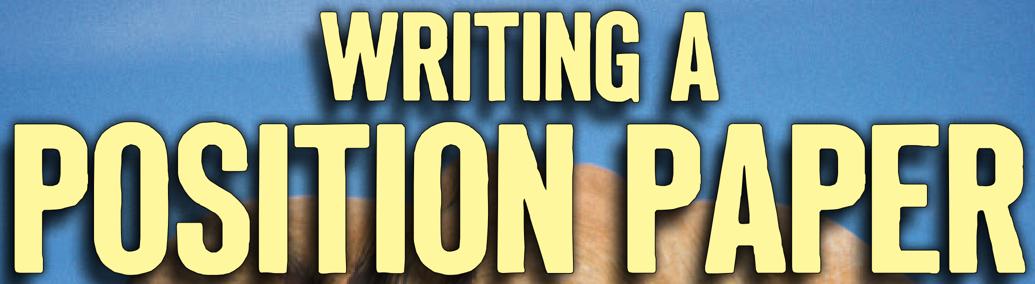

FOR HISTORY STUDENTS

BY MARK WILSON · THIRD EDITION

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Writing a Position Paper for History Students
by Mark Wilson

Third edition
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Preface

Every document ever written, including this one, was created with the same intent: ***To convince the reader of an idea.***

When you write an essay or a term paper, it's absolutely vital that you keep this fact in the front of your brain from start to finish. Papers and essays are *not* about recycling information. They're not about stringing facts together. They're about convincing your reader of an idea. Every time you write, your job is to impress a single, compelling idea onto your reader's imagination.

Writing a strong and effective position paper means taking a position and using evidence to convince your reader of an idea you want them to believe. And you'll find that the skills involved in planning, structuring, and executing a strong, effective position paper will continue to be useful to you—not only in other academic assignments, but in *any* situation in which you have an interest in getting someone else to believe an idea you want them to believe, whether you're talking to friends, family members, coworkers, online friends and followers, or the audiences for whatever comes from how you choose to express yourself. It's all about convincing people of an idea, and it starts with making a compelling argument. One way to do that is by developing and practicing the skills involved in writing good papers and essays and learning from the process.

In order to write a truly effective paper, two things are of critical importance:

(a) a strong statement of the **position** you're taking in this paper—in other words, the single, overriding idea you intend to convince the reader of, otherwise known as the **thesis statement**; and

(b) convincing **evidence** to back it up.

This booklet is about ways to make both of those things happen.

The introduction: Problem and thesis statement

Your introduction is in many ways the most important part of your paper, because it sets out both what the paper is about and what you intend to say about it. A good introduction consists of two things: the problem, and the thesis statement.

The problem

The key to a good paper is a strong, well-crafted thesis statement, because that tells you exactly what you need to prove in the rest of the paper. And the key to a good thesis statement is first clearly stating the issue about which you're going to be stating an opinion.

Every opinion is in some way the answer to a question. That means that stating the question clearly helps you to make your opinion more solid and more effective. You need more than just the topic in order to craft a strong thesis statement—you need to state a specific question that your paper will answer, convincingly, for the reader.

The problem is something about that time and place that needs explaining. But it's important to take a close look at your question and see whether it will work for your paper. You need to test your question in two ways:

- **First test:** Are there two or more sides that historians might argue with each other about?
- **Second test:** Is the scope too big, or too small, for the paper I am writing?

An example: Enkidu and Gilgamesh

Suppose your topic is the role of Enkidu in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the story, the people of the city of Uruk complain to the gods about the behavior of their king, Gilgamesh, who is abusing his power by sleeping with new brides and fighting with the young men. The gods' response is, strangely, to create a wild man, Enkidu, who is then civilized by means of an encounter with the harlot, Shamhat.

A beginning student's first impulse is probably to take the topic—the role of Enkidu—and just write about that, saying that Enkidu is there as the gods' response to Gilgamesh's behavior, and talk about how Enkidu then confronts Gilgamesh and they afterward become good friends. But all that is already there in the story. A student who writes that paper hasn't expressed any opinions—he's just summarized the plot of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. And a paper like that will mean nothing to his audience, because the audience (we happen to know, in this case, that it's the course instructor) can be counted on to already know the plot of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Starting out by first stating a problem—a question—is the key. It needs to be a question that has more than one possible answer, a question that arises from the *how* or the *why* of the transformation focused on by the topic. It also needs to be a question that your reader would be interested in—that would occur to anyone who was interested in the topic you're writing about. For any topic, there might be several possibilities;

you need to pick your question. You're looking for the *how* and the *why*, because the problem you're asking about comes from that.

In this case, your problem might be the very reasonable question: "Why is Enkidu the gods' response to Gilgamesh's behavior?" This is a great question, because (a) it's a question that will naturally occur to anyone who considers the story of Enkidu and Gilgamesh; (b) it's a concrete and specific question, which should spur a concrete and specific answer—the best kind of thesis statement; and (c) once you've read and thought about the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there are a few different opinions you could express about that idea. Your answer to that question will help lead you to a strong thesis statement.

