

Writing Tips for History Students

This list includes some of the most common errors students make in writing history papers and some basic rules students should follow to improve their work. For more in depth explanations see William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* and David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies*. The most current standards publishers use for grammar and citation can be found in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. A shortened reference version of those standards can be found in Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

I. Useful Grammar Rules

A. Basic Sentence Errors

1. Fragment: A Complete Sentence has a Subject and Predicate

Ex. In Japan, just before the last war and in the process of modernizing.

(This sentence lacks a subject.)

2. Run-On: Independent Clauses in a Sentence Must be Properly Separated

Ex. The sun is hot, put on some sun screen.

(This comma in this sentence needs to be replaced by a semicolon or period.)

B. Comma Errors

1. Separating Independent Clauses with a Conjunction

Ex. Incorrect: I have heard his arguments and they are sound.

Correct: I have heard his arguments, and they are sound.

2. Dependent Clauses Preceding Independent Clauses

Ex. Incorrect: Because I am healthy I will run.

Correct: Because I am healthy, I will run.

C. Apostrophes

1. Possessives

Ex. It was Paul's blue ox.

(Paul is singular. If plural, the apostrophe goes after the s.)

2. Contractions

Avoid these in formal history papers.

D. Word Choice

1. Precision

Make sure the word you are using actually means what you think it means.

2. Variety

Find suitable synonyms to avoid repetition of words.

E. Subject Verb Agreement

1. Number of Subject Determines Number of Verb

Ex. Incorrect: None of us are perfect.

Correct: None of us is perfect.

F. Pronouns

1. Personal Pronouns Differ as Subjects and Objects

Ex. Incorrect: He eats more than me.

Correct: He eats more than I.

G. Active and Passive Voice

1. Sentences Should Have Agency

Ex. Incorrect: The atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Correct: The United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

H. Tense

1. Make Tense Consistent

Ex. Incorrect: Sally went to the store. She is buying cat food.

Correct: Sally went to the store. She bought cat food.

2. History Should be in Past Tense

Keep history in the past. When discussing a book or author, present tense may be used.

II. Analysis and Logic Errors

A. False Dichotomous Questions

-avoid questions that suggest answers that can be divided into two and only two mutually exclusive parts

Ex. Jacksonian Democracy: Myth or Reality?

B. Metaphysical Questions

-avoid questions that try to resolve non-empirical questions by empirical means

Ex. Was the Civil War inevitable?

C. Tautological Statements

-avoid statements that are true by definition

Ex. When people are out of work, unemployment results.

D. Fallacy of Prevalent Proof

- avoid making mass opinion a method of verification

Ex. Most historians agree that the world is flat.

E. Fallacy of Essences or Reduction

-avoid assuming that an argument can be reduced to an essence, an inner core of reality

Ex. Western Civilization is essentially racist.

F. Furtive Fallacy

-avoid assuming only dark and dirty facts are significant

Ex. Populists were paranoid.

G. Fallacy of Overwhelming Exception

-avoid generalizations that are not as general as they appear

Ex. The Magna Carta was the chief cause of Democracy in England.

H. Presentism

- avoid using the present to interpret the past

Ex. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the triumph of liberalism and the “end of history.”

I. Static Fallacy

-avoid casting dynamic events in static terms

Ex. The modern party system first appeared on July 4, 1776.

J. Didactic Fallacy

-avoid extracting specific lessons from history and applying them to present problems

Ex. The Vietnam War taught the U.S. not to send troops into Iraq.

K. Fallacy of the Universal Man

-avoid assuming that all people are intellectually and psychologically the same in all places, times and circumstances

Ex. Slaves were merely ordinary human beings.

L. Fallacy of the Mass Man

-avoid reducing millions of individual living men to “masses”

Ex. Jack Tars, colonial merchant seamen, were virtuous, manly, and jolly.

M. Fallacy of Man Mass

- avoid converting a singular individual into a collectivity of individuals.

Ex. They had the intellectual curiosity of a Jefferson or a Franklin.

