***Some TIPS for WRITING HISTORY PAPERS***

**Thesis:** A good historian does not adopt a ***thesis*** until quite late on in the process of preparing a paper. First, find good questions to ask yourself, questions that deserve and actually call for an answer, real world question-even if the paper is about a remote period of the past. Only at the almost-final stage of preparation will you know at last more or less exactly what you want to argue, what your line of argument (thesis if you will) is to be.

In the body of the paper, argue your case for your answers to the questions you have set. Do ***not*** write a simple narrative, or just tell a story, or try to include everything (no matter how little) you know about a subject.

Of course, in making your argument, you will need to give examples that support the thesis, and these examples may well include narrative. But you should try to persuade the reader of the validity of your argument. So aim to write an analytical paper in which you discuss the thesis, and then draw a conclusion for the preceding debate. By the end the reader should be able to state your point of view clearly, and to summarize the evidence of which you base that argument. Assume that your reader knows nothing about the subject before reading your paper.

Take a position; don't waffle. Say what you think, and why. Just don’t use first person tense! In history, although certain facts are indisputable, there are few "right" or "wrong" answers; usually it is a matter of a "good", i.e. persuasive, argument, or a "bad" one, i.e. an unpersuasive, poorly planned one.

**Bibliography:** A research paper requires research, i.e. finding the relevant primary sources, secondary literature, etc, and evaluating all this material. Skim through the secondary sources and see what general lines of argument develop that relate to your topic.

**Are you sure you understand the difference between "primary" and "secondary" materials, and why they matter? If not, ask! and see below**.

**Outline:** After you have done your research, plan in advance what line of argument you will take. Depending on the complexity of your subject and on your own study habits, the outline may be anything from a broad general guide to a very detailed plan. The outline should enable you to check easily on the development of the argument, and to re-order it in the most effective, logical order.

An outline will also help you gauge your time. Start working on the paper well in advance of the due date.

You may need to go through multiple plans before writing the paper, to clarify your questions and their ordering (crucial) and to gradually sort out the argument with which you bring together the different questions you have set yourself.

**Title:** Choose a title which suggests a question or debate you will address. Follow MLA style. Bear it in mind while you are writing the paper. Don't let yourself stray from the subject as you have framed it.

**Introduction:** Start strongly. This is where you manage (or fail) to capture interest and thereby improve your grade. Usually the first paragraph should introduce the argument. Sometimes a short opening paragraph is also needed to set the historical context.

**Argument:** Find evidence to support your thesis/argument. This does not mean that you simply pile up facts. If others take different lines of argument on your topic, indicate why you agree or disagree with them.

**Conclusion:** Finish with a bang, not a whimper. Summarize the debate neatly in a paragraph or two. Save a point of interest to end on -- a comment on the significance of the subject, what is original about your argument, etc. The conclusion should reinforce, in the reader's mind, the persuasiveness of your whole argument.

**Style:** Write in clear, concise English. Use the least number of words possible to make your point.

* Always write in the past tense: this is, after all, history. The events have occurred already and should be treated as such.
* Short sentences are often easier to control. This helps you to make your points clearly and forcefully. Frequent paragraph divisions may also help to maintain interest and to separate thoughts from each other. How you handle sentence and paragraph divisions is naturally a matter of taste. But keeping things short will usually at least ensure that your points come over clearly, your first responsibility. You can go after elegance at a later stage.
  + Don’t get too fancy with punctuation—you don’t need too many commas, semi-colons, etc. Just prove your points concisely.
* Address people by last names.
* Do not use abbreviations, slang, contractions, or other informal language.
* Do not use passive voice. *The Civil War had been fought by the Confederates and Union soldiers.* Instead: *The Civil War was fought by the Confederates and Union soldiers.*

**Paragraphs:** Each paragraph should contain one major point with advances your argument. Use about 3 or 4 paragraphs to a page. Don't write the paper as a "stream of consciousness" with the stages of the argument undifferentiated.

**Quotations:** Keep all quotes short: it is more important to the reader and teacher to see what ***you*** have to say. All quotes must fit smoothly into the text. Follow MLA style for quotations.

**Annotation:** Follow MLA style for in-text citations and bibliography. A major goal of your paper is not just to give credit to the original author, but to provide your readers with further information for their own research and interest. We will be using turnitin.com. Remember that any evidence of plagiarism will result in a zero on the assignment and a referral.

**Revisions:** Once you have written the paper, read it through again. And again.

* + Read it aloud! You may be surprised to discover that your ear catches simple grammatical errors that may "look" fine on paper, and so escape your eyes. You will also be so pleased when it sounds good, euphonious, persuasive, clear.
  + Get someone else to read it. Does it flow easily? Does it make sense? Can they follow your argument? Can they tell what you were trying to argue?
  + Remember that spell check will not catch simple errors. Check for:
    - Its, it’s
    - There, their, they’re (but don’t use contractions)
    - Could of (should be *could have*)
    - Are, our
    - Than, then

**If you’re wondering if your source is reliable, ask yourself these questions:**

1. Is your evidence a primary source or secondary source?

2. What are the author's sources? That is, what does he/she know, and how does he/she know it? If a primary source, was he/she an eyewitness?

3. Does your author acknowledge his/her sources?

4. Is the chronology accurate?

5. Is there evidence of bias in your author?

6. What assumptions does he/she make about the subject?

7. On what premises does he/she base the argument? Are they logical and consistent?

8. Is the information in your source corroborated elsewhere? Can you check the facts easily?

9. Why is your author writing -- ie, to inform, to persuade, to apologize?

10. Is your author aware of other viewpoints?