WRITING HISTORY ESSAYS with Dr Jasmine Day, JCPML Education Officer

Why do you think we study history? Perhaps for interest, learning the truth or using lessons from the past to guide future actions. History can also be used (often in a biased way) to legitimate political regimes or other causes (e.g. Saddam Hussein sponsored the reconstruction of Babylon; Hitler used archaeology to support German nationalism). Positive uses of historical sources include:

- Finding solid evidence for events and also material to which we can apply our own interpretations (e.g. what is the meaning of a particular object/text?). People who express opinions often stand accused of formulating their ideas without any basis in fact, whereas people who express opinions about history – while still vulnerable to criticism from those who disagree with their interpretations – base their views upon solid evidence, so they tend to develop followings of people who agree with their views and trust their judgement.

- Discovering fine levels of detail (the “little picture”) that we can link to major historical events (“the big picture”). The little picture provides specific examples of broader trends (e.g. a German child’s anti-Semitic school book exemplifies one of the major Nazi philosophies) and the big picture can be pieced together only by looking at all of the smaller pieces of evidence and noticing how they are interrelated or similar. The problem with the old traditional approach to history is that it focused on the big picture only, which seemed irrelevant and boring to many students (e.g. in the 1930s my father, living in relative poverty in a small Western Australian town, was taught about the history of the British monarchy). This has now changed and we emphasise the little picture and its relationship to the big picture. A major development in historical research since the 1970s (which originated in Britain in the academic field of Cultural Studies, i.e. the study of popular culture) is that “low” culture (the mass media and popular ideas and practices) is not degraded, bad or unimportant but is, in fact, vital to our understanding of culture and history. Once, only “high” culture such as histories of kings and the work of great artists was studied; now, we can study literally anything, giving us an insight into the lives of everyday people as well as the rich and powerful.

Writing your own history essays is challenging, but need not be difficult and can be really interesting if you know the right technique. My first piece of advice to anybody writing anything is: write anything, first of all. A blank page can be one of the scariest things in the world, so to overcome this fear, jot down absolutely any ideas or information that you have and worry about organising and rephrasing it later (this process has been much assisted by the advent of computers). It is far easier to modify something that you have already written – even to scrub it out entirely and replace it with something else – than to stare at a blank page waiting for the perfect words to come out first go. They won’t. Good writing is writing that started as scrappy notes and was rewritten repeatedly until it became perfect.

Writing an essay is like reconstructing a dinosaur. First, you build the skeleton section by section, creating a basic structure. Then you flesh out the details, building your argument. Finally, you put the surface skin layer of polished words in place. The mistake some students make is to try to add surface details before they have finished creating the underlying structure – or otherwise, they have a structure that is not well thought out before they begin adding details (e.g. they have many details but their essay does not actually answer the question, or they have details that “wander” without direction because there is no real argument to structure the use of the details). So what you have to do is to imagine that an essay has LEVELS.

**LEVEL 1: Taking notes from sources; considering an argument (or, Building the Skeleton of the Dinosaur)**

Types of sources include texts, images, film, objects and oral histories. Some academics in fields such as Cultural Studies, Museum Studies, Film Studies or Literature Studies refer to all of these kinds of sources as ‘texts’ because they can be read like a language that expresses specific ideas through specific symbols. This readability means that while some people accepted the meanings of texts, others inadvertently or deliberately “misread” the texts – for instance, proud symbols of the British Empire were viewed by some of the people it conquered as hateful tokens of oppression. Historians reveal and explain these disjunctions in meaning.

Each kind of source comes in different forms (e.g. a diary versus a published book; home movies versus feature films; mass-produced versus handmade objects), each of which is produced in a particular cultural, social, historical and technological context and is useful for finding out particular kinds of information. For example, Nazi records may list the people killed in concentration camps, but only those people’s belongings, diaries and living descendants can convey the victims’ experiences.

Tips for taking notes from sources:

- Using a highlighter pen on a (photocopied) text is NOT the same as taking notes. It selects some text and ignores the rest, whereas written/typed notes allow you to summarise most or all of the text, leaving out nothing except what you already know will not be relevant to your enquiry. With a highlighter pen, you may miss a point that proves to be relevant later on.
• Develop your ability to write notes on what has just been said while also keeping up with what is now being said (e.g. when listening to oral histories, discussions or lectures or watching programs).
• If possible, type your notes so that you can word search them. This comes in very handy later on, when you begin to incorporate details from your notes into your essay structure. Also, you can cut and paste the notes you want into your essay.
• Include detailed information about your sources. Be specific about names, dates and places.
• Include general information about your sources. Summarise the event you are studying and outline its causes and effects.
• If you have any thoughts of your own as to the significance of an historical event while you are looking at a source, or if any questions come to mind, write these down too, indicating that they are your ideas, not ideas from the source material (e.g. write your initials in a circle immediately before a note about your own ideas, or write "ME"). Including your own ideas at this early stage helps you to formulate answers to the essay question and develops your understanding of history. Instead of just watching or reading something, you are really thinking about it by engaging with it from the start.
• When you are watching a video, never let a few minutes go by without taking notes (don't get “mesmerised” by the screen). You are just missing out on recording information you will not have another chance to acquire.

