Common Problems with History Papers

Compiled from the real world

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Citations:

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Short title after first cite: see web guide on footnotes for examples. Zotero does this automatically. Do not repeat the whole citation after first use.

URLs for scholarly articles from the databases: If you used one of the scholarly journal databases, do not bother with the url. Usually it will only work from your account and I am not going to type five lines of random characters! Just cite the published version. I'll know if it is a proper journal from the databases.

Punctuation, grammar, mechanics

“punctuation first, quotation marks next, footnote last.”

Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks. Long quotes are indented with no quotation marks.

PAGE NUMBERS! I hate counting pages for you.

Past tense for past events.

If it happened in the past, use past tense. Do not use historical present (then Custer attacks but fails) => then Custer attacked but failed). If you are talking about your secondary source's take

Footnote after period and quotation marks.
on things, present tense is usually ok unless the secondary source is fifty years or more old or so, in which case you should probably look for a more up to date source (e.g., so as historian Rath argues, Custer attacked but failed). It is crucial to proofread. I have to correct this stuff in my own writing all the time.

Passive constructions are to be avoided in most cases.
Sloppy arguments are too easy in a passive allowing who is doing what to be hidden (both the sentences are passive, here are the active versions: You should avoid passive constructions. You can hide who is doing what and other sloppy arguments too easily in a passive construction. BTW, this is why the thesis exercise makes you avoid the verb to BE). Example where it matters: Passive: “Taking Native American lands was thought to be a good thing.” BY WHOM? Active: “Many colonists and later, white Americans, thought taking Native American lands was a good thing.”

Among, Amongst: Thou shalt avoideth amongst unless ye be over a hundred years old or British. Wouldst thou talk like that? Then thou shalt not writeth in such manner as this!
Affect, effect: affect is almost always a verb. Effect is almost always a noun.
Plurals vs. possessive. “Custer’s last stand” (possessive) “Cherokees fought back” (plural), “the captives’ only possessions” (plural possessive).
Contractions: Don’t use contractions. Do not use contractions.
Spell out centuries and numbers below one hundred. “Nineteen people survived jumping off Niagara Falls in the twentieth century.” “In the 1940’s 40s forties 1940s only two lived”. Higher numbers that are rounded off are also spelled out (a million, fifteen million).
Its: The possessive of “it” is “its” with no apostrophe. The contraction is “it's” and it's never used (see contractions). It's very confusing.
You: You should never use “you” in a formal paper.
Than/then: use “more than/ less than” (comparison), then you will have it right (conditional, temporal order)
Ellipses: avoid “etc.” – if it is important, say it, if not don't. In a quote, no need for “…” unless it is in the midlle of the quote. Don't use it at the beginning or end.
Very: Very often, Very can be deleted with no change in the meaning except to make your writing clearer.
Dashes: to use dashes to set off a phrase – like this one – use two hyphens with a space on either side but not between them (like this -- including the spaces). Your word processor may or may not change it into a real dash (called an “em dash” as opposed to the shorter “en dash” used as a hyphen and for everything else).
Their there now: One is place, the other is a third person possessive pronoun. Neither is a contraction for “they are.” Figure it out. I still make this error when I write, but fix it when I proofread.
Hear here now: As a historian of hearing, I mess this one up regularly. So do students.
On the other hand: should be preceded by “On the one hand” otherwise the other hand is not other. Can usually use “In contrast…” or something like that.
That which is whom: These are the main relative pronouns, pronouns that set off a relative clause like this part in italics. “That” can also be used as an indexical – something that points, like that over there, ya know? People usually have no problem with indexicals though. Use “who” or “whom” when referring to people, not “that.” Although there is a man that got away with it once. The reason you need to be careful is that when you use “that” in reference to people who happen to be women, slaves, Indians, working class, gay, trans, or whatever, it leaves open the implication that they are objects rather than human beings, so be careful that you use who or whom whenever possible when referring to people.
That or Which: For referring to things: pay attention to the commas. If commas are setting off the clause, don't use “that.”
- Bill found a dollar, *which* was lying in the street, right when he needed it most.
- **WRONG** Bill found a dollar, *that* was lying in the street, right when he needed it most.
- Bill found a dollar *that* was lying in the street. (no commas setting off the relative clause)
- **Works in England but not so well in the US** Bill found a dollar *which* was lying in the street.

**Who and Whom:** think of these as “person X” or “someone.” If person X is the subject of the relative clause, use “who”, if the object of a clause, use “whom.”

- The lesbian transgender Native American deaf woman *who* escaped yesterday is sitting over there (Person X – Someone – escaped. X is the subject.)
- The lesbian transgender enslaved Native American woman *THAT* escaped yesterday is sitting over there (You are objectifying him/her. And you are probably Racist!!!! (just kidding, mostly))
- The woman *whom* I saw is sitting over there. (I saw Person X/someone. X is the object)
- The woman *that* I saw is sitting over there. (ok in speech, but do you really want to go there after I just called you a racist?)

These distinctions are seldom made in speech, but are part of formal written English, which you are learning.

**Prepositions in relative clauses:**

- Tanya is someone *whom* I know very little of (this is neither informal nor correct because the preposition “dangles” at the end and it is supposed to be in a “pre”-position, which it certainly isn't, hanging out there at the end. The person who says this is probably trying to impress someone with his education but failing.)
- Tanya is someone *of whom* I know very little. (This is the formally correct way)
- Tanya is someone *who* I know very little of (Would be heard in normal speech since the middle ages, which indicates that the grammarians are wrong, but have had their way with the rules. Dangling prepositions are increasingly ok in more formal writing, and I won't fuss about them).
- Tanya is someone I know very little of. (if we allow the dangle, we can finesse the who/whom thing by just dropping it.)