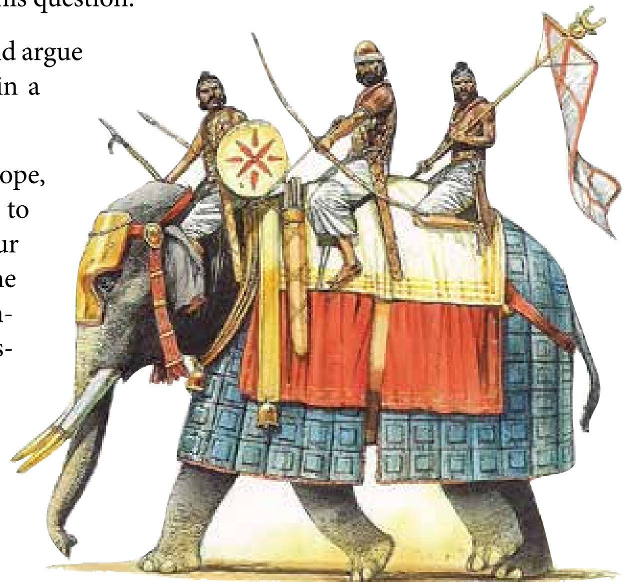
Another example: Elephants and war

Suppose your topic is Hannibal's war with Rome. The great, climactic war between Carthage and Rome decided the fate of the entire Mediterranean world, and has inspired lots of debate ever since. If you're interested in Hannibal's war with Rome, you might first want to look at the big question: "Why did Hannibal lose?" This is a good one in terms of the first test, because historians have given lots of conflicting answers over the last 2200 years. But it's also potentially *massive*, which might mean you'll be in trouble on the second test. In this case you'd want to narrow it down to a more specific question about Hannibal's war that still has different possible answers.

The first test—are there different answers?—is crucial. If your question were something like "Why did Hannibal attack the Roman world?" you could write a long paper answering it, but it wouldn't be a position paper because there's really no disagreement: Rome was Carthage's economic nemesis; their ex°0panding interests created inevitable conflict, leading to a previous war—one result of which was Hannibal being raised to despise Romans. Unless you've unearthed some radical, game-changing new evidence, it would be hard to imagine two sides to this question.

So you need to choose a question that people could argue different sides of, and one that can be tackled in a paper like the one you're writing.

A specific question can help lead to a narrow scope, and a narrow scope means you have less of a job to convince your reader. So you might narrow your topic to Carthage's use of elephants in war. In the war between Carthage and Rome, the Carthaginian generals, including the famous military mastermind Hannibal, carried on an ancient tradition of using elephants in war. This, despite the fact that the war elephants weren't always effective against the Romans, who decisively defeated the forces of Carthage, elephants and all, at the Battle of Zama.



Once again, the topic is not enough. If you start with the topic, you're going to end up writing a paper describing how the Carthaginians used elephants against the Romans, and how in the end they weren't very effective. And once again, writing such a paper would be pointless, because it doesn't involve making any arguments; a paper like that just narrates the history of Carthage's use of war elephants, which, once again the reader (your professor) already knows.

You have to state the problem, and once you do, you'll have a position to argue that will form the blueprint and backbone to your paper. Remember, your question comes from the *how* and *why*. In this case, the question could focus on the rationale behind Carthage's use of elephants in war, and whether that rationale seems sound in light of the evidence we have. So the question could be something specific, but simple, like, "Did Hannibal's elephants really make a difference?" Anyone who's read up on that war could make a good case for "yes" or for "no". Deciding your answer—and why it's the answer—will provide your with your thesis statement, and your plan for the paper.

Setting out the possible answers

It's a good idea to make the point outright that your question is open to debate. If you show that there's more than one possible answer to your question, it has the effect of causing your reader to consider the validity of each of the possible solutions. That puts you in the perfect position to sell your reader on the argument you're choosing to make, as supported by the evidence you bring to bear.

That's why I recommend that your introduction include a statement of the problem, followed by statements that might be made by historians arguing different, opposing answers. You should be able to express these competing ideas in a **"some say… others say…"** formula, even if you don't use those actual words. Setting these out will help you to clarify exactly what you need to prove in your paper, by underlining the issues that frame each side of the debate.

In the example involving Hannibal's war elephants, you could give different positions based on the plusses and minuses of using elephants for Hannibal. On the one hand, the elephants could be argued to have been very effective in strengthening the morale of Carthage's troops, as the Roman legions they were facing already had a reputation for indomitability. They were also good for intimidating smaller nations into allying with Hannibal against Rome. On the other hand, the elephants were so much trouble that it could just as easily be argued that they did more harm than good to the Carthaginian side.

Again, it's very useful to consider the problem in terms of a debate. It needs to be something that could be reasonably argued from both sides. That way, in your paper you will be making a case for an idea, not just facts everyone agrees on.

The thesis statement

Your thesis, then, must provide *your* answer to the problem or question you've posed. If your problem meets the two tests—it has two or more possible positions and it has a manageable scope—then your thesis should easily meet the main requirement, which is that your thesis statement must be a statement of opinion that someone could disagree with.

That's why something like (to pick a deliberately bad example) "Hannibal Barca was a Carthaginian general" would make a bad thesis. There's no conflict, there's no possible disagreement. No one would want to read a paper attempting to prove this. What's more important top say is that a paper that just narrates the history, with a thesis statement like "Hannibal used elephants against the Romans, but the Romans won anyway", would be *just as pointless*, because there's no problem, no debate—no idea to convince the reader of.

