

# Ten Commandments of Good Historical Writing

by Theron F. Schlabach

With Apologies To The Author Of The Original Ten

---

## **I. Thou shalt begin with an outline that buildeth thy entire paper around thy central ideas.**

An outline built around a THESIS AND SUBTHESES will do the job much better than one that only categorizes information or puts it into chronological order--although topical analysis and narrative also have their uses. In any case, whether you organize by thesis-subthesis, topic, or narrative, your central task is to ask penetrating, interpretive questions of your sources. Therefore structure your outline to let incidental facts recede as supporting evidence, and to emphasize answers to intelligent questions.

Facts and details should always support the main ideas in evident ways.

Do not relegate the real point (or points) of the paper to the conclusion.

---

## **II. Thou shalt avoid self-conscious discussion of thy intended purposes, thy strategy, thy sources, and thy research methodology.**

Draw your reader's attention to the points you are making, not to yourself and all the misery and sweat of your process of research and writing. Keep the focus on what you have to say, not on the question of how you hope to develop and say it. Do not parade around in your mental underwear. Show only the well-pressed and well-shined final product.

Avoid self-conscious-sounding phrases such as: "now let us turn to"; "I will demonstrate that"; "now we see that"; even "I think that", or (even worse) "I feel that".

Avoid use of first person.

If you must discuss methodology, do it in a preface; discussing sources is fine, but in a bibliographical essay.

Phrases that tell your reader explicitly what you intend to do or to do next, or that tell explicitly where to see emphasis, are crutches. They indicate weaknesses in your paper's implicit development and emphasis.

The above does not mean that you offer the reader no cues and clues. Yes, it is important, in the opening paragraph or two of a paper or a section, to lay out the essential question(s) you will address and often to hint at the answers you may find. But do it artistically, not with a heavy hand.

In the cases of historiographical papers and book reviews you may of course discuss sources. Those cases are exceptions. There may be other exceptions.

---

## **III. Thou mayest covet other writers' ideas but thou shalt not steal them.**

Document EVERY quotation, paraphrase, or crucial idea that you borrow from a source.

Document those facts which you cannot consider common textbook knowledge--especially those which could be controversial or which are crucial to the development of your argument, analysis, or narrative.

If there get to be too many footnotes, combine some or all that refer to a given paragraph. However, never make one footnote cover material in more than one paragraph. When in doubt, footnote.

---

**IV. Thou shalt strive for clarity above cuteness; thou shalt not use jargon when common language will serve, nor a large word when a small one will serve, nor a foreign term when an English one will serve, nor an abstract term where a vivid one is possible.**

Learn first of all to write lean, tough, logical, precise prose. After you have learned that, you may begin to experiment with metaphors, allusions, and fancily turned phrases. But use these only if they add to communication and do not clutter it up.

Never use more words when you can make the point with fewer.

Trying to impress your reader with obscure vocabulary, erudition in foreign or specialized verbiage, and all such pretension, is absolutely out.

Take special care to keep verbs in their active, verb form, rather than changing them into abstract nouns, usually with "tion" endings. ("She helped organize." Not: "She helped in the organization of." "He was one who used Marx's ideas." Not: "He participated in the utilization of the ideas of Marx.")

---

**V. Remember thy paragraph to keep it a significant unity; thou shalt not fragment thy discussion into one short paragraph after another, and neither shalt thou write a paragraph that fails to develop a topical idea.**

Think of the paragraph as an instrument to develop an idea. The paragraph should have a recognizable idea, usually as a topic sentence.

Usually, three sentences are minimum for a good paragraph, and most paragraphs should have more. Short paragraphs seldom develop ideas or nuances. They are for people with very short attention spans (which partly explains why journalists use them).

Maximum length for a good paragraph is roughly one typed, double-spaced page, although a paper full of such long paragraphs will be tiring. A good length for most is 1/2 to 3/4 page.

There are times to violate the no-one-or-two-sentence-paragraph rule, especially: to make a succinct statement stand out sharply for emphasis; or, to make a transition to a new section of the paper.

