

A Brief Overview of Writing For HIST 1111: World Civilizations I

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I. Introduction

History in high school tends to focus on what professors of education call “content knowledge,” or, in plain English, facts and dates. This is because a large part of your former teachers’ task was to prepare you for standardized multiple-choice exit exams.

You will not encounter such tests in this class. Instead, the majority of your final grade will be based upon a series of written assignments. In part, I want you to experience what it is that historians do, which is to analyze material from the past and then to craft written arguments based on that evidence. Also, as I have said in class, improving your own abilities to create well-written, well-organized, and well-argued analyses is one of the most important things you can get out of this course because these skills can be used in many different areas in and outside UWG.

Therefore, I prepared this overview regarding my thoughts and expectations concerning writing for this world civ survey. Overall, I want to stress that writing is a process that requires time and practice in order to master.

II. Analysis versus Summarizing

Writing at the high school level revolves mostly around summarizing: identifying main figures, people, ideas, and events in a given text and restating those in your own words. Many of the book report assignments and reading comprehension sections on your tests were designed to test these skills. I know you are able to do this because otherwise, you would not be in this university or in this class.

Throughout the semester, I will be pushing you to move beyond summary to analysis. By analysis, I mean the use of specific information from readings to make a larger point that reveals broader historical implications. Or, in other words, use the “who,” “what,” and “when” to talk about “why” and “how.” Make sure in discussing the “why” and “how” to go further than narrative to show that your argument is significant—some questions to think about to lead you in that direction: Why did people in the past do what they did? Why did historical events occur as they did? What can we learn about a world we will never be able to actually experience? How do events and people from so long ago still shape our world today? Why are we still talking about these things today?

Let me give you two example sentences to make this clear:

1. Summary: “The flood story of Noah is about a big flood sent by God that destroyed most of humanity.”
2. Analysis: “The Hebrew’s account of God destroying most of humanity with a flood reveals how they saw the relationship between humans and God and the need to follow God’s commandments.”

I hope you noticed that the second sentence does more than just tell you what happened, it shows what happened is important. The words “reveals how they saw the relationship between humans and God and the need to follow God’s commandments” demonstrate significance. That is analysis. Before going farther, I should emphasize that

analysis is not opinion. An opinion is a statement of feeling not supported nor connected firmly to evidence and, so, cannot be proven.

III. Preparing to Write

Writing is a skill and a process and involves preparation. You should never expect to perform at your peak without preparing beforehand. In order to succeed in this course's writing assignments, you must demonstrate mastery of combining material from class lectures and assigned readings in order to support your own arguments.

A. *In the Classroom*

Not only do I expect you to attend lectures regularly, but also to be engaged actively while in the classroom. That means, in part, taking good notes. I strive for organization and clarity about what the overall point of a lecture and how I intend to prove it. Therefore, I do use PowerPoint to provide images and outlines. However, just writing down the outline will not be enough as the PowerPoints only contain major points, names, and dates. I give you the necessary explanatory information verbally. If you are ever unsure during a lecture, please ask for clarification either in class or at office hours.

B. *Reading*

All the readings in the class are what historians call primary sources—meaning that they are actual products from the time period being studied. Primary sources are the raw material historians use in trying to understand the past. They include such things like newspapers, letters, art, literature, among many others. They offer a window into the worlds long gone by.

Primary sources reflect the people who created them and the times in which they were created. Always remember that they speak to issues of their time and not ours. Knowing the background context is crucial. In addition, the people who wrote the readings you will encounter had their own perspectives on how the world should be and what was right and what was wrong. These perspectives might not be stated explicitly, especially if the author thought they were obvious. When reading, pay careful attention.

Of course, primary sources can be very frustrating when first encountered, especially the further removed they are from us, both in terms of geography and time. You can easily fall into the trap of trying to memorize each and every detail, particularly strange names, that you lose sight of the big picture. In order to avoid this, you must read strategically, meaning:

1. Realizing that you are not reading for entertainment. You must be mentally engaged with the text. Do not let your mind relax.
2. Analyze sources while you read them, not afterwards. Avoid reading the same texts over and over again.
3. Ask questions of the source when reading, including:
 - What does the source discuss?
 - Who created the source and what was their place in their society?
 - Why was the source created—what was the point?
 - What are the author's biases? What assumptions lie between the lines?
 - Above all, what does the source reveal about the culture that created it?

At all times, take notes while you read. You need to identify major points rather than getting lost in details, therefore, when you finish a reading, write down the people, events, and issues that come up again, again, and again. This will help make clear what the author thought was important. Also write down what you see as the author's major assumptions regarding how the world should work and what is right and what is wrong, and the like.

IV. Writing

After taking careful notes on lectures and readings, you are ready to turn to actually writing. Remember, your main aim is to craft a well-written, well-organized, and well-argued analysis based firmly on primary sources. Therefore, begin by thinking about what you are going to argue and how you are going to argue it. If you have the question in advance, go through your lecture notes and readings to find the relevant information to support your analysis. You have neither the space nor the time to mention everything, so think carefully about what material best advances your argument.

Then, you should craft a schematic plan—an outline, a mapping diagram, etc. Thinking about your argument and sketching out how you intend to prove it will help you avoid one of the traps of writing—trying to develop your argument at the same time as actually writing it. Such papers lack clarity and organization and tend to bring up so much information that they cannot develop any argument in depth. In short, taking the time to outline your paper in advance usually leads to more effective arguments.