In fact, the rule here is to go as far as possible in the other direction. The more radical your opinion, the better—as long as you have evidence to back it up. (More on evidence in a moment.) For example, a thesis like "Hannibal was really an extraterrestrial from the planet Mondegreen" is, in a way, a wonderful thesis. Everyone would want to read the paper trying to prove this thesis—which is where the whole supporting evidence thing comes in. You just have to be able to show the evidence later.

A focused statement of real opinion is what you need, especially if you can nail it down by giving an idea why your position is the right one. The best thesis is one that states a position, and gives an extremely concise summary of the "reasons why" that you're going to give. You should be able to express your thesis using the formula **"I believe… because…"**.

For example, here's a thesis statement that might work for the elephant paper:

> I believe that Hannibal's use of elephants was a mistake, not because war elephants were a dumb idea in general, but because Roman adaptability meant that they would inevitably find a way around them.

Here we see that the ideal thesis is the blueprint and backbone for your paper. That's why the thesis is so important. In this case, the thesis not only sets out what you're going to prove in your paper, but gives you the magic number of topics to cover in the body of your paper—three. Using your thesis as a guideline, you know you'll need sections on (a) why war elephants could be effective in ancient battle scenarios; (b) adaptability as a key and intrinsic trait for the Romans, especially in war; and (c) how that adaptability ended up trumping the usefulness of elephants when the Carthaginians faces the Romans. Now you just need to assemble, and discuss, the evidence available in each of these three areas.

Notice that you're supporting your thesis with three assertions that in themselves are statements of opinion—they are sort of mini-theses. This logical structure is why a position paper works to convince the reader. Your thesis rests on opinions A, B, and C. You can prove A easily using evidence. You can prove B, too, with the evidence related to that assertion. And then C flows naturally from A and B, brought home

using the evidence related to C. Demonstrating that A, B, and C are true convinces your reader that your thesis is true, too.

A good thesis, in other words, provides you with the plan for the body of your paper.

A sample introduction

Here's what the introduction would look like for the elephant paper:

> Hannibal Barca, the great Carthaginian general, brought 37 war elephants with him over the Alps into Italy, and at the climactic Battle of Zama he had a front line that included 80 elephants. Did Hannibal's elephants really make a difference? Some say that Hannibal's elephants were crucial in establishing the morale of his troops against the legendary Roman legions and in intimidating other armies along the way into alliances; but others say that Hannibal's elephants did the Carthaginian side more harm than good in their fight with Rome. I believe that Hannibal's use of elephants was a mistake, not because war elephants were a dumb idea in general, but because Roman adaptability meant that they would inevitably find a way around them.

This introduction has the elements we've talked about:

(a) The problem;

(b) The possible solutions; and

(c) A strong thesis statement that's specific and focused.

Now you've not only told the reader what you're going to demonstrate, but you've also given yourself a road map of how you're going to set about doing it.

Evidence and analysis

I said before that three "reasons why" your thesis is convincing is the magic number. You can think of them as pillars, because what they're doing is supporting your argument. Plenty of papers have been written with more than three pillars, and you might be able to support an argument (for some readers) with two or even one pillar. But long experience suggests that **three pillars** is the most sturdy and aesthetically effective way of supporting a thesis in a position paper like this one.

Using the three pillars structure

The body of your paper, then, will have three sections. Each starts with the assertion you hinted at in the thesis statement. Then you provide evidence supporting that assertion, and finally you interpret that evidence, showing the reader how it effectively illustrates the assertion, and so in turn supports your overall thesis.

What evidence do you need to assemble and describe? In most historical situations, you want to provide two kinds of evidence:

(a) examples from the time and place that show what you asserted was what actually happened, and

(b) expert testimony from scholars who have deeply studied the relevant events or texts. In other words, you ideally want to provide both primary sources and secondary sources.

What evidence you need depends on your assignment. If you're writing an essay on Enkidu's role in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the assignment doesn't require additional sources, then your evidence is all going to come from the moments in the *Epic* itself. Your task becomes finding the right moments to make the argument you need.

Other assignments will involve tracking down evidence to support the arguments you're making. For example, in my sample thesis for the elephants paper, the first section—my first pillar—involves discussing why war elephants are not *normally* a bad idea; or, to put it another way, to show that the reason Hannibal's elephants were a mistake was *not* that elephants were a mistake in general, because what my paper is really about is Roman adaptability as the thing that threw a wrench in the works. So I need to show that war elephants were effective in other contexts—ideally, for the Carthaginians in other wars, if possible.

I can do that by providing examples of effective elephants from the ancient literature. For example, I could point to primary sources that show Alexander of Macedon using elephants effectively at the Battle of the Hydaspes River; the Seleucids using elephants well at the Battle of Ipsus and against the Maccabees; and the Ptolemaic Egyptians at the battle of Raphia. (See the **Rule of Threes** surfacing again? Remember, each of your three sections is making its own argument or assertion, and that requires convincing your reader, so three pieces of evidence are ideal.)