---

**VI. Thou shalt write as if thy reader is intelligent--but totally uninformed on any particular subject: hence, thou shalt identify all persons, organizations, etc., and shalt in every way try to make thy paper a self-sufficient unit.**

Here, the chief temptations are: to plunge into a subject without adequately establishing time, place, and context; and, to refer to authors and to obscure historical events as if everyone knew of them. The motive may even be snobbery, showing off one's esoteric knowledge.

So, do not refer to facts in language that implies that the reader is already familiar with them, unless you have first established the facts. To do so may make the reader feel dumb. Often this rule means: using "a" or no article at all instead of using "the" or a possessive pronoun; and, not putting the reference in a subordinate clause.

In the first reference to a person, organization, or whatever, give the complete name (not only initials). Thereafter, unless a long space has elapsed, you may refer to a person only by last name (seldom the familiarity of only the first name). In the case of an organization, after the first reference you may use an acronym (e.g., CIA for Central Intelligence Agency) if you have made the meaning of the acronym clear.

---

## **VII. Thou shalt use quotations sparingly and judiciously, only for color and clarity; if thou must quote, quotations should not break the flow of thine own language and logic, and thy text should make clear whom thou art quoting.**

Effective quotation is a literary device--not a way to transfer information unprocessed and undigested from your sources to your reader.

Quoting does NOT add authority, unless you have already established that the source carries authority. Even then, paraphrasing may do as well or better. (Often, you should be able to write better than did the original author!)

Usually, for art's sake, do not quote whole sentences. Your language will flow better, without strange sentence structure and abrupt shifts in style, if you quote only short phrases and merge them nicely into your own stream of language.

Indented block quotations are out! If a quotation gets beyond about four lines (heaven forbid!), break it up, paraphrase, do something--but do not make notches at the edge of your paper that signal a coming mass of undigested material.

---

## **VIII. Thou shalt not relegate essential information to thy footnotes**

Normally, discursive footnotes should be very few. If the information is important enough to print, get it into the text; if not, save the paper.

---

## **IX. Thou shalt write consistently in past tense, and in other ways keep thy reader firmly anchored in time.**

The "historical present" causes more confusion than it is worth. Sense of time and context is first among the historian's contributions. Writing of past events in the present tense is usually evidence that the author lacked appreciation for historical setting.

Historical essays and book reviews present special problems. But even the author's act of writing a book took place in the past, even if only a year or two ago. Thus, Hofstadter ARGUED, not "argues", in his *Age of Reform*. Hofstadter is now dead, and presumably cannot argue (present tense). Even if he were still living, we do not know that he has not changed his mind; authors do change their minds. On the other hand, the book, if it is the subject of the verb, does always

continue to make the same point, so that you do use present tense. Thus, Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* "argues," not "argued".

As you write, frequently intersperse time phrases: "in 1907", "two years later", whatever. If the date is the more important, state the date; if time elapsed is the more important, use a phrase such as "two years later".

Perfect tense is very helpful, indeed often necessary, for keeping the time line clear--especially when you shift or flash forward or backward from some reference point in time. ("In August, 1893 Smith met Jones at the World's Exhibition in Chicago. Three years earlier they had met in London. Now they met as old friends.") Note "had met".

---

## **X. Thou shalt not use passive voice.**

Passive voice destroys clarity because often it does not make clear who did the acting. ("The order was given.") In such cases, it fails to give complete information. Or even if it does give the information ("The order was given by Lincoln.") it gives it back-end-forward. Why not: "Lincoln gave the order."?

If you write many sentences in passive voice, check whether your language is not generally abstract and colorless. Passive voice almost always goes with a style that lacks vigor and clear, direct statement.

Some people have the notion that passive, colorless writing shows scholarly objectivity. The idea is pure rot.

---

### **Copyright © 1996 by Theron F. Schlabach.**

**Permission has been granted to reproduce this document for non-commercial educational purposes, on the condition that the author receives credit. Theron F. Schlabach is a professor of history at Goshen College, in Goshen, Indiana.**

---

*Page maintained by [Gerald W. Schlabach](mailto:gwschlabach@stthomas.edu), [gwschlabach@stthomas.edu](mailto:gwschlabach@stthomas.edu).  
Copyright © Gerald W. Schlabach. Last updated: 12 July 2000.*