If your sources are like ingredients, then your argument (which will determine how you structure your essay) is the recipe that decides which ingredients to use, how much, in what ways and in what order.

As you read through your sources and become familiar with your subject matter and historians’ debates about it, you should begin to think about how you will answer the essay question.
• Don't rush into thinking up an answer to the question the moment you first read it. Instead, analyse the question itself. (This is what some students do not do, which is why their essays, however detailed, do not actually answer the question and include irrelevant information.)
  o What is the question asking you to do? (e.g. explain the reasons for an event; take a stance on an issue; reflect on the long- or short-term consequences of an event; explain to what extent, or in what ways, a particular person influenced history). Some instructions may be explicit but others may be implicit (e.g. a question that uses key terms will require you to define them, but may not actually tell you to define them – and the definitions may be partly a matter of your opinion).
  o What are the question’s key topic terms that will give you your subject parameters (e.g. World War II, cohesion, division)?
  o What are the question’s key analysis terms (e.g. describe, explain, evaluate) that will tell you how to analyse the topic?
• Remember that the topic and analysis terms will shape the structure of your essay. They are clues as to how to write it. Some questions are “closed”, designed to scaffold the student by clearly suggesting which essay structure to use (e.g. a “compare and contrast” essay could have a comparison section followed by a contrast section, or could compare and contrast one case study, then repeat this process for each of several more case studies). More challenging questions are open-ended and do not suggest a specific structure; they leave it up to the student to design one (e.g. questions with key analysis terms like “discuss” or “assess”). If given a choice between several questions, it may be best to choose a closed question if you feel you need assistance in structuring your essay, or an open-ended question if you like formulating your own argument and deciding for yourself how to structure your essay.

LEVEL 2: Editing, ordering and building an argument (or, Putting the Muscles on the Dinosaur)

How do you convert your notes into the beginnings of an essay? By now you should have some idea of what your argument will be. This will determine which of your notes is relevant, or irrelevant, to answering the essay question in the way you want to.
• Select the notes from each source, plus your own ideas included in your notes ("ME" phrases) that are relevant to the question. If your notes are typed, you can use word searches to find relevant material. Copy and paste relevant points into your draft essay file (you could put a cross-out line through them in the original notes file to show that you have used them, without deleting them). Keep a copy of unused notes – these may be useful later in exam preparation or other assignments.
• Rearrange the selected notes and ideas into an order that will tell the story of your argument step by step. You can form “rough” paragraphs grouped by topic or stage of argument. There will be an introductory paragraph, a series of paragraphs in the body of the essay that continuously move your argument forward, then a concluding paragraph (or a concluding section consisting of several paragraphs). The purpose of paragraphing is to 1) sequence and 2) develop/progress ideas, so no paragraph (or sentence) should be repetitive or superfluous – this would be like going backwards or digressing from the main path of your argument.
• Remember that you do not necessarily have to discuss historical events in the order in which they happened. So long as it helps you to answer the question, you may find it useful to discuss an event then go back in time to its origins, or to focus on a particular theme to be found in a number of different events (e.g. common features of colonialism with examples from different times and places).

Writing essay introductions:
• Define key terms (this may occur within the first several paragraphs as you introduce your subject matter). Some types of terms are open to interpretation; if this is the case, explain how and why you are interpreting a term in a particular way.
• In the introduction (which may require one or several paragraphs) you will summarise your essay plan (indicate in what order you will discuss events or issues and why) as well as outlining your hypothesis/argument. In some cases it may be necessary to indicate that you will not discuss some topic that would normally be associated with your subject, because you feel that it is not relevant here for some reason. Indicate and justify the parameters of your subject matter and theoretical approach to it.

The body of the essay focuses upon argument, evidence and explanation.

• Each paragraph begins by introducing a new aspect of your argument and ends by drawing a mini-conclusion upon which the next paragraph will further build your argument. Thus each paragraph moves the argument forward by one step. This is why you should not try to crudely link paragraphs by repeating the last sentence/idea of a paragraph in the first sentence of the next paragraph. The first sentence of the next paragraph should instead introduce a new idea or piece of information that follows on from what you just concluded in the previous paragraph. Thus each step in your argument is possible because you made the previous step. This means that the stages of your argument must be explained in a particular sequence and should not be muddled up (e.g. if you want to interpret Hitler’s suicide as, in part, an attempt to evade capture by the Russians, you must first explain his campaign against Russia, and before that you would have to have mentioned his breaking of the Molotov–Ribbentrop non-aggression pact with Stalin. An explanation of this sequence of events would better build your argument that “Hitler feared Stalin’s revenge” than if you were to mix up the paragraphs/stages of your argument into a different order, or leave a paragraph/stage out).

