

A POCKET GUIDE TO

# Writing in History

SIXTH EDITION

**Mary Lynn Rampolla**

Trinity Washington University

Bedford / St. Martin's

Boston ♦ New York

Historians have held dramatically different views about the importance of European colonial rule in Africa: Marxist historians, along with others who focus on economic issues, have tended to see the colonial period as an important turning point, while cultural historians have maintained that the impact of the West on the ancient cultural traditions of Africa was superficial.

In the rest of the paper, the student supports the thesis as he or she would do in any other history paper. (For a fuller discussion of formulating and supporting a thesis, see 4c and 4d.)

### 3c Taking history exams

History exams reflect your ability to synthesize the materials you have examined over the course of a semester into a coherent picture of the period you are studying. If you have been attending classes and reading actively and critically throughout the semester, the final exam should not be an occasion for panic but rather a chance to demonstrate your understanding of the people, events, and institutions you have been studying.

History exams can follow many different formats. One typical component of a history exam that allows the professor to evaluate the students' basic mastery of the material is a series of identification questions that ask students to briefly describe and note the significance of important persons, places, or events. Many instructors also test their students' ability to synthesize the material they have been studying throughout the semester by asking them to write short essays that discuss a particular historical question or issue in some detail. Since history exams can vary widely in format, it is important to pay careful attention to your professor's specific instructions. The following general advice, which includes strategies for answering identification questions and composing short essays, can help you prepare for any history exam.

#### 3c-1 Preparing for an exam

The best preparation for an exam does not begin the day, or even the week, before the exam but takes place throughout the semester. Careful reading of the texts and

periodic review of your notes will ensure that you have a firm grasp of the material come exam time. Throughout the semester, you should do the following:

**Attend class regularly and take good notes.** It is not necessary to write down *everything* your professor says. When taking notes, you should listen for the main points and note the evidence given to support those points. (You will discover that your professor's lectures usually follow the same format as a good essay.) Follow the same suggestions for a discussion class; your classmates will often make important points about the material you are studying.

**Review your notes regularly, preferably after each class.** If you review your notes while the class is fresh in your mind, it will be easier for you to notice places where the notes are unclear. Mark these places, and clarify confusing points as soon as possible, either by researching the issue yourself or by asking your professor.

**Keep a list of important ideas, people, and events.** As you read your texts and review your class notes, it is useful to make a list of significant persons, places, events, and concepts along with a brief description of why they are important. Look up the definitions of terms with which you are unfamiliar. This not only will ensure that you understand the key ideas in the material you are studying but also will be particularly useful if your exam for the course includes an identification section. How do you know which items to include on this list? Some will be obvious; if you are taking a course called *Twentieth-Century Dictators*, it would be a good thing to be able to identify Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. In cases in which the importance of a person or an idea is not so obvious, look for other clues: words that are italicized in your texts; concepts that recur in several of your readings; and terms, events, or people that your professor has highlighted for you or written on the board.

**Refer to your syllabus throughout the semester.** Many instructors provide detailed syllabi that state the themes for each section of the course. Use the syllabus as a guide for your own studying and thinking about the course material.

**Take careful notes on the reading.** Read with a notebook or computer at hand, and take notes as you read. Keep in mind that simply copying long sections from your texts is not very useful in ensuring that you have understood the material. It will be much more useful for you to take notes in the form of summaries. (See 3b-1 for a fuller discussion.)

**Keep an academic journal.** Some professors require students to keep academic journals, but even if this is not the case for your class, you should consider doing so. In your journal, record important points about the material you are reading, any questions you want to answer or issues you would like to raise, important ideas suggested by class discussions, and so on. Use the journal to track your growing knowledge of the material you are studying.

The week before the exam, you should do the following:

**Review your notes, syllabus, and texts.** Identify the most important themes and issues of the course, and assemble the evidence that clarifies those themes.

**Anticipate questions.** Imagine that you are the professor faced with the task of creating the exam for this course. What questions would you ask? Framing your own exam questions and answering them can be a useful way of organizing your thoughts.

### 3c-2 Answering identification questions

Professors often use identification questions as a way of testing your basic understanding of the material covered in the course. You may be asked to identify people, places, or events, or to define important concepts. If you have kept a running list of significant individuals, events, and terms, you probably will not be surprised by any of the items in the identification section of your test.

