This guide is provided as a general resource. Individual professors may provide you with different guidelines for specific papers.

The Three Parts of a History Paper

I. THE INTRODUCTION: The introduction is usually one paragraph, or perhaps two in a paper of eight pages or more. Its purpose is to: (1) set out the problem to be discussed; (2) define key terms that will be used in that discussion; (3) outline the structure of the argument; (4) CLEARLY STATE THE THESIS.

A. Suggestions for the introduction:

Establish the problem: Quickly established the issue your paper confronts. Where and when are you? What are you examining? It is especially important to clearly define the limits of your exploration. If you are discussing the life of Frederick Douglass, it will not suffice to establish the setting by referring to the "days of slavery," since slavery has existed in all times all over the world. Frederick Douglass was a slave in Maryland in the decades before the Civil War. Do not begin a history paper with absurdly general phrases like, "since the beginning of time," or "humans have always. . . ." Get as specific as necessary as early as possible.

Set the tone, voice, and style of your paper. (See other guidelines for how this is done.) Make sure you convey that the topic is of vital concern, and that you are interested in it.

Catch the reader's attention. You might start with an example, a quotation, a statistic, or a complaint. Be sure that this opening theme runs through your paper. Do not abandon this theme. You can use it again later to help unify your paper. There are many types of introductions that can catch your readers' attention, but a few include: narrative (setting the scene with a well chosen vignette); corrective (laying out the problem that is before you and how your paper will fix it); paradoxical (setting up the issue you will address as an unexpected conundrum needing a solution); and inquisitive (asking a few pertinent rhetorical questions that draw your reader in).

Provide a subtle blueprint (or "road map") for the paper. Let your reader know where you are headed (how you plan to tackle the subject) without giving away your best ideas. If, for instance, your paper breaks down into political, social, and cultural components, telegraph this to your reader so he or she will know what to expect.

B. The thesis:

The last function of the introduction is to present your thesis. This is so important to your paper that it merits lengthy consideration. The biggest

problem with student papers is that they contain no true thesis. The second biggest problem with student papers is that the thesis is vague and ill-defined.

How the thesis fits in the introductory paragraph: The thesis statement is the one-sentence version of your argument. The thesis thus presents your reader with new information. But a good thesis will require you to introduce the concepts in it before presenting the thesis itself. That is the task of the introductory paragraph. The following introductory paragraph presents a thesis that relies on concepts which have not been properly defined and clarified:

```
Since the beginning of time humans have owned one another in
slavery. This brutal institution was carried to its fullest extent
in the United States in the years between the American Revolution
and the Civil War. Slaveholders treated their slaves as chattel,
brutalizing them with the whip and the lash. The law never
recognized the humanity of the slave, and similarly regarded him
as property. Consequently, there was a big disparity between
private and public rights of slaves.
```

This thesis presents two words -- "private" and "public" rights -- that are not even mentioned earlier in the paragraph. What are these things? This paragraph does nothing to establish the distinction. Instead, it is a bland statement of theme which provides little background for the thesis. Thus, when one reads the thesis, it seems to float -- the premises underlying it have not been established. Compare the last introductory paragraph with this one:

```
To many supporters of slavery, the nature of slave rights had a
dual character. On the one hand, in order to maintain the total
dominance of the white master class, the law denied any rights to
slaves. Publicly, the slave was merely property, and not human at
all. Yet the personal records of many planters suggest that slaves
often proved able to demand customary "rights" from their masters.
In the privacy of the master-slave relationship, the black man did
indeed have rights which the white man was bound to respect, on
pain of losing his labor or subjecting himself to violence. This
conflict between slaves' lack of "public" rights and masters'
"private" acknowledgment of slaves' rights undermined planters'
hegemony and permitted slaves to exert a degree of autonomy and
freedom within an oppressive institution.
```

Note how quickly this paragraph lays the groundwork for the thesis. It is clearly structured around two competing concepts -- public and private rights -- which are then incorporated into the thesis. Nearly every element of the thesis is established in the preceding paragraph, yet the thesis itself is not a restatement of the paragraph. This paragraph even tells the reader what sources will be consulted: planters' personal records. Note finally that, in contrast to the previous paragraph, the reader now has a strong sense of what the paper will need to argue to prove its thesis.

II. THE BODY: This takes up several pages, and constitutes the bulk of your paper. Here is where you argue your thesis. The content of this section largely will depend on your thesis, and what it requires you to argue. Think to

yourself, "what do I need to support this argument?" If you find yourself unable to answer, you may need a more interesting thesis.

A. Structure of the body: You need an organizing scheme for your paper, which most often will be suggested by your thesis. Take this thesis for example: "In the 1950s, American auto workers developed their identities as laborers in the home as well as the workplace." This thesis suggests a structure: at the very least, you will have to divide things up into "home" and "workplace."

