

The Historiographical Essay: Guidelines and Requirements

A historiographical essay is one in which the essayist analyzes works of history in terms of their intent, success, and failure as works of history according to accepted disciplinary criteria. For the purposes of my courses, I have adapted five criteria long used by a scholarly journal in its instructions to those who reviewed new books for that journal. These are the criteria which you must understand and use for success in this part of your coursework:

1. The author's purpose: what did the work's author intend and how successful was the author in fulfilling that intention? If your assignment calls for reviewing several authors, all working on one subject, how useful was the author's work in terms of the subject? If your assignment calls for reviewing two or more authors, each working on a different subject, how useful was the author's work in terms of that particular subject?
2. The author's sources: did the author make good use of adequate sources? To support your conclusion in this regard, please list the types of sources the author used (such a list might be as follows: a broad range of secondary sources, correspondence, periodical accounts from the time, memoirs of participants, contemporary government reports). The issue of an adequate source has to do with sources which make sense in terms of what the historian is arguing; if, for example, s/he is writing about the intentions of policymakers or of slaves, s/he should have correspondence from those policymakers or memoirs or oral history or police records reflecting the ideas of the slaves. We want the historian to have gotten as close to the events and participants as the available evidence will allow. That is why we tend to prefer primary sources to secondary sources. Generally, a primary source is one close to the reality at issue, such as contemporary official documents, publications, and (official or private) correspondence, or eye-witness or participant accounts. Generally, a secondary source is an analysis and/or narrative based on primary sources, such as a study written after the events took place by a non-participant, such as a scholarly monograph or article. For example, what you will be reading as you do your work on this paper are secondary sources.
3. The author's bias: did the author's inevitable prejudices clearly distort the account and analysis, or did the author successfully present a reasonably balanced work of scholarship? This is a controversial area in academic circles today, because few believe objectivity is possible. However, most practicing historians believe it is important to approximate objectivity through a dispassionate, reasoned argument and analysis based on primary-source evidence and a careful sifting of secondary sources. We tend to criticize colleagues who fail in this regard. Bias might be thought of in two different forms: bias by omission (in which the historian through poor research fails to examine all the evidence relevant to the issue) and bias by commission (in which the historian attempts to sway the reader by presenting evidence which only supports his/her position, or by presenting evidence from various points of view but in a way which favors his/her position, or, again, by reaching conclusions based on his/her position without regard to evidence to the contrary). Often, a poor historian will mingle the two kinds of bias. Many historians believe that a historian who makes his/her personal position obvious but nonetheless clearly tries to present the evidence in a balanced fashion cannot be said to have failed; others continue to maintain that the tone and presentation of the historian should suggest a dispassionate, non-partisan approach. Your task is to decide if you can detect one or more biases

on the part of the historian and if the bias in question has undermined the credibility of the historian's work. This task is the critical one. If you cannot determine a bias, you must at least state as much, so that it is clear that you reviewed the author's work with this in mind.

4. The author's contribution. If you are reviewing a number of works on the same subject, does the work you are discussing provide readers with something important and new in either findings or interpretations? In other words, if your assignment calls for you to read a number of works dealing with the same topic, you may see that over time one author's work tends to be basic and others merely use it, without adding anything to our understanding. Ideally, each historian is supposed to master what has been done by other historians before him/her and add something new, so that, depending upon when one wrote, one added something that was not there before (although it may then become something well known afterward). Thus, if you are reading a number of works on the same subject, your task is to compare the works you have been reading in terms of when they were published to establish who is bringing something new to us and who is simply repeating established material. Note that someone can use previously known material (in terms of research and information) to achieve a new understanding by thinking about the old material in a new way; this, too, is a contribution. If your assignment focuses on a few works, each of which has a different subject, then your analysis of contribution can only really address two questions: What use is the work? Would you recommend the piece to someone else interested in the subject and, if so, why?

5. The author's failings and/or the direction for future research: If the work has no obvious failings in what the author did, what might be done by the author or another historian to address the obvious, related matters that were left undone or, what might be done or take the next logical step in the argument? If the author did fail in one way or another, what might be done to rectify failings in the work? Here you must not only make an assessment of what is poorly done or incomplete about what the historian set out to do, you must also suggest what the solution to his/her problem might be. For example, if a historian of a war writes his/her account from the point of view of only one of the participants, using archives from only that country, you might note the problem and suggest archival research in the other country. Another historian might write up an analysis of an urban revolt on the part of the poor, using police and newspaper records, but neglect to analyze the policies which provoked the revolt in terms of what the policymakers hoped to accomplish and how they perceived the poor before and after the violence. Such an account fails to address fully the issue of why the revolt took place and what its repercussions might be, because we understand only what the poor did (and, perhaps, something about how they perceived their situation) but we do not understand the larger context in which the revolt took place, without which we cannot ponder its historical meaning and legacy. There may also be cases in which you think that the work is without obvious failings. In these cases, it would be best for you to suggest what the next step in research might be to take advantage of such an achievement and move our understanding along further. In this case, try to suggest a research agenda closely tied to the research interests/trajectory obvious in the piece being discussed. It will not do to say that a successful analysis of the movement to abolish slavery in Cuba should be followed up by a study of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 -- the links between the two are too indirect. A more suitable example for the direction of future research would be a study of the political role of Afro-Cubans after slavery's abolition.