MISCELLANEOUS WRITING REMINDERS

1. Once you have a draft with the main points you want to make and the evidence for them from primary documents, you should decide what questions these points and evidence are actually considering (whether or not you come up with final answers for them and whether or not they are the questions you set out to answer) and what the main thesis of your essay is (as written, not necessarily as planned). Then, organize your paragraphs so a reader can follow your arguments most effectively, write an introduction and conclusion, and see where and how throughout the essay you might need to highlight your main concerns.

2. Decide what historiographic information and background information a reader would need to understand your main points and evidence. Include only what is truly necessary for a reader who is a graduate student in American history but not an expert in your topic area.

3. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence, often but not always the first sentence of the paragraph. Try creating a separate file with nothing but these sentences. What would a reader understand if they read nothing but your introduction and these sentences? Decide if any other points need to be made and if the order of paragraphs needs to change.

4. Avoid paragraphs that are a page long or less than three sentences. If some paragraphs or sections seem particularly muddled, try dividing them into sentences or small portions of paragraphs, printing that up, and then playing with what order would make the most sense. This often leads to the discovery that you should omit some of the sentences and expand on others.

5. Notice when you need to have transition sentences to avoid too abrupt a jump from one topic to another. See how a favorite historian handles transitions and avoids other writing problems, including how to make your points clear without sounding too much like a social scientist.

6. Do not use direct quotes from historians or other secondary sources unless they are needed to make a specific historiographic point. Use direct quotes from primary documents only when the exact words illustrate your points in a special way, not just when you are in love with their words. If the wording gives a special message, decide how you can explain this before or after the direct quote. Sometimes it helps to break up a long quote with some paraphrasing and analysis, but don’t forget to have a foot/endnote even if you are not doing a direct quote.

7. Double indent and single space any direct quotations that are over four lines long. Do not use quotation marks for these. Use the same punctuation before the quote that you would use if you were not double indenting. This means you should use a colon only if it would be appropriate if you were using your own words.

8. When you feel you have an almost final draft, read through it for technical writing issues, such as removing the passive voice whenever possible, avoiding having the same words too close together, using capital letters correctly, avoiding run-on sentences as well as ones that are too choppy, fixing over-generalizations by adding qualifying adjectives or adverbs, removing all contractions and slang, and correcting any other errors professors have repeatedly mentioned on your papers. (We all have some bad writing habits we need to correct before doing a final draft.)

9. Write out numbers through one-hundred and humor me by not capitalizing “southern” or “southerner” (or “northern” or “northerner”), unlike “the South” or “the North.” (And notice where I put the quotation mark at the end of the previous sentence.)