• Evidence is used as the basis for your argument. That is, you must select and examine relevant pieces of evidence and draw a conclusion (that answers the question) from them, just as a detective works out who has committed a crime, how and why on the basis of evidence left at the crime scene. Your interpretation should be based on the evidence, not the other way around (i.e. selectively choosing or even “changing” the facts to suit your preconceptions, or coming up with an argument before you look at enough evidence and realising too late that your argument is not plausible). You should not deliberately exclude evidence that conflicts with your argument; either explain it and argue convincingly that it doesn’t count or, if there is too much of it, consider changing your argument (hopefully, if your argument was implausible you would have discovered and fixed this during your planning stage, not now at this late stage of writing). Each step/paragraph in your argument will require at least one new piece of evidence; if you can find multiple pieces all the better, especially if they come from different types of sources (e.g. documents and oral histories that all point to the same conclusion).

• Explain your interpretation of each piece of evidence. Are you using a particular theoretical approach to interpret the evidence? (e.g. modern knowledge of psychological profiling that gives an insight into the mind of John Curtin.) Do you agree with the view of a particular author who interprets the evidence in a certain way? Have pieces of evidence similar to the one you are discussing been given a particular type of interpretation by historians, which you choose to follow here? Are there particular features of an object, text or event that reveal the motivations of the people who caused/created them?

Writing essay conclusions:

• Complete and communicate a convincing argument. Draw together the mini-conclusions made step by step through your paragraphs to present you mega-conclusion, the one you said you would make in the introduction to the essay. The conclusion links back to the introduction like a snake biting its tail.

• Do not introduce a new argument or new piece of evidence in the conclusion. The conclusion is for explaining how different aspects of your argument relate to each other. You can summarise the major types of events or evidence you have discussed, but only in the course of explaining how you have interpreted them overall. Do not simply list the topics you have discussed, as this is a statement of the obvious.

LEVEL 3: Writing the final polished version (or, Putting the Skin on the Dinosaur)

Writing the final wording of your essay should be fairly easy now that you have arranged all of your ideas in the order you want to present them. If writing is still difficult at this stage, either you have not completed the previous stages properly (e.g. lack of argument ideas or insufficient notes taken at Bones level; problems linking ideas/facts together in a logical sequence at Muscles level) or you are experiencing Skin level issues. The latter are easier to fix as they are just technical problems. Here are some tips:

• If you have problems writing in formal language, write your ideas in everyday language as you would say them (e.g. if you were explaining them to a friend). Then rewrite these notes in more formal language. Aim for succinct phrasing (maximum meaning for minimum words) and avoid “wordiness” (longwinded phrases with superfluous words). Formal language makes your meaning much clearer to readers who may not know as much about your topic as you do.

• You need not convert each point from your notes into a single sentence. To show how ideas link together, you may choose to begin a sentence referring to one author’s idea, then conclude it by comparing or contrasting another author’s idea or even one of your own ideas. For example:

  • The Opposition Leader, Arthur Fadden, accused Curtin of hypocrisy in changing his values (Doe 2009:130).
  • Women, as well as men, were essential for war work. Many moved into factories, offices, workshops and farms, replacing the men who were away at war (Smith 1999:40).

• The best authors write multiple drafts, not one perfect draft. Write several drafts of the final essay if necessary; computers make the task much easier, but remember to save a copy of each draft, in case you change your mind about an amendment.

• Have another person read your work – if possible, someone older than you – who can tell you how well your draft reads.
Imagine that you are going to write an essay about the issue of conscription in Australia during World War II. John Curtin, the wartime Prime Minister, had successfully lobbied against the introduction of conscription in Australia as a young man during World War I but now, the possibility of a Japanese invasion and the necessity of an alliance with the United States persuaded him to change his mind. He introduced a limited form of conscription, adding groups of conscripts to Australia’s existing volunteer militia. This decision outraged Curtin’s Labor Party colleagues, but they were persuaded to support it when Curtin assured them that conscripts would serve only in Australia. He then “expanded” Australian territory to include areas to the north of Australia (such as New Guinea) through which Japanese forces were advancing toward Australia, so that conscripts were required to fight abroad!

The essay question asks, “Was John Curtin a hypocrite to change his mind about Australia’s stance on conscription?”