Primary sources provide accounts or narratives of events; you next need to talk about *how and why* the elephants are effective. Here's where secondary works come in. In this case, you want scholars who spe-

cialize in either ancient military tactics or specifically in Macedonian-style warfare, talking about theory behind elephant warfare and why the ancients kept turning to it during this period.

The last paragraphs of this section are for your interpretation, where you make connections between your sources. Your interpretation shows how your sources demonstrate the assertion you're making in this section, and makes it clear that this helps support your overall thesis. You can't just throw the evidence at the reader: first describe it, then tell the reader what it means.

That means the structure of the paper so far is something like this:

I. Introduction
    A. Context
    B. Question
    C. Possible positions *("some say… others say…")*
    D. Thesis statement *("I believe… because…")*
II. Elephants were not a dumb idea in general
    A. Examples from primary sources
        1. Alexander
        2. Seleucids
        3. Ptolemaic Egyptians
    B. Expert opinion on effectiveness of elephant warfare
    C. My interpretation of what the evidence means and why it shows elephants were not a dumb idea

The remaining sections, as called out in the thesis, will work the same way. In this case, Sections III (Roman adaptability) and IV (How Roman adaptability trumped the effectiveness of elephants) will follow the same structure as section II. Finally, you'll end the paper with a conclusion that ties together the three sections of your main body, and show how they demonstrate the validity of your thesis statement.

Notice the structure of each section. For each section of the paper, you:

(a) Make an assertion (the pillar or mini-thesis);

(b) Describe the evidence from primary and/or secondary sources that supports this assertion; and

(c) Talk about exactly how the evidence demonstrates that the assertion is valid, and therefore supports the overall thesis.

Finally, notice again how a strong thesis provides the blueprint and backbone for your whole paper, because the thesis lays out the reasons why your argument is valid, and arguing those reasons each in turn forms the major sections of your paper. It all flows from having the strong thesis.

Finding evidence

Finding evidence for any given historical problem is easy. Finding the *right* evidence that will help you make a convincing argument is harder. Therefore, my rule of thumb is, start with the evidence that's easy to find, and let it point you toward the evidence that *it* relies on.

For example, it's often easier to find the secondary sources than the primary. But remember the definition of a secondary source: it's the work of a scholar *using primary sources* to provide his or her own interpretation of events.

So a scholarly secondary source is going to be based on primary sources—and the secondary source's text, footnotes, and bibliography will tell you which ones and where to look in them. That way, you'll find the primary sources you need, too.

Finding books

So, start by looking for books. Tertiary sources like textbooks and encyclopedias are one possible starting point: just as secondary sources are based on primary sources and can point you toward them, tertiary sources are based on secondary sources and can point you toward them. A history textbook will usually have a "Suggested readings" section for each chapter; or else it will have a bibliography at the end, listing important books on the subjects covered in the text. These will give you the names of books that you might want to try to find. History-related articles in online encyclopedias like Wikipedia, while notoriously unreliable, normally have a sources section that lists relevant books on the subject.

(Remember: <u>tertiary sources cannot be used as evidence</u> in your paper. This includes textbooks, print and online encyclopedias, and almost everything on the web apart from online scholarly journals.)

If there's a book that's obviously useful, the next step is to try to get that book through the library system by looking up the book title in the online catalog.

Say you've come across references to the book *War Elephants* by John Kistler—obviously a potentially useful secondary source for the elephants paper. Some university systems allow you to access books even if they're not at the campus you're attending. For example, the Kistler book is not at the Lehman College library; but it is at John Jay College, which is within the CUNY system. The CUNY libraries' online catalog allows you to click on the "Request" button, and within a few days the librarians at John Jay College will have sent it to Lehman for you to borrow.

If the book weren't in the university system at all, you'd still have the option to have it sent to you through an online Interlibrary Loan request. If it's at another regional library you'll get it delivered to your college library via ILL in a week or two.

Another option would be to check the book's availability at the public library. For the New York Public Library, this can be done easily using the online catalog at http://catalog.nypl.org. If it's at the main library on Fifth Avenue (and many, many books that aren't available elsewhere are available there), and it's essential to your paper, it might sense to plan an afternoon in midtown to make use of what you can find

there. (You can't borrow books out from the reading room there, but you can photocopy the pages you need and take notes.)

Another tactic is browsing the topic. Start by searching the college library's online catalog for relevant keywords: *ancient war, Roman wars, elephants, Hannibal, Zama*, etc. As you do these searches, take note of the **call numbers** for books that seem like they might be useful. The call numbers will start to cluster in two or three different areas. Those are the areas you want to pay closer attention to.

For example, Roman military history is around DG89 (*history—ancient Italy—armies*), but also U35 (*military science—Rome*). Books on Hannibal will be in DG249 (*history—ancient Italy—Second Punic War*). *War Elephants*, the book I noted above, is at UH87 (*military science—other*). And so on.

So here's the big trick: Once you find the call number clusters, go and look at the shelf for each of them and see what's *next to* the books that came up in your search. Because every time I do research, the book that's most useful to me is on the shelf next to the books that came up in the catalog search.

Take down books with likely titles—and, before you even carry them to your library table, check two things: the Table of Contents and the Index. They'll tell you if that book covers subjects that will be useful to you and your thesis. If you've got a book on Hannibal in your hand, but the index doesn't list elephants, you can confidently put it back—it won't help you with this paper.

