of advice relating to problems that we often see in this MA:

1. Use formal language for scholarly writing. This *isn't* a piece of journalistic writing or an email, twitter, etc. conversation. Avoid colloquialisms and contractions, such as "haven't," "didn't" and the like. If you are uncertain what formal language entails use the internet (search for "difference between formal and informal English") to see more examples.

2. Avoid the passive voice where it is unnecessary. Some authors—many famous professors among them—think that convoluted sentences in the passive voice make their writing more "scientific" or "scholarly." More often than not, it sounds stilted and, worse, obfuscates who does what in the sentence. Choose active or passive voice according to which word needs to be the subject of a sentence, but aim for the active voice wherever possible.

3. For narrating something that happened in the past, use the past tense. "Goethe wrote" is generally preferable to "Goethe writes" in history papers.

4. In English, many abstract nouns do not have a definite article. Whereas in Spanish or German you need the definite article (as in “el fascismo” or “der Faschismus”), this is not the case in English. Most non-abstract nouns, on the other hand, do need an article of some kind.

5. When an adjective or an ordinal number are joined with a noun to fulfil the function of an adjective in a sentence, they are often hyphenated. The classic example in history is: “Germany in the nineteenth century was a predominantly rural country,” but “Nineteenth-century Germany was a predominantly rural country.” Please spell out the ordinal numbers here.

VIII. Criteria for Grading Seminar Papers

When grading seminar papers, instructors will take the following criteria into consideration:

- Organization of the Paper:
  - Has the research question been clearly defined?
  - Has the author conducted a close and critical reading of primary sources (if applicable) and of current and relevant secondary literature?
  - Is the argument presented in a coherent manner?
  - Do both the research question and the argument engage successfully with the issues raised in the course for which the paper has been written?
  - Has the author formulated a perceptive, compelling and independent argument in response to scholarly debates?

- Historical Evidence:
  - Is the paper sensitive to historical context?
  - Is the author sensitive to historical complexity and nuances (in most cases, for example, one should be careful to simply write “the Chinese”, “the Germans”) and change over time?
  - Is the paper based on thorough historical research?
  - Are the arguments factually correct?
  - Is the argument supported by a well-chosen variety of specific examples?
  - Is the historical evidence presented in a clear and coherent manner?

- Academic Style:
  - Is the paper written in good academic English (spelling, grammar, vocabulary)? If you are not a native speaker of English, please ask your instructor if he/she will take this into account when assessing your paper.
  - Is the literature referenced in a coherent manner? The faculty recommends using Chicago Style (see above), but you are free to choose another one, as long as it is applied coherently.

Grades

The following grades can be awarded for papers:

1.0, 1.3 =	very good
1.7, 2.0, 2.3 =	good
2.7, 3.0, 3.3 =	satisfactory
3.7, 4.0 =	sufficient
5.0 =	failed

Please bear in mind that many faculty members at Berlin's universities will employ the full grading scale, and that the numerical grades literally translate into the above meanings. Perhaps in contrast to what is customary in other academic systems, a "B" grade (1.7, 2.0, or 2.3), for example, is indeed a "good", i.e., successful paper.

IX. Further Reading

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Graff, Gerald and Birkenstein, Cathy. *They Say, I Say. The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2006.

Hayot, Eric. *The Elements of Academic Style. Writing for the Humanities*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.

Strunk, William Jr., and Elwyn B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2014.

Swales, John M. and Christine B. Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students. Essential Tasks and Skills*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

(-> especially directed at students who are not native speakers of English)