When answering identification questions, it is important to *read the directions carefully*. Students tend to make one of two mistakes in answering identification questions. On the one hand, they may produce answers that are too detailed. The response to an identification question should not be a fully developed, multi-page essay. So how much should you write? Often, your professor will tell you how long your response should be; you might,

for example, be asked to write one sentence or a three- to four-sentence paragraph. The number of points an identification answer is worth also provides a clue to how much time you should spend writing your response. If your exam includes an essay worth 50 points, and ten identifications worth 5 points each, you obviously should not spend thirty minutes on one identification.

On the other hand, take care not to write too little. Your answer should be detailed enough to identify the individual person, event, or concept. Again, if each identification is worth 5 points, merely identifying Anne Boleyn as an English queen is clearly not enough; dozens of people can be identified as English queens. A more successful response would identify Anne Boleyn as the English queen who was the second wife of Henry VIII and the mother of Queen Elizabeth I. Moreover, identification questions may ask you to go one step further by noting the significance of the person, event, or concept. Sometimes, this expectation is spelled out in the directions with such wording as "identify and *explain the significance of . . .*" At other times, the suggested length of your answer provides the clue; if you are asked to write three to four sentences, you will need to provide more than a minimal identification. In this instance, thinking about why your professor has asked you to identify particular persons, events, or concepts will help you formulate your answer.

### 3c-3 Taking an essay exam

The essays you write for an exam will necessarily be shorter than the papers you write for your course, but they should follow the same basic format. In other words, an exam essay should begin with a thesis stated clearly in the first paragraph, followed by several paragraphs in which you provide evidence supporting your thesis, and end with a conclusion. (For detailed advice on writing a history essay, see Chapter 4.) The difficulty, of course, is that you will be writing this essay under pressure, in a limited period of time, and without the opportunity to check the accuracy of your data. The following are some suggestions for writing a successful essay on a history exam.

**Preparing to write.** *Do not begin to write right away.* This is probably the biggest mistake that students make in essay exams. Before you write, do the following:

- Read the exam carefully. Make sure you understand what each question is really asking. You will not gain points by scribbling down everything you know about the development of Chinese politics from the tenth century through the fifteenth century when the question asks you to discuss the impact of the Mongol invasion in 1260.
- If you are offered a choice, make sure you answer the question you can answer best. This may not always be the one you are drawn to first. One great insight about the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi will not be enough to write a good essay about Maori-British relations in nineteenth-century New Zealand. Be sure that you can cite several pieces of evidence in support of your thesis.
- Take the time to organize your thoughts. Jot down a quick outline for your essay, stating the thesis and listing the evidence you will provide to support that thesis.

**Writing the essay.** Once you are ready to write, your essay should follow the same format as any other history essay:

- Begin by stating your thesis. *Do not* waste time restating the question; your professor knows what he or she asked.
- Cite the evidence that supports your thesis. If you are aware of any counterevidence, make sure you discuss it. (See 4d-2 for a discussion of counterevidence and how to deal with it.)
- Be sure you stick to the point. Do not go off on interesting tangents that are irrelevant to the question. Referring frequently to your outline will help keep you on track.
- Tie your essay together by stating your conclusions.

## Writing History Papers

- 4a Approaching a history assignment, 39
- 4b Thinking like a historian, 41
- 4c Developing a thesis, 43
- 4d Constructing an argument, 45
- 4e Organizing your paper, 49
- 4f Revising for content and organization, 57
- 4g Editing for style and grammar, 58

Each academic discipline has its own practices, or conventions, that people writing in the discipline follow when engaged in a scholarly dialogue. Following the conventions for writing in history will make it easier for you to participate in an academic conversation in your field. Moreover, many historians are excellent stylists. Your instructor will pay attention to your writing, so your attempts to learn and follow the conventions of the discipline will be noticed—and worth the effort.

History students are most often asked to write two types of papers: short essays and research papers. Unlike most of the assignments described in Chapter 3, such papers often require you to examine *multiple* (rather than single) sources. Writing a historical essay is a process of synthesis—pulling together different sources, thinking about their relationship, and drawing conclusions about what, taken together, they can tell you about your subject. This chapter provides advice on all aspects of writing short essays—relatively brief papers with limited sources and, frequently, an assigned topic. Full-fledged research papers, which build on the techniques outlined here, are considered in Chapter 5.

### 4a Approaching a history assignment

When faced with the task of writing a short essay in history, you must first analyze the assignment carefully, making sure to identify and understand *all* of its parts so that you know exactly what you are being asked to do. Some