

6.d.

The Scholarly Voice: Hints on Crafting Historical Prose

Clarity of language demonstrates clarity of thought. Your prose should be precise. Never assume that the reader will know what you're talking about; she or he never will unless you avoid all possible ambiguity. The meanings of every word and phrase must be crystal clear; if they are not, you have not explained sufficiently.

Avoid referring to yourself explicitly ("in this paper I will examine") or implicitly ("it is interesting to examine").

Your paper is about the people in your sources, not the sources themselves. Do not bring attention *in your prose* to your sources or the problems they present (this is what notes are for). Avoid phrases like, "In the collection edited by Ira Berlin, there is the story of a slave man who escaped to freedom." Instead, just tell me the story of the man; if you've cited properly, I'll be able to find your source. Avoid also phrases like, "This document shows that planters abandoned their land with great reluctance." Just say "Some planters abandoned their land with great reluctance."

It is important to keep your "voice" distinct from the "voice" of your subjects. When working closely with the writings of a historical subject, it is easy to forget to identify the author of a thought. Often, *you* wind up looking like the author.

For instance, in explaining William Lloyd Garrison's views on African colonization, your sentence should not read "Those who favored colonization were really hostile to the interests of all black people." This looks like your thought when it is really Garrison's. Identify it as such by adding, "According to Garrison," immediately before.

Here is another example of incorrect use of voice causing confusion about the author of an idea: "Black parents have complained about books containing the word 'n_____' being read aloud in class, therefore *Huck Finn* and other novels which use the pejorative term should be excluded from the classroom as racist." The implication here is that *black parents* think the book should be banned, but the sentence technically reads that the *author of the paper* thinks this. This re-write clarifies things: "Black parents have complained about books containing the word

'n_____ ' being read aloud in class, therefore **they think that** *Huck Finn* and other novels which use the pejorative term should be excluded from the classroom as racist."

History takes place in the past. Use the past tense and avoid the present tense. Keep tenses consistent.

A great scholar once told me that good writing is in the verbs. Use active verbs rather than the verb "to be" (and its conjugations), and minimize your use of adjectives.

Make sure you define important concepts. If you argue that Jefferson was neurotic, make sure you define that term.

When introducing a person, identify her or him completely. Only after first using "James Biddle, the president of the first national bank," should you refer to him simply as "Biddle."

Avoid using rhetorical questions to introduce your subject, or for any other reason. Instead, provide the answer to the rhetorical question you wish to pose.

Gendered language: Pay attention to gender-specific language. "The plague killed half of Europe's mankind"? Well, womankind suffered as well. On the other hand, there are times when it is not appropriate to use gender-neutral language. In this sentence – "Catholic law declared that the priest was required to keep his or her vow of celibacy, despite frequent lapses in practice" – gender-neutral language makes no sense, as Catholic priests are by definition men. Thinking about gendered language invites more analysis: "All men are created equal." You might ask yourself if this meant all men and women, all men except slaves, etc. Avoid overuse of male-gender pronouns when their referents are not necessarily male. You may wish to alternate use of "he" and "she" in your paper. Avoid "s/he" or "he/she." It is often possible to make the noun to which a pronoun refers plural, thus obviating the need for a gender-specific pronoun ("their" is gender neutral; "his" is not).

Vague terms and over-generalizations: Terms like "now," "then," "later," "before," "in this period" should refer to clearly-defined dates. "The people," "the masses," and phrases like "white power structure" are vague and generalized, as are "blacks" and "industrialists." Rarely can one generalization capture the nuances of history. Work for specificity; it is more accurate, and much more convincing. Avoid the article "the" that many writers use, for example: "the whites" or "the blacks." This may seem to objectify your subjects and introduce a distasteful tone.

Strive for conciseness. In general, use as few words as possible, but as many as necessary. "His reasons for whipping her included such things as letting her husband enter the army." Why not: "He whipped her for letting her husband enter the army." Wordiness often results from overuse of adjectives, as in "Former slaves were happiest and most content when living with their fraternal and related families." This is redundant and wordy. "Former slaves were happiest when living with their families."

Avoid the passive voice, as in "The bill was passed by Congress." Make active by identifying the subject of the sentence and placing it before the verb, as in "Congress passed the bill."

Choose active verbs: Good writing springs from lively verbs rather than superfluous adjectives. Choose active verbs, and avoid whenever possible dull verbs, like "was." Ask yourself, what was the subject of the sentence *doing*?

When writing on topics in American History, avoid personalizing your analysis by using words such as "we," "our country," and "in our culture." American history, like all others, varies enormously over time and place, and it is best to respect that variety in formal prose.

Avoid parentheses. Instead, set off parenthetical phrases in commas. If this does not work, rewrite the sentence.

There is almost no place for the verb "to feel" in a history paper. The phrase "I feel" is most often used when you are unsure of your evidence and argumentation. Any insight you believe worthy of inclusion in a paper should be stated with confidence.

Do not refer to people in the paper by using their first names alone. In the first reference to a person, use the full name and clearly identify, as in "Joe Smith, Senator from Wisconsin, argued the Republican position."

Avoid personal intrusions, such as "as stated earlier" or "as aforementioned" from your writing.

A final note:

It cannot be stressed enough that writing is the product of dialogues, both with yourself and between you, your professor, and your colleagues. Good writers constantly play with language and ideas, and constantly explore options and alternatives in their heads. Do not expect to write well without engaging in this process.

Writing is re-writing. Good writers have simply internalized many of the rules and idioms that young writers have yet to learn. Yet nobody in the world -- not even the best writers -- can write well without editing. The editing process in the best writers occurs before pen is even put to paper. Allow yourself the time to rewrite, and edit your own work.