B. Logic and flow: The general movement in the body is from the general to the specific. Start with general statements, such as "Federal policy towards native peoples aimed at either assimilating Indians or exterminating them." Then move on to specific statements which support your general statement, such as "The origins of the policy of assimilation can be traced back to Puritan missionaries of the 1650s."

C. Paragraphs: Your paper is built on paragraphs. Each paragraph should be minimum of four (sometimes three) sentences. The first sentence of each paragraph is called the "topic sentence."

D. Topic sentences: The topic sentence should tell the reader what the paragraph will be about. In essence, it is a "mini-thesis" -- a small argument you will support in the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph will be support for this mini-argument. For example, the topic sentence for a paragraph may be the general statement:

Federal policy towards native peoples aimed at either assimilating Indians or exterminating them. (Note that you are including no specific facts in this sentence, you are merely making an argument which must be supported with facts and evidence.)

E. Support: Two kinds of support should appear in your paragraphs:

Source evidence and quotations: Taken from primary (sometimes secondary) sources. Can be quoted material, but not always -- you can always paraphrase (put in your own words) this material, as long as you acknowledge the source. This is the "raw data" that supports the mini-thesis of your paragraph. In the case above (federal policy towards Indians), you could, for instance, quote portions of this letter from Thomas Jefferson, in which he advocates to the Mohicans private ownership of land to Indians as a means of assimilating them:

> When once you have property, you will want laws and magistrates to protect your property and persons, and to punish those among you who commit crimes. You will find that our laws are good for this purpose; you will wish to live under them, you will unite yourselves with us, join in our Great Councils and form one people with us, and we shall be Americans.

Analysis: Raw data ***can never, ever*** stand alone to support your mini-thesis. It must *always* be interpreted and analyzed. This is especially true of quotes. *Never* just plop a quote in and expect it to be clear to the reader how it supports the mini-thesis. Following each citation of raw data, you *must*

analyze and interpret it -- tell the reader how it supports the point. In the case above, *you* must supply the connection between the primary source evidence (the quotation above) and your "mini-thesis" (that assimilation was one of the goals of federal policy):

Jefferson had little interest in understanding Native American culture and society on its own terms. To him, "assimilation" meant encompassing natives in a web of obligations and institutional arrangements which utterly departed from the anarchy he alleged characterized their societies, and rendered them dependent upon the "civilized" society he represented. (Note that these are writer's thoughts, words, and analysis of the material. He or she is not permitting the material to speak for itself, because it cannot.)

Transitions: The body of the paper must flow from one idea to the next. This linking of ideas is accomplished through transitional phrases. There are transitions between paragraphs, and transitions within paragraphs. Often, but not always, the last sentence of a paragraph begins to guide the reader to the next idea. (For this reason, it is often a good idea to end paragraphs with a sentence summing-up their findings.) Or the topic sentence of the next paragraph may accomplish this. In the current example, this topic sentence for the next paragraph not only introduces a new mini-thesis, it serves as a transition from the preceding paragraph:

If Jefferson embodied a policy of assimilation, President Andrew Jackson represented the ambivalence of a nation enamored with both assimilation and extermination of Native Americans. (The key to the transition is the phrase "If Jefferson embodied a policy of assimilation." This phrase bridges the last paragraph by summarizing its findings. As you can tell, the paragraph(s) must deal with the ways Jackson represented the embodiment of both policies towards Native Americans.)

Here is another example of a clear transition:

. . . Sailors in the merchant marine faced a troublesome labor picture. Seasonal fluctuations and the unpredictability of the economy of the shipping industry contributed to instability in employment relations. These in turn led to a decline in workers's loyalty and their sense of job stability.

Instability and insecurity also characterized the wage and employment conditions of longshore work. . . . (The transition here is built on the use of "also" in this topic sentence, which links the "instability and insecurity" of the longshoremen in this paragraph with the "instability and insecurity" of the sailors in the previous paragraph.)

G. Arguing in the body: The body is where you will flex your rhetorical muscle. Scholarly argument is not necessarily rancorous; it does not rely upon heated emotions, raised voices, and passionate appeals to the heart. Rather, scholarly arguments marshal *facts* -- and *analyze* those facts -- in a fashion intended to persuade the reader through *reason* rather than emotion. The most important technique for doing this is to anticipate the counter-arguments your argument is likely to receive. You must constantly ask yourself, what arguments which counter my thesis make sense? You may do this one of two ways:

(1) you may *refute* an anticipated counter-argument by proving that it is untrue (sort of a preemptive strike), as in, *"While the federal census of 1890 seems to suggest an increase in black mortality, that census was infamous for recording specious data."*