- If you think he was, you will need to look for evidence in your sources ...
  - That the public and politicians opposed his stance, that they comprised a majority or high percentage of the population and why they opposed it
  - That conscription during World War II did not achieve its aims (and what were its aims?)
  - That support for conscription conflicted with traditional Labor principles (and why did Labor oppose conscription?)
  - Plus any other ideas/evidence you have to support your argument

- If you think he was not, you will need to look for other evidence ...
  - That Curtin had compelling reasons to change his stance (and why did he hold that stance? What were the reasons to change it?)
  - That these reasons for a change of mind came from his inner conscience and/or from external pressures
  - That conscription during World War II achieved its aims (and what were its aims?)
  - Plus any other ideas/evidence you have to support your argument

- If you think there is a “third option” for answering the question (e.g. you agree in some ways that Curtin was a hypocrite but disagree in others; you do not think that the actions of leaders in war should be interpreted in moral terms; etc) then you can even attempt a more complex argument. Be aware that while some people enjoy the challenge of deconstructing the essay question rather than giving a straightforward answer, this approach works only when well supported by evidence and a very persuasive interpretation of it. (See the discussion of challenging paradigms in the Conclusion below.)

No matter what your view, you have to start your essay by outlining the issue you will discuss and the stance you will take on it. Here is what your notes may look like as you progress through the Bones, Muscles and Skin levels of writing to produce the first paragraph of your essay. (Notes for a complete essay would be more substantial than the short selection shown here.)

**LEVEL 1 (Bones): Taking notes from sources; considering an argument**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of source: Conscription</th>
<th>Author: Joe Bloggs</th>
<th>Year of publication: 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curtin opposed conscription in WWI but favoured it in WWII. The Americans thought it unfair that they fought with conscripts while Australia did not – Australians ‘not pulling their weight’ (Bloggs 2013:50).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Curtin broke Labor’s ‘sacred policy’ not to use conscription (Bloggs 2013:54).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941 CMF (conscripted Australian militia) were based in Australia and its territories while our volunteers worked overseas (Bloggs 2013:55).</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of source: Conscription For Military Service Outside Australia</th>
<th>Author: Jane Doe</th>
<th>Year of publication: 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Douglas MacArthur wanted Australian conscripts to fight outside of Australia in order to defend the areas north of Australia (Doe 2009:123). <strong>(ME: Curtin saw the bigger picture, the need to defend Australia adequately and get along with American demands, so he revised his earlier values.)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Opposition Leader, Arthur Fadden, accused Curtin of hypocrisy in changing his values (Doe 2009:150).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of source: Women on the Home Front</th>
<th>Author: John Smith</th>
<th>Year of publication: 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women, as well as men, were essential for war work. Many moved into factories, offices, workshops and farms, replacing the men who were away at war (Smith 1999:40).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>45,000 women in the WAAF, AWAS, WRANS (Smith 1999:42).</td>
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<tr>
<td>For the same work as men, women earned only 60–75% of men’s wages (Smith 1999:43).</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Include all publication details so that you don’t have to go back to the sources again later to find them. Start writing your Bibliography on another page.

Bracket reference in the text every idea you record, to avoid accidental plagiarism. Include page numbers, again to save time searching back through the sources later. Use quotation marks if copying an author’s exact words – collect the best quotes.

Add your own ideas whenever a thought occurs to you, such as comparing the ideas of this author with those of another author. Make it clear which ideas are yours by bracketing them and writing “ME” or your name. Some of these ideas could become part of your essay’s argument.
LEVEL 2 (Muscles): Editing, ordering and building an argument

1. Curtin broke Labor’s ‘sacred policy’ not to use conscription (Bloggs 2013:54).
2. Curtin opposed conscription in WWI but favoured it in WWII. The Americans thought it unfair that they fought with conscripts while Australia did not – Australians ‘not pulling their weight’ (Bloggs 2015:50).
3. The Opposition Leader, Arthur Fadden, accused Curtin of hypocrisy in changing his values (Doe 2009:130).
4. Women, as well as men, were essential for war work. Many moved into factories, offices, workshops and farms, replacing the men who were away at war (Smith 1999:40).
5. **ME:** Curtin saw the bigger picture, the need to defend Australia adequately and get along with American demands, and so he revised his earlier values.

LEVEL 3 (Skin): Writing the final polished version

**Was John Curtin a Hypocrite?** (opening paragraph of an essay)

John Curtin, staunch opponent of conscription in World War I, broke Labor’s ‘sacred policy’ to commit Australians to conscription in World War II (Bloggs 2015:54). He was obliged to do so because America, Australia’s new ally and supporter of conscription, threatened to withdraw resources from Australian soil (Bloggs 2015:50). The Opposition Leader, Arthur Fadden, accused Curtin of hypocrisy in changing his values (Doe 2009:130) but Curtin’s decision was not an impractical one because women could