

HISTORIOGRAPHY PAPERS

Historiography papers give an overview of the different historical interpretations of the topic, usually as historians' methods and views have changed over time. Historiography papers may be sections in longer historical papers, and they put arguments in conversation with other historians who have written on the same topic.

Historiography is the study of the study of history—in other words, historiography asks how historians in the past have thought about a certain topic.

PURPOSE AND TONE

1. **Give an overview of the relevant research** – Like a literature review, a historiography paper takes the reader through what different historians have said about a particular topic.
2. **Choose the most important histories** – Use secondary sources but pay closest attention to monographs or books entirely committed to one topic (as opposed to textbooks or encyclopedias). Avoid history books written by regular authors or journalists rather than historians—professional histories will be written for an academic audience, not a popular one.
3. **Include different philosophies of historiography** – Many historiography papers include the perspectives of several *-isms*: Progressivism, historicism, Marxism, universalism, etc. Just as these philosophies prescribe a way of thinking about the world, they each carry a method for thinking about history—compare these perspectives!
4. **Create a conversation and use humility** – Write about each historian as if they were having a conversation with each other—and with you. Compare the points of view instead of simply listing them. Recognize that you are a student among professional historians and have humility. Storey (2021) suggests to “give them the same amount of respect that you would if you were speaking to them in person” (p. 96).

STRUCTURE

1. **Provide background** – Before presenting different views, *briefly* summarize the topic. Remind your audience what happened!
2. **Summarize and critique secondary sources** – Depending on the paper's length, you may write a summary and a critique paragraph for each source, or you might combine them.
 - a. Faithfully summarize the author's argument, emphasizing what differentiates this source from the rest.
 - b. State what the author did well and what they may have missed, using evidence from their work.
 - c. Compare the authors—do they agree or disagree? Explain how they may have come to different conclusions.

3. **Light the path for your research** – Especially for longer research projects, use the concluding paragraph to summarize any gap in the research that you can fill. Usually, this will not be a huge or glaring gap in the research.

EXAMPLE OUTLINE: The following is a historiography paper sample outline (*using fictitious sources*):

- I. Introduction
 - A. **Background:** Farmers in colonial Virginia each owned large plots of land and settled far from any neighbors, only meeting a few times a year for local government.
 - B. **Thesis:** Their motivation for settling far apart cannot be explained by a one-sided approach.
- II. *Colonial Culture: An Overview of Rural Virginia* by Mark Melson, 1921
 - A. **Summary:** Example of Progressive historiography. Argues that colonial Virginians delayed industrialization by settling far apart and not sharing ideas.
 - B. **Critique:** Melson wrongly assumes that colonial farmers wanted, or should have wanted, the rapid urbanization that came with the industrial revolution.
- III. *Class and Motivation in Colonial Virginia* by Graeme Greene, 1930
 - A. **Summary:** Example of Marxist historiography. Argues that colonial Virginia stagnated because the working class lacked class consciousness as they kept to themselves.
 - B. **Critique:** Greene assumes that farmers would have reason to rebel against the colonial government if they had the opportunity.
- IV. *Working the Fields in Colonial Virginia* by Elle Everson, 1956
 - A. **Summary:** Example of postwar historiography. Argues that there were no adverse effects to farmers settling far apart because they each chose that life for themselves.
 - B. **Critique:** Everson ignores the economic stagnation and volatility of the period, opposing Greene's stance.
- V. *Analyzing Colonial Virginia: A Multifaceted Approach*, by Quinn Queen, 2015
 - A. **Summary:** Example of modern historiography. Argues that farmers settled far apart for a blend of economic, social, and political reasons and shows the positive and negative effects.
 - B. **Critique:** More balanced than the other historians. Good use of primary sources and analysis.
- VI. Conclusion
 - A. **Summary:** Melson, Greene, and Everson took one-sided approaches to the topic, while Queen examined all types of motivations. Queen seemed to have the least bias.
 - B. **Future research:** None of the authors covered how important each motivation (economic, social, or political) was to colonial Virginians when they settled far from each other.

References

Storey, W. K. (2021). *Writing history: A guide for students* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.

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