Bottom line: dangle them if you wish to.

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**Content:**

**Who, What, When, Where:** Make sure you tell us these things (*when* is particularly important for historians) as you go along. Just because you know does not mean your reader does.

**What's in a Name?**

See this excellent guide from the government of Canada to using proper names and pronouns in a respectful manner. It explains how to use gender appropriate pronouns and respectful proper nouns. It also helps explain why.

**Native Americans:**

**Tribes:** They were not called tribes until the nineteenth century anthropologists needed a way to talk about nations that were not made by white people. They were and are nations. The only exception is that you can talk about twentieth and twenty-first century US federally recognized Indian nations as “tribes”, but you can also still call them nations too. If in doubt, say nation. The best practice, however, is to be specific and use the actual nation name where possible.

**Plurals:** Among the student, it is common practice to use singular when a plural is meant for
Native American nations, such as “among the Navajo” or “the Cherokee then moved west” (which one?). This is not so common amongst the German as among the Christian. **Right way:** “the Navajos” “the Cherokees” “the Germans” “the Christians”...but note, if you use it as an adjective, it has no plural: “The German people,” “the Cherokee language.” Lots of authors, some of them current and even very good, will still use the singular, so this is more my pet peeve. Nonetheless, humor me, or I'll send the White after you.

Indians, Native Americans, Indigenous: The best policy is to use the nation name. If that is not known or appropriate, “Indians,” while it was a mistake, is used commonly, even by Indians. “Native Americans” is fine. Canadian Indians are officially called “First Nations people.” “Indigenous people” is also ok, but “indigenous” as a noun is not. Avoid “the natives” like you would avoid “the savages.” Only use it if you are quoting someone else using it. The word “native” is ok when used as an adjective though, as in “native language.”

**African Americans:**

African Americans is fine. No hyphen, even if using it as an adjective. “Black” is sometimes used as an adjective (but not so much as a noun anymore) too, but avoid “the Blacks.” “Black” should be capitalized when referring to people. Actually, if you find yourself generalizing about a whole racialized group, to quote teh internets, “ur doing it rong.” Do not ever use “Negro” or “Colored” unless you are quoting. Same with the “n” word no matter what your self identify as. If you want to know why the names are important, look up Geneva Smitherman, “‘What Is Africa to Me?’: Language, Ideology, and African American,” *American Speech* 66, no. 2 (July 1, 1991): 115-132. I guess I just looked it up for you. Read it.

**The White Man:**

If you say this, I'll personally come get you and revoke all your white privilege if you have any. Even if you don't have any, I'll still come get you. Avoid. It is always followed by sloppy thinking and stereotypes, just like if you started talking about “the Black man.” Which one? If you want to be sneaky, you can just use “white” as an adjective and not capitalize it, while capitalizing “Black.” Very subversive, and really bugs the heck out of the white man, but there is nothing he can do except keep on oppressing you.

**US, America:**

America includes North, South, Central America and sometimes the Caribbean. When you say “American” do you mean US? Or do you mean “white Americans from the US?” or do you really mean to include all Americans. Since there is no “United Statesian,” you can use American as an adjective for US people, but be careful of your imperialist tendencies in doing so, especially when you really mean white US citizens. If you need to you can talk about all Americans with the adjective “pan-American.” The more specific you can be, the better though.

Some abbreviations:

- agr: agreement, usually in number or gender: “We is are.”
- pt: past tense.
- ptpe: past tense for past events.
- tense: verb tense
- wc: word choice
- awk.: awkward phrasing, rewrite.
- anything circled: ur doing it rong. Figure it out and fix it.
- etc. or …. do it to all the other ones like this too.
- =>: block indent (see above)
- ital.: fix italics (or less often, Rastafarian for “crucial to I and I's life force”)
• **caps**: FIX CAPITALIZATION.
• **trans**: transition
• **ttl**: title.
• **ppl**: people or population.
• **rep**: It repeats something, or says it again, or is redundant over and over. Remove all but one.
• **lc**: use lower case
• **frag**: sentence fragment.
• **UG**: It are ungrammatical.
• **sp**: spelling mistake
• squiggly sideways"Z” or mirror image “S” between two characters, words, or phrases: reverse the order of them.
• **ref.**: means reference, usually an ambiguous reference, meaning a pronoun could refer to more than one previous noun: “John told Bill to eat dinner in the car, then he ate it.” Who ate what?
• **agr**: Agreement, most often of number: John eat two cars, but they eats all the rest.
• **Non seq**: *non sequitur*, Latin for “does not follow.” It means that the second part of your argument does not follow from the first part. *Non seq*: John drank the orange juice. The dog got angry. *Seq*: John ate the dog food and the dog got angry. *Seq*: John drank the orange juice instead of feeding the dog, so the dog got angry. Often times the correction for a non sequitur is more information. Other times it is because you are not thinking straight and need to think through your argument better. From wikipedia: “an argument in which its conclusion does not follow from its premises. In a non sequitur, the conclusion could be either true or false, but the argument is fallacious because there is a disconnection between the premise and the conclusion.”
• **taut**: tautology, when something causes itself. The cause of the Civil War was the fighting between the states.
• **In**: last name (use instead of first name after first use, where full name should be given)
• **LOL**: laugh out loud. Less often: LMAO, ROFL: Laughing my A... off., Roll on floor laughing
• **re**: about, in reference to.
• :^) **smiley face**: I'm making a joke. Do not take comment literally. LOL.
• **Anything nice** I will write out completely since it so seldom happens. :^)
• **colloq**: colloquialism. Informal language not to be used in scholarly writing. Jeez. You kids.

**Finally,**

*for every rule there is an exception*: (except this one).