N. Historian’s Fallacy

-avoid assuming your subject knew or should have known what was coming next

Ex. Roosevelt knew the Pearl Harbor attack was imminent and failed to stop it.

III. Research/Citation Formatting Examples

A. Book

Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 174.

B. Article

Caroline Ziemke, "Senator Richard B. Russell and the 'Lost Cause' in Vietnam, 1954-1968," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 72(Spring 1988), 42.

C. Newspaper

John Martin, "Sit-ins Made-to-Order for Reds, Hoover Says," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, 22 May 1961, p. 3.

D. Web Site

Gail Mortimer, The William Faulkner Society Home Page, 16 September 1999, <<http://www.utep.edu/mortimer/faulkner.htm>> (19 November 1997).

E. Manuscript Collection

Russell to Truman, August 7, 1945, Box 1, Series III, Russell Papers, Richard Russell Memorial Library.

F. Ibid

Ibid. is an abbreviation used by editors to save ink. It simply means refer to the previous note.

Example of footnote usage:

one of whom went on to serve in the reconstructed Georgia state legislature. Though the family quickly rebuilt its textile business after the war, Dick's inherited memory of Reconstruction was bitter indeed. His favorite book on the subject was Claude Bower's *The Tragic Era*, which described Reconstruction as a disastrous time of carpetbagger and black control of state government. The history of home and family for Richard Russell, then, was one that embraced the heroic but futile efforts of the South in the Civil War and the region's tragic mistreatment in the years immediately after.¹

It was thus with a loyal son's gut instinct to protect his own that Russell defended his beloved South. An overwrought speech delivered to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in

¹ "The Rearguard Commander," *Time* 70 (August 12, 1957), 15; Gilbert C. Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator From Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2.

1930 accurately conveyed his sense of Southern history. When “the last waver of the bloody shirt of sectional hate” had passed, he said, and the “dispassionate judgment of America reaches a true verdict on the Civil War,” the entire nation would “seek to share the glory which hallows the achievements of the Old South.” It was an “epic story of the devotion to principle.” Principle, he argued, that included “the cause of local self-government and home rule and defense of country, home and liberty.” The South’s commitment in the Civil War was the “brightest page of American history,” and the “proudest tradition of our national life.” Dixie, he insisted, could claim a heritage of “honor, chivalry, and devotion to ideals. . . without parallel in all the annals of history.” Any who dared impugn that legacy and insult his heritage suffered Russell’s quick, passionate, even vicious response.²

Russell never lost that defensive sense of Southernness, even after thirty-eight years of serving his country in the United States Senate. Indeed, Russell’s patriotism, his devotion to the United States was but a byproduct of his regional identity. The South for him represented the “bulwark of democratic institutions” in the nation and the world. It was in the South that democratic health had been passed on like a gene. The commitment to responsible citizenship necessary to sustain democracy, according to Russell had been handed from the Anglo-Saxons to Southern whites. But his “love of the memories of the stars and bars” did not mean “disloyalty to the stars and stripes.” Rather it was the South that would save democracy for the nation and the world. “The future hope of this republic,” he sincerely told audiences of fellow Southerners, “rests in the natural conservatism and loyalty of the Anglo-Saxon South.”³

Richard Russell was thus an odd mix of open-minded worldly wisdom and myopic regional pride. It left him endlessly interested in global affairs but profoundly distrustful of the

² Calvin Mcleod Logue and Dwight L. Freshley Eds., *Voice of Georgia: Speeches of Richard B. Russell, 1928-1969* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 42-44.

³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

world outside of the South, a romantic when his gaze turned toward home, a realist when focused abroad. These predilections firmly ensconced during his formative years, Russell entered manhood and political life as a Southern exceptionalist, committed to preserving his home and heritage in a hostile universe.

Ironically, it was a time when the South seemed once again poised to become a player in world affairs. In the spring of 1913, Dick, his father and a contingent of Russell family members attended the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson. Born in Virginia and reared in Georgia and the Carolinas, Wilson was the first Democrat elected president in twenty years and the first native Southerner since before the Civil War. His inauguration represented for the Russells and most Southerners the region's return to greatness. In