An Informal Guide to Writing History Papers

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The first problem all of us face is to decide on an interesting topic--a topic that will be sufficiently interesting to keep us at the job until we find something worth saying, and a topic that ends up by communicating something to our reader.

DEFINING THE TOPIC

We seldom begin with topic fully worked out in our minds. Rather we begin with a broad general area that seems to interest us. Perhaps we would be interested in writing on the relations between science and religion in the later middle ages. At this point we have to look at the more general reference works (encyclopedias, survey texts) to find out a bit more about the topic. Generally after this beginning we will conclude that the problem is much too large to handle. We can't write anything meaningful about so broad a topic in a paper of the size allotted and, even if we could, the amount of work in researching the topic would take until the end of next semester, while the deadline is only a month away.

OK, now we must decide about more narrow areas. Do we want to talk about "The influence of the mendicant orders on medieval science" or "The Cathedral Schools and the Origins of the University" or "Christian Neoplatonism and the development of Gothic Architecture". This choice can be difficult--we may have found many interesting topics to look at but we have to focus on a single area. And we should decide as early as possible, for we will then be able to concentrate on certain aspects in our research.

GETTING DOWN TO SPECIFICS

In selecting this narrow topic we should remember that we are writing a history paper. History does not deal with disembodied sets of abstract ideas, whether astrological, theological or geological. It is not so important to a historian what these ideas are or whether they are right or wrong as how they came to be held. Thus, we have to deal with the specific people who held specific ideas at specific times. We will therefore consider the ideas and the persons who held them within the historical context which influenced them and which they influenced. For other courses ou may want to treat Aristotle's philosophy as raising philosophical questions, or Newton's physics as raising scientific questions; here we want to treat these persons and their ideas historically.

One possible way to restrict our scope is by deciding to focus on a single person. A biography seems ideal, but it can turn out to be a lot of trouble unless we are careful. We don't merely want to list the events in, say, Isaac Newton's career. Instead, we have to raise interesting questions about his career: Why did he turn to the study of Religion? What role did Alchemy play in his scientific thought? By what processes did he come to his knowledge of gravitation? As you can imagine, these questions require us to know something about 17th century attitudes toward religion, alchemy, or the problem of falling bodies. Biography is a useful restriction, but it doesn't allow us to ignore what's going on around our principal character.

To return to our hypothetical topic, once we've chosen "The influence of the mendicant orders on medieval science", we should begin to frame a question that our reading suggests is significant. Again we have a choice--we might want to ask "to what extent did the Dominicans' emphasis on rational theology assist medieval science", or "why did the English Franciscans focus on the study of optics?" Now we have a narrow question and we can look for the evidence we need to answer that question.

FINDING THE EVIDENCE

We might decide to write about the English Franciscans and optics, having found in a survey of medieval science that Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, and John Pecham were all important writers on optics who were closely tied to the English Franciscans. We could then read the biographical sketches of them in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* and skim some books on medieval science, medieval religion and the history of optics for material on these

three men. An important way to find further evidence is to track down footnotes and bibliographic entries that seem to deal with this topic.

We would want to find what elements of their Franciscan orientation set them apart from their non-Franciscan contemporaries and how this could have influenced their interest in optics. It might have been a concern with how we come to know through the senses, it might have something to do with seeking a better understanding of light as a metaphor for grace, or a desire to interpret the scriptural passages on light as the first created being. It may even be that the first of them established a tradition that, although it had no significant connection with Franciscan ideas in themselves, was followed by his Franciscan successors.

Here comes the part that I, personally, hate to get down to. Once our reading leads us to one or more of these conclusions, then we must write a discussion of them that will convince our reader. We have to gather the specific bits and pieces of evidence that led us to our belief, and use them in our discussion so that they will draw the reader to the same conclusion. Sometimes we may find that some of the things that seemed most interesting aren't really useful as evidence. We may have come across some neat facts about Roger Bacon's speculations about war machines, but unless they help our case, they will only confuse our readers, so we must put them aside for another paper.

EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE

The evidence we've collected will be of varying quality. We may have a passage where one of the persons involved in our story gives his opinion as to why he studies optics. this is a good type of evidence, but even then, we must recognize that writers often give justifications for their activity that are meant more to attract the reader, than to describe the author's real motivation. Our subject may reveal his motivations more honestly by the subjects which he actually studies and his approach to them than by any formal statements.

Since for a brief term paper, we won't be likely to read much of this first hand evidence (which historians call primary source material) we must carefully evaluate the brief quotations or interpretations provided in books and articles we have examined in our research. Such secondary sources are of varying quality, and we should look for good recent works from serious writers and published by reputable publishers or in scholarly journals. This evaluation requires critical judgement and although experience helps, a few indicators will tell us a lot:

1. Is the author a recognized scholar in the field we are studying, a serious amateur or popularizer who knows the field well, or only a professional writer turning out a piece without any deep study of the field?

2. Does the author approach our subject historically, or is his investigation philosophical or scientific rather than historical.

3. Does the author give detailed references to the sources of information?

4,. Is the work up to date and based on current research? Some students seem to believe that for a history paper an old book is somehow better than a new one; this is definitely not the case. Old historical interpretations are superceded at least as rapidly as old scientific theories.

5. If a book, is it published by a university press, by a commercial publisher of scholarly books, by a general "trade" publisher, or as part of a popular illustrated series? If an article, is it published in a specialized scholarly journal or in a periodical aimed at a general audience.

If we still aren't sure if a secondary source is trustworthy at this point, we can check how much it agrees with what others have to say about the topic. If it disagrees with the conventional view it might simply be wrong, yet it might reflect some innovative scholarship that deserves serious consideration. Does the author justify this unusual

perspective; does he/she seem aware that it is unusual; do others who wrote on this topic consider it worth mentioning? For books there's one further way to check; we can see if, and how favorably, it was reviewed in scholarly journals.

In using secondary sources, it isn't enough to quote an author's conclusion that, for example, the English Franciscans studied optics because of the influence of Robert Grosseteste. We must be critical of our sources. How do they justify their opinions? What are the specific pieces of historical evidence that support such general statements? Perhaps an author notes a number of quotations from Grosseteste in the writings of English Franciscans. Is such evidence really enough to prove this point? In any event, citing such specific evidence--especially when drawn from several different books we've consulted--provides a sounder basis for our own arguments than citing the opinions of a number of supposed "authorities"

Gathering evidence isn't enough, however. We have to use the evidence to build a well-reasoned argument that will convince a skeptical or even hostile reader that our conclusions are correct. It is this interplay between evidence and argument, between facts and logical demonstrations based on those facts, that makes a paper convincing.

FOOTNOTES (OR ENDNOTES)

In any event, we have to document the sources for our evidence. If we use a quotation from a source, we must put it in quotation marks or block indent it to set it aside from the text, and provide a footnote or endnote to show the source of our quotation. But notes are not just used for quotations. Whenever we use a fact that is not common knowledge or an interpretation that is not our own, we must identify the source of that fact or interpretation in a note. This whole issue of footnoting gets into the difficult question of plagiarism.

PLAGIARISM AND ETHICS

It is all too common for high school "research papers" to be nothing more than summaries of articles found in a book or encyclopedia. In high school we didn't have adequate libraries to work with, so many of our teachers tended to accept this kind of "research". At WVU there is no reason for such a method of writing. Our library has enough different sources that we can compare differing accounts of a given historical event. Furthermore, we have reached a stage where we can ask intelligent questions about the event. So a paper must not be a mere paraphrase of passages taken from the sources that we have read. We may mention a source with adequate footnotes or endnotes, but the real goal of a history research paper is to come to grips personally with a question that we have asked ourselves. To provide someone else's analysis of the problem as our own, *footnoted or not*, *in our words or theirs*, is a kind of theft. In a word, it's plagiarism.

Beginners are often confused about what use of a source is acceptable, and what is improper. Here are some examples that illustrate the boundary between acceptable and improper uses. If we were investigating the change from the medieval to the modern model of the universe, we might encounter C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, where he makes the following comment:

> We can no longer dismiss the change of models as a simple progress from error to truth. No model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known in a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many. But also, no less surely, each reflects the prevalent psychology of its age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age's knowledge.[1]

Here are three different ways of dealing with this passage. The first is a simple paraphrase; clearly a case of plagiarism.