Once you have a book in hand, you can harvest *its* sources by checking the footnotes and bibliography for (a) mentions of other secondary sources that seem to be the seminal books in the field and (b) important primary sources and the relevant passages in them. So a book on the Second Punic War will often mention both the most important scholarly books on that war, some of which you'll want to try to find. It will also refer not only to the primary source authors who wrote about that war, but it will specify the crucial passages in those works. In this way, using what you have, you can assemble what you need.

Finding journal articles

In addition to scholarly books, you'll want to look for another kind of secondary source: journal articles. Books are generally comprehensive approaches to a general subject, with titles like *Hannibal* or *The Second Punic War* or *War Elephants*. Journal articles are much more narrow and circumscribed. Like a position paper, journal articles are usually written to answer a very specific question.

Most of the classics and history journals are archived in JSTOR, an online database, available through most university library web sites, where you can (a) search by keywords and authors, and (b) retrieve full-text PDFs of the articles.

For example, a JSTOR search reveals that there is a journal article called "*Magister Elephantorvm*: A Reappraisal of Hannibal's Use of Elephants" by Michael B. Charles and Peter Rhodan. This article, it turns out, argues that Hannibal's use of elephants at Zama illustrates his tendency to take risks in battle. There's also another article another by Charles, "African Forest Elephants and Turrets in the Ancient World," that takes on the very particular and contentious question of whether ancient warfare with the small African forest elephants did or did not involve the use of turrets (also called howdahs).

From searches like these, you can assemble a wealth of information. You may find articles that are spot on for your subject, and will be directly useful both (a) as expert secondary evidence you can quote or summarize in your paper, and (b) as directories of the most important primary and secondary sources on the subject. (Charles and Rhodan's copious footnotes, for example, cite every important book, article, and classical source on Hannibal and elephants.)

Even without articles that perfectly intersect with your thesis, just the search and a glimpse at the resulting articles, even the ones that aren't exactly what you need, give you useful information—like who's writing about these subjects (apparently Prof. Charles is one of the experts on ancient war elephants) and what the burning issues are in this field.

You can also use JSTOR to find a particular article referenced elsewhere. For example, you might have come across a footnote citing the Charles and Rhodan article in a book you've already found; you could then look for the article in JSTOR.

Finally, a JSTOR search may return book reviews of books that might be helpful; you can then go and find that book. For example, my JSTOR search on the keywords "*war elephants hannibal*" turned up a review of a book called *Hannibal's Elephants* by Alfred Powers; that book might have been worth investigating. (Do not use just the review as a source. The reviewer will have picked only the elements of the book that stood out to him to write about, making the review both a subjective and an incomplete treatment of the material covered in the book.)

Counterarguments

To make your position as convincing as possible, one thing you'll want to consider is: What would someone say if they wanted to disagree with you? The reason this is important is that your reader may remain unconvinced because you haven't dealt with an objection he or she already knows about and is mentally setting against your arguments. Your paper is not effective because you haven't countered the opposing argument.

Suppose you were writing a paper arguing that Louis XIV was a great king who made France stronger. Anyone familiar with French history, reading your paper, might be thinking, "Yeah, well, but what about revoking the Edict of Nantes? Exiling the artisan and middle-class Protestants was a huge and long-lasting blow to the French economy, wasn't it?" Your argument and your evidence might be well structured and impressively interpreted, but, if you don't talk about the most likely counterarguments, chances are that your reader will set down your paper unsatisfied, still thinking, "But what about the Edict of Nantes?"

So before you begin your conclusion paragraph, consider a paragraph where you address what an opponent in a debate, for example, might say to rebut you after you've had your say. You should be able to phrase this paragraph using a formula like **"Some might say… . In fact, however, …"**. In this example, you want to show why revoking the Edict doesn't tarnish Louis XIV, perhaps because the impact wasn't actually that major (using evidence, perhaps quoting an assessment along these lines from a book or article by an expert on the Edict of Nantes) or because the other things Louis did outweighed it in benefiting France, in the ways you've previously described.

Citations: Footnotes and bibliographies

Citations are absolutely essential in any academic paper, but particularly and especially in history. All information that is not from your own head must be cited, whether it's a direct quote, a paraphrase, or even just an idea.

Citations are how we can tell the difference between what you're claiming is your research and analysis, and the work of others. If you don't cite others' work, you're claiming it for your own, and that's plagiarism. Plagiarism is not tolerated at any academic institution; the lightest you'll get off is a zero for the paper, but in many cases harsher penalties are invoked, including an F for the course and academic disciplinary proceedings that may result in a range of transcript-damaging punishments.

It is therefore crucial that you distinguish evidence you've gathered from primary and secondary sources from your own discussion, interpretation, and analysis. You do that with citations.

Consider the article by Charles and Rhodan I alluded to above. There are a number of ways that that article might crop up in your paper. You might have quoted it directly:

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. "Scipio had the answer to the elephant question, and the Punic elephants, when they were not doing damage to Hannibal's own troops, were unable to inflict any real damage on the enemy infantry."

Or you could have paraphrased it:

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. Scipio was ready for them, and Hannibal's elephants, even setting aside the injury they did to the Carthaginians, ended up not causing any real damage to the Romans.

