

# Seven Suggestions for Writing Good Historical Essays

By Ronald Schatz and Jeff Nelson (abridged)

1. Write clearly. Among other things, that means developing a thesis (statement of your central argument or point) and introducing it in the first paragraph, reviewing subsequent paragraphs to check that they are relevant to your point, eliminating sentences that are convoluted, spelling correctly, and using correct punctuation. In addition, be careful with quotations. Do not let another author speak for you.
2. Back up your conclusions with evidence. What is evidence? Not the opinion of an historian, but primary evidence.
3. Always put your subject into context. What was the general situation in that society at that time that helps us understand why the person or group acted in this manner?
4. Be wary of simple explanations. Examine your essay critically for statements like “farmers felt...” “business leaders acted...,” “to women this meant...” Do not be shy about conceding the existence of variations within groups. History is complex.
5. Offer comparisons. You might compare your subject: e.g., white textile workers living in repressive conditions in North Carolina to black people excluded from the mills or white families still on the farm.
6. Cite your sources. Don’t assume, however, that a citation by itself proves a point.
7. Revise, revise, revise.