(2) you may *concede* certain points: accept the truth of statements which seem to refute your argument, but explain why they actually do not harm your argument (sort of a strategic retreat), as in *"It was indeed true that Latino youth were incarcerated at a rate three to four times greater than Anglo youth, yet this may suggest the iniquitous workings of the local justice system rather than a Latino propensity towards crime."*

In history, these strategies often mean dealing with evidence that seems to undermine the point you are trying to make. It is crucial that you not ignore this evidence; after all, the reader will not. Selectively invoking evidence while ignoring counter-arguments undermines your credibility, and hence the force of your argument. Consider the following paragraph:

White Southerners were concerned only with re-imposing a kind of slavery on the freedpeople. They voted the straight Democratic ticket, which sought to overturn "Negro rule," and they supported secret organizations like the Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia. In short, their regard for the civil rights of the newly-freed slaves was almost non-existent. (The fallacy here is one of over-generalization. The author claims that *all* southern whites supported the move to return freedpeople to a kind of slavery. But scholars know that some southern whites *did* support black rights in the era, and voted Republican. By refusing to consider countervailing evidence, the author undermines what is a generally sound point: most southern whites supported the Democracy, but not all. By anticipating and countering these criticisms, this author would enhance her credibility and make a good argument more persuasive.)

Topic Development: There are many different types of topics you can explore in order to develop your ideas and argument. You can build argument that concentrate on defining important terms. You can develop arguments that focus on comparison (pojnting out similarities, differences, or degrees of both). You can develop an argument that explores the relationship of events to one another (cause and effect).

III. CONCLUSION: This is usually one paragraph long, and briefly recapitulates your thesis, pulling all your arguments together. The first sentence of the concluding paragraph is a clear, specific re-statement of thesis. The conclusion should do more than simply re-state the argument. It also suggests why the argument is important in the bigger scheme of things, or suggests avenues for further research, or raises a bigger question.

Grammar and Punctuation:

Following the following grammar and punctuation advice will definitely improve your writing. You must remember that, for the most part, papers in history classes are formal writing assignments and thus must adhere to certain rules.

1) Avoid using I, we, us, our, and other pronouns that emphasize you rather than the subject. Writing "I think" or "I believe" weakens your analysis because it comes off as mere opinion. For example, dropping "I think" from the sentence, *"I think President Roosevelt proposed his New Deal to save capitalism,"* forces you to write *"President Roosevelt proposed the New Deal to save capitalism"* and thus you establish an assertive, specific argument. Likewise, don't put yourself in other historical periods by saying, *"We defeated the British in the Revolutionary War."* You were not there, rather state the Americans did or the colonists, etc..

2) Please be sure to use the proper verb tense in your papers. Remember, this is a history class and everything happened in the past so write it as so. The one exception to this is if you are referring to the author of a book or document written in the past. In this case it is appropriate to use the present tense only when referring to the author's work, not the events or topic itself. For example: *"Frederick Douglass writes about how slave owners whipped and bloodied their slaves."* Note that that the present tense is only used in this sentence when writing about the specific author's statement, but that the action of the slave owner is in the past. This can often be confusing so you might consider just writing the entire sentence in the past tense. Remember, Douglass wrote it 100 years ago and he is dead. *"Frederick Douglass wrote about how slave owners whipped and bloodied their slaves."*

3) Avoid the use of the passive voice as much as possible. Notice the difference in the following sentences: *"The song was performed by the Eagles."* *"The Eagles performed the song."* The first is the passive voice where the subject (Eagles) follows the verb and in the second it precedes the verb. The active voice is stronger and more persuasive because the agent of the action (the one doing the action) is the subject of the sentence. One way to notice this is the use of "is" or "was" before a verb ending in –ed.

4) In formal writing do not use contractions. Spell out the contraction so that don't is do not.

5) Watch your paragraph structure. Paragraphs rarely will exceed one page. A paragraph should not contain several different ideas or thoughts unless related in some clear manner. Also, one sentence does not make a paragraph. Also, try to avoid beginning a paragraph with the word "another." For example: *"Another murder Charles Manson committed occurred the following day."* Instead, just start with the main thought: *"Charles Manson committed another murder the following day."*

6) Punctuation is still important. One of the most common errors is to place the period or exclamation point outside or after the quotation mark instead of inside. The quotation mark always goes last. For example: *The turnout by more than 20,000 Seattle women and the successful recall of Mayor Gill, McClure's magazine proclaimed, "must be regarded as a triumph for woman's suffrage."* Notice that the period appears inside or before the quotation

mark. Also, when writing dates it is best to drop the apostrophe from the date. For example, the 1930's should be written 1930s.

7) Avoid use of sub-headings in papers shorter than 12 pages. Instead, devise a proper transition from one section of a paper to another.

8) Finally, please put page numbers in your paper.

The Department of History would like to acknowledge that much of this writing guide was borrowed from Bowdoin College's online writing guide. See Patrick Rael, Reading,* **Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students** ***(Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 2004).