Or you might have just used the idea the authors were putting forward:

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. When Hannibal's elephants attacked, the Romans were ready for them.

All three of these assertions require a citation, because all of them derive not from your own head, but from Charles and Rhodan. Making these assertions in any form without acknowledging that you got them from Charles and Rhodan is plagiarism and deserves a failing grade.

The citation system in your paper has two components: the bibliography and the footnotes.

Bibliography

The bibliography goes at the very end of your paper. It is a list of all of the books and articles you used for the paper. Every book and article you used as source material must appear in the bibliography, once.

Each entry in the bibliography gives the reader all the information they need to find that book or article if they need to. For a book, you have to give

(a) the author,

(b) the year,

(c) the title of the book, and

(d) the city and name of the publisher.

For an article, you need to give

(a) the author,

(b) the year,

(c) the title of the article,

(d) the journal name,

(e) the volume number, and

(f) the pages within that volume that the article covers.

A bibliography listing all the books and articles referred to so far would look like this:

Sample Bibliography

Charles, Michael B. 2008. "African Forest Elephants and Turrets in the Ancient World." *Phoenix* 62: 338–362.

Charles, Michael B. and Peter Rhodan. 2007. "*Magister Elephantorvm*: A Reappraisal of Hannibal's Use of Elephants." *The Classical World* 100: 363–389.

Kistler, John M. 2006. *War Elephants.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Powers, Alfred. 1944. *Hannibal's Elephants*. New York: Longmans & Co.

The bibliography is alphabetized by the authors' last names, and is not numbered.

Footnotes

I described the bibliography first because what footnotes do is point to an entry in the bibliography**.** For example, in the three sample uses of Charles and Rhodan described above, each of them needs a footnote after what comes from the article:

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. "Scipio had the answer to the elephant question, and the Punic elephants, when they were not doing damage to Hannibal's own troops, were unable to inflict any real damage on the enemy infantry against which they had been arrayed."[1]
>
> ___
>
> [1]Charles and Rhodan 2007, 388.

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. Scipio was ready for them, and Hannibal's elephants, even setting aside the injury they did to the Carthaginians, ended up not causing any real damage to the Romans.[1]
>
> ___
>
> [1]Charles and Rhodan 2007, 388.

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. When Hannibal's elephants attacked at Zama, the Romans were ready for them.[1]
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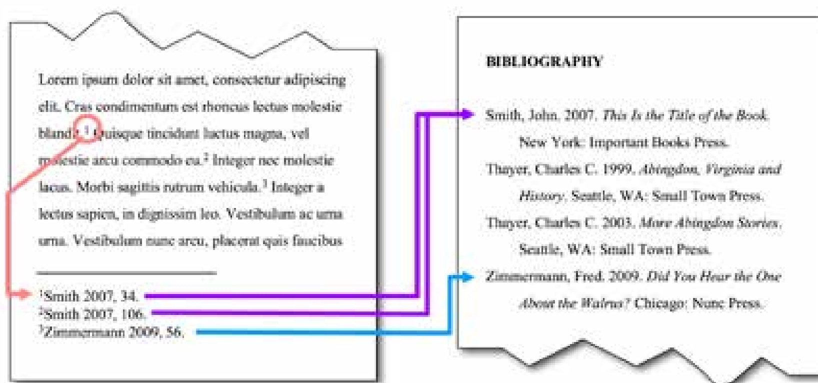
> ___
>
> [1]Charles and Rhodan 2007, 388.

Note that each footnote is actually pointing to an item in your bibliography. In each case, a footnote gives two pieces of information: (a) **which book or article** and (b) **what page in that book or article**—that is, which page would a reader go to in order to find the information you've just referred to?

You can think of the relationship between the footnotes and the bibliography like so:



The first footnote in this illustration is shorthand for what you're really telling the reader: "You can find this information on page 34 of the book in my bibliography that's written by Smith and published in 2007."

Usually author plus year is enough to identify a particular work from your bibliography. If an author has written more than one book or article that you're using that was published in the same year, then the years are given in the bibliography as 1999a, 1999b, etc., and is referred to in the footnotes by "Jones 1999b."

Citation formats

In these examples I've used the citation style that I normally use, which is based on author–date Chicago style and is derived from the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The 16th edition of the CMS is current, and information and samples can be found at: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

The "Author–date" version of Chicago style allows for in-text citations instead of footnotes. For example:

> It's clear that Roman adaptability rendered the power of elephants moot. Scipio was ready for them, and Hannibal's elephants, even setting aside the injury they did to the Carthaginians, ended up not causing any real damage to the Romans (Charles and Rhodan 2007, 388).

The idea's the same: for material that comes from a source, refer to the bibliography item and add the page.

Other systems, such as Modern Language Association or MLA style, also have in-text citations. (For more on MLA cites you can consult, e.g.,: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/.)

I don't care what citation style you use, or whether you use footnotes or in-text cites. What matters is that the cites are there and that you've properly documented the evidence you've collected from primary and secondary sources.

Citing ancient sources

When you cite ancient sources, the principle is still the same—you must always provide a citation to show that it comes from a source, whether it's a direct quote, a paraphrase, or just an idea. But how you do it is a little different compared to modern books and articles.