Indeed, strong organization and structure are central components of good papers. Your written arguments should follow the following template:

1. Introduction, in which you:
 - a. Clearly state your overall argument.
 - b. Show briefly how you intend to prove that argument.
2. Body, of a varying number of paragraphs in which you prove the arguments laid out briefly in the introduction. The body must follow the order established in the introduction.
 - a. As part of its proof of your argument, the body must use direct examples from the course readings. In this survey class, I will accept parenthetical citations—for example: (Gilgamesh).
 - b. No what stand you take on a question, you must show how other interpretations are not as strong as yours.
3. Conclusion, that:
 - a. Restates the argument.
 - b. Briefly shows how your argument reveals larger implications about the historical period under investigation.

At all times, remember that writing in this class is a formal exercise and you must use a professional tone. This is not the same writing as you might do in Facebook or in a text to a friend. Avoid all slang and colloquial expressions and avoid contractions like don't and can't.

In addition, grammar does matter, even in in-class assignments. If I cannot understand what you are trying to say, your argument will lack strength and effectiveness.

As stated on the syllabus, any act of plagiarism (the use of someone else's words or ideas without citation) from any source (class materials and/or outside, including from the internet) will be dealt with severely, so remember to always cite all words and ideas that are not your own. All assignments in this class are designed to test your mastery of course material—use of outside materials, including internet sites like Wikipedia, will not count in any way towards your grade.

Please recall that when you entered UWG, you consented to uphold our Honor Code, in which all students “pledge to refrain from engaging in acts that do not maintain academic and personal integrity. These include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, cheating, fabrications, aid of academic dishonesty, lying, bribery or threats, and stealing.” Moreover, you agreed to the following: “[a]s a West Georgia student, I will represent myself truthfully and complete all academic assignments honestly. I understand that if I violate this code, I will accept the penalties imposed, should I be found guilty of violations through processes due me as a university community member.” You can review the Honor Code at: <http://www.westga.edu/~handbook/index.php?page=honorcode>. Penalties for Honor Code violations are discussed in the syllabus.

Finally, I recommend you keep in mind the following phrase: Keep It Simple and Systematic, or KISS. Some people find writing so uncomfortable, they compensate by throwing every big word they know into their papers. Resist this trap because if you do not use big words in your everyday life, there is a good chance you will use them incorrectly in your writing. The point about writing in this class is that it is not the fanciness of your language that matters, it is the effectiveness of your argumentation that counts.

V. Conclusion

Overall, writing is a process of which the putting words to paper is only the last stage. One of the most challenging and frustrating aspects of this process can be the fact that there are not single right answers in history. There will always be multiple ways in which questions can be answered because there are multiple ways in which sources can be read and interpreted. At the same time, keep in mind that there are plenty of wrong answers.

That does not mean, however, that a “formula” does not exist in history. The “formula” lies not in the argument, but in the organization. Make sure to always begin by stating your argument, then prove your argument, and end with showing how you proved your argument and its larger significance.

To repeat from the syllabus regarding grades, in general, “A” grades reflect totally excellent work—work that is well written, well organized, and well argued; work that avoids summarizing and instead integrates lecture and reading material into a deep analysis. “A” work contains no factual errors, excellent writing with no mistakes in spelling, grammar, or organization, and displays complete mastery of the main issues of our class.

“B” grades indicate good work—work that mixes analysis with summary. “B” work contains few factual errors, good writing with few mistakes in spelling, grammar, or organization, and displays a good command of the main issues of our class.

“C” grades indicate average work that offers only summary and lacks analysis and organization. “C” work contains some factual errors, average writing with some mistakes in spelling, grammar, or organization, and displays an average command of the main issues of our class. Something to think about: a “C” reflects summarizing of the material (the questions of who, what, and when)—“B” and “A” indicate you have gone beyond mere summary to address the crucial questions of why and how.

“D” grades reflect poor work that fails to demonstrate a mastery of assigned material. “D” work contains many factual errors, poor writing with many mistakes in spelling, grammar, or organization, and displays a less-than-average mastery of the main issues of our class.

“F” grades reflect work that fails to achieve any of the above criteria and display no mastery of assigned materials whatsoever.

You can improve your writing and, thus, your grade, in several ways: most importantly, practice. The more you go through the writing process, the better you will become. This is why I assigned the number of written exercises that I have. Also, you can become a better writer by reading frequently. Seeing how other people have used the English language will give you examples you can base your own style upon.

We will talk about these issues further in the classroom. Feel free to see me at office hours if you have questions regarding your writing and my expectations. There are a variety of other resources to help you get through this class, including UWG’s University Writing Center at TLC 1201 (<http://www.westga.edu/~writing>). I also recommend strongly that you have a friend read through your papers before submission—it will help you find typos and unclear arguments. You want the arguments in your final draft to be as strong as possible.

I have tried to give you detailed information about what I am looking for when it comes to written work. Writing is a process, one that requires time and effort. Certainly, I will be pushing you to strengthen your written arguments throughout this semester. It is not an impossible task; rather, one of the most important skills you can gain in a college survey.