

Historical Evidence

Evidence is the foundation of all history papers. The responsible historian does not formulate a thesis until the evidence has been studied. Evidence for history papers is usually found in primary sources (texts written during the period under study), but one may also write a history paper based on secondary sources (texts written after the period). Which of the two you use will depend on the level of your course and the nature of the assignment. Ask your professor.

1. Your first job is to read the sources. They rarely present a single set of ideas, or facts, and must be read *critically*, so that one can determine what events were most important and which writers are most trustworthy. Out of your evaluation and analysis of the sources, you develop your thesis. A good thesis is valid and not simply correct. A thesis is persuasive when it has been argued well and supported by enough reliable evidence.
2. How you organize and present your evidence will be dictated by the nature and internal logic of your thesis. In any case, the evidence will not speak for itself. As the writer making an historical argument, it is up to *you* to explain the significance of your evidence, and how it pertains to your thesis. Do not leave your evidence stranded.
3. Quotations allow the writer to present the original language of figures under consideration. In a short paper, avoid long quotations. You lose control of your paper when you give up to another writer for so long. To avoid this, try to quote only the crucial phrases. Sometimes, a few words prove sufficient to capture the essence of the passage. Inevitably, there will be occasions which require longer quotations. If the expression is longer than three typed lines, the expression should be indented, stripped of quotation marks, and single-spaced.
4. Generally, one should avoid quoting from secondary sources. Even though a previous historian may have written exactly what you want to say, paraphrase the remark (and cite the author in a footnote!) rather than reprint a published statement. Also, make an effort to re-think and expand that author's conception. Sometimes, a secondary source contains such a delightfully polemical or delicious phrase that any attempt to reword it would seem unfair. In this case, make sure to introduce the author and explain why the expression is worth repeating.
5. All evidence, quoted or paraphrased, must be cited as another author's work. Whether you use footnotes or endnotes is determined by your professor. The failure to note your source is plagiarism, and it also makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish between your evidence and your own ideas.
6. The historian is limited by the available evidence. Do not go beyond the evidence, either by being influenced by other interpretations, or by misreading or exaggerating what your evidence means, such as:

Evidence: John Brown and his wife had nine children.

Invalid interpretation of evidence: John Brown was a male chauvinist pig who denied his wife her lifelong dream of becoming an actress.

Even if your conclusion is correct, and even if the introduction to the source said that John Brown was a male chauvinist, the evidence cited above does not support that conclusion.