The thing about ancient sources is, there are lots and lots of different versions, editions, and translations for each work. Think about *The Iliad* by Homer. There are hundreds of different versions, printings, and translations in English alone, not to mention every other language and printing that exists. Everyone has their own copy or their own favorite version, which is going to be different from what the next person who might read your work might have. Or the library in one school has a different version from the library in another school. The point is, there are many, many different *Iliad*s out there, so referring to a page number in the edition you happen to have in front of you is of limited usefulness.

This has been the case for as long as there has been classical scholarship. To get around this problem, scholars have divided each ancient work into books, chapters, and sections (for prose works) or books and line numbers (for works in verse) that are observed and noted in any good edition of that work. So all the other copies of *The Iliad* out there won't have the page numbering you have—but they will be divided into the same books and line numbering.

So if you were quoting the famous line from *The Iliad* that goes, "No man or woman born, coward or brave, can shun his destiny", all you need to put by way of footnote (or in-text parenthetical citation) is a reference to the author, the work, and the scholarly divisions: in this case, book and line number. In this case, your cite would be: Homer *Iliad* 6.623, because this quote occurs on line 623 of book 6 of *The Iliad*.

Examples from the elephant paper

There is quite a selection of ancient, primary source material relating to elephants used in war, and elephants as used by Carthage against Rome in particular. For example, Polybius—a great source because he's a reliable historian writing not long after the war with Carthage—has many passages about the Carthaginians' use of elephants, including a long discussion of the troubles involved in getting the elephants across the Rhone, one of the many major rivers across the army's march.

Here's a part of that passage from the ancient historian Polybius:

> When they had set foot on the rafts that were farthest out in the stream, the ropes were cut which fastened these to the other rafts, the towing lines were pulled taut by the wherries, and the elephants, with the rafts on which they stood, were quickly towed away from the mound of earth. When this happened, the animals were terror-stricken; and at first turned round and round, and rushed first to one part of the raft and then to another, but finding themselves completely surrounded by the water, they were too frightened to do anything, and were obliged to stay where they were. And it was by repeating this contrivance of joining a pair of rafts to the others, that eventually the greater part of the elephants were got across. Some of them, however, in the middle of the crossing, threw themselves in their terror into the river: but though their Indian riders were drowned, the animals themselves got safe to land, saved by the strength and great length of their probosces; for by raising these above the water, they were enabled to breathe through them, and blow out any water that got into them, while for the most part they got through the river on their feet.

This narrative occurs in Polybius's *Histories*, book 3, section 46. As it happens, only one work survives for Polybius, which means it's not even necessary to name the work. So the cite for the above would be simply: Polybius 3.46.

For an example of the effective use of elephants prior to Hannibal, one might note how Alexander the Great was checked at the river Ganges by a massive, hostile Indian force that included "six thousand fighting elephants", according to the account related in Plutarch's biography of Alexander. This information is related in book 62, section 2 or that work; so the cite for this quote would be: Plutarch *Alexander* 62.2.

Abbreviations for classical authors Scholars writing about ancient history normally use standardized abbreviations for famous authors and works, so in a true scholarly work the cite given above would be: Hom. *Il.* 6.623; Polyb. 3.46; Plut. *Alex.* 62.2. Using these is much less important that making sure everything is correctly cited, but if you're interested most author and work abbreviations, as well as links to the works themselves, can be found on the Ancient Texts page of my website, markbwilson.com.

Again, what's important is that a reader is able to locate the specific piece of information you used in your paper, either to find out more, or to check your use of the source material as evidence. With ancient sources, that means giving author, work, book, and section (or line number), so that the reader can find it in whatever edition he or she has access to.

Ancient sources in the bibliography

Your bibliography should include the listing for the book you used. For the *Iliad* example above, you'd need to list the version of *The Iliad* you have in front of you, because which translation it is (who translated it and when) is relevant information for the reader. (If the translation is old and out-of-date, the reader might take issue with how will the ancient source actually supports the argument you're making.) For example, the version of the quote I just used came from the William Bryant translation of Homer's *Iliad*; so I need to include the details for that edition in my bibliography, since it's one of the books I used.

> Homer, and William Cullen Bryant. 1870. *The Iliad of Homer.* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.

For the bibliography of the elephants paper, the details of the books used for the ancient sources again need to be provided. The Polybius came from the 1962 edition of the Evelyn Shuckburgh translation, and the Plutarch from the 1919 edition of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, so the bibliography entries would be:

> Plutarch and Bernadotte Perrin. 1919. *Plutarch's Lives.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
>
> Polybius, Friedrich Otto Hultsch, and Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. 1962. The histories of Polybius. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.

A final word

Academic papers aren't at all about regurgitating facts—especially in history courses. They're about using your interpretive skills to make sense of skewed and fragmentary evidence, and making an argument that your interpretation is the right one.

That's how history scholarship has worked for hundreds of years. So go out there and do it. Understand the reality—the hows and whys. Accumulate the evidence. And convince your reader of something powerful and compelling about the human experience.

Appendix A: Examining primary sources

Primary sources are the most direct and most powerful way to connect with people and events of the past. But primary sources must be interpreted, because every source originates from a certain point of view and is intended for a certain audience, and therefore tells only part of the story. Our job is to figure out what part is being told, how it relates to what else we know, and what's being left out. You should ask yourself these questions each time you encounter a primary source.