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 222.

> We can't treat the change of models as the mere emergence of truth from falsehood. No model is totally true; no model is totally false. Each tried to account for all the appearances known in a given period, and each accounted for many of them. But almost as much as they reflect the state of their age's knowledge they also reflect that age's psychology.[2]

The next example is somewhat more subtle, it seems to apply Lewis' argument to the particular astronomical context of the Copernican revolution, and it drastically revises Lewis' phraseology, yet when looked at closely we see that while the words may be original, the ideas are still Lewis's. The key to plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's words *or* ideas as if they were our own, and despite the footnote, the tone of this paragraph wrongly implies that these are the writer's ideas.

> When we consider the transformation from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican world view, we can see that neither embodies the ultimate truth, and neither is pure fantasy. Each was an attempt to account for everything in the heavens, but each also reflected the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age.[3]

Finally, here is an example where the writer has come to grips with Lewis's ideas, and placed them in context.

> Some historians have written of the triumphal progress of scientific ideas from Ptolemy's medieval model to the Copernican worldview. But Lewis has argued that neither model gets at the ultimate reality, neither is a pure fiction. Each model reflected a serious, and largely successful, "attempt to get in all the phenomena known in a given period." But unlike the positivist believers in scientific progress, Lewis maintains that each model also reflected the prevalent psychology of an era.[4]

Paradoxically, this paragraph is a little closer to Lewis's words than the previous one, but what is significant is that the writer has made it quite clear where his interpretation begins and where Lewis's leaves off. This clear demarcation between our ideas and the ideas of our sources is a key to avoiding any suspicion of plagiarism and becomes especially important when we are citing interpretative passages like this one.

Not unrelated to claiming someone else's work as our own is submitting the same paper in two different courses. Trying to sell the same thing to two different buyers is considered fraud. In the academic world it is improper to publish the same piece of research in two different journals. Similarly, it is wrong to submit the same research paper for credit in two different courses without first working out an arrangement that both instructors agree with.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

As we put our argument together (and an essay is really a reasoned argument defending our conclusions) it is generally useful to begin with a statement of the question that we intend to answer. We might also add enough general background so the reader knows how our question is significant. Then as we put together our evidence, we should note how each bit of evidence relates to the question we have raised. Finally, we should end with our answer to the question and a discussion of how the evidence we have presented leads to our answer.

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2. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, p. 222.

3. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, p. 222.

4. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, p. 222.

At this point students are sometimes tempted to end with grand generalizations on topics like "the necessity of a proper relationship between science and religion for the fate of humanity". Usually, such generalities aren't really justified by such a brief research effort. If there is any one theme that runs through the process of writing a term paper, it is one of trimming away: trimming the topic down to a well-defined question we can deal with, trimming the evidence down to that which will answer the question, and trimming our conclusions down to those which are supported by the evidence. In this process of trimming we must set aside interesting topics, intriguing facts, and even some of our fondest generalizations, but only by abandoning these, at least for a time, can we hope to convince our reader.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Besides producing a quality paper we are naturally concerned with that imperfect measure of quality -- grades. I grade papers using the following general criteria:

Definition of the problem: Does the paper raise a significant, well-defined question about the general topic?

Adequacy of sources: Does the paper draw its evidence from properly cited', sound, scholarly publications? Do these sources include both recent articles from scholarly journals and the basic works on the topic selected?

Adequacy of interpretation: Do the paper's conclusions flow from the evidence presented in the paper? Do the conclusions represent the writer's own interpretation? Conclusions that misappropriate the analyses of other authors, *including authors cited as sources*, may be plagiarism and can result in a failing grade for the course.

Clarity of presentation: Does the paper communicate its conclusions clearly and effectively, demonstrating the connection between the historical evidence and the conclusions derived from that evidence?

Grammar, style, and mechanics: Does the paper employ the standard conventions of scholarly prose? Does it use correct sentence structure, grammar, spelling and punctuation? Does it display proper use of idiom, appropriate citation style for footnotes or endnotes, and careful proofreading of the typed copy?