1. Who wrote this document, when, and where? In documents provided for a course, as in a course reader or handout, you will usually be provided this information in the headnote to the source; otherwise it will be in the introduction to the edition you're working from. The who, when, and where provides the context you need to get beyond the document's face value.

2. What type of document is this? Primary sources come in all types, and which type tells us something about what was going through the author's mind when he or she wrote it. For example, a newspaper article would normally be written to be a concise and informative communications to many readers, while a private diary entry is probably more candid and informal, intended to be seen by few or none, or perhaps intended to be read by the writer's family or descendants. (Although this discussion is framed largely in terms of written documents, all primary sources—artifacts, recordings, graffiti, and so on—can be treated with these same steps.)

3. Who is the intended audience of the document? Most documents are intended to communicate ideas and viewpoints to a person or a group. Authors tailor their arguments to their target audience, sometimes without realizing it, using their knowledge of the target to elicit the best response. Also, there may be more than one audience: a general writing a military dispatch, for example, might be thinking both of his superiors at headquarters and the general public.

4. What are the main points of the document? Boil it all down. What is the author ultimately trying to get the audience to understand?

5. Why was this document written? What do we know about the impetus for this document? What prompted the author to write it?

6. What does it reveal about the society and time period in which it was created? Bring together what you know from all of the above and try to get at the real meat of what this document tells us—not just about the author, but also about the author's society and his or her relationship to it (was she a part of the mainstream, or a rebel?). One way of looking at this would be to ask yourself whether the same document could have been written 10 years before, or 10 years after. Why not—what changed?

7. What's missing? What point of view is left out? Was it intentional? How would that change the picture presented by the author?

8. What passage stands out the most? Which sentence or passage did you react most strongly to—out of admiration, revulsion, or strong agreement or disagreement? Think about what caused that reaction: Was is the content alone, or where you affected by the differences between the author's cultural values and your own?

Appendix B: Some common mix-ups

The key to a lot of mix-ups like these is that these words all fall into categories that include lots of other words formed exactly the same way. So you can remember the right word by thinking about the other words in the same group.

Just sharing with you what helped me:

its	is possessive	The word is patterned like other possessives like it:	yours, his, hers, **its**
		The state government in Albany has lost its credibility.	
it’s	= it is	The word is patterned like other contractions:	I’m, you’re, he’s, she’s, **it’s**
		It’s time to think about taxing goat cheese.	

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your	is possessive	The word is patterned like other possessives like it:	her, their, **your**
		Your tarantula just died.	
you’re	= you are	The word is patterned like other contractions:	I’m, he’s, they’re, **you’re**
		You’re not going to believe who won a Grammy.	

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their	is possessive	The word is patterned like other possessives like it:	our, your, **their**
		I like the Martians, but, boy, their spaceships sure are ugly.	
they’re	= they are	The word is patterned like other contractions:	we’re, you’re, **they’re**
		The Ravenclaws aren’t coming. They’re going to Fred’s party instead!	
there	is a location	The word is patterned like other pointing terms:	here, **there**, everywhere
		I’ve always wanted to visit the planet Skaro, but I’ve never actually been there.	

Ancient names: Capitals, possessives, and italics

One of the ways you tell your readers you respect the people and things you're writing about, as well as the practice of interpreting history, is observing a few simple rules about dealing with names.

- Names of people and places should be capitalized.
- When you make a name possessive, you add *'s* to the end (even if the name ends in *s*).
- Titles of books and plays (as well as any other creative work, such as movies) are always put in italics.

Just to create a contrived example, here's a sentence that has all three:

> The ancient Athenians were delighted that Aristophanes's play, *Clouds*, contained fart jokes.

Capital letters Both "Athenians" and the name of the playwright, Aristophanes, begin with a capital letter. Some other languages don't always capitalize names when they appear as descriptors, and so I occasionally see things like "a roman city" or even "the romans weren't afraid of Hannibal". But in English, names always get a capital letter, no matter what. Not using a capital letter is basically showing disrespect, which tells your readers that you don't really care about your what you're writing. Whether you actually do or not, I'd like to suggest that giving off that impression might not be in your best interests. Unless you're writing pretentious poetry or Twitter messages, always capitalize your names.

Possessives of names One of the mistakes I see most often is something like "Aristophanes play." But you need to show that the play belongs to Aristophanes, in the same way as "President Obama's healthcare plan" or "Julius Caesar's assassination." To do that in English writing, you add an apostophe and an *s*. Logically, Aristophanes is singular—there's only one of him—so it becomes "Aristophanes's play" in the same way that the possessive of Charles, when there's only one of him, becomes "Charles's brother".

If you did have a plural name, then it would follow the usual English rule and put the apostrophe after the *s*: "the Romans' mightiest legion".

Titles in italics The title of any book, poem, play, or any creative work should always be put in italics: "Homer's *Odyssey*", "the movie *300*", "the *Histories* by Polybius", "the famous tragedy *Oedipus Rex*". This makes it clear beyond doubt that you're talking about a work with that title. It's acceptable to use an underline instead, but you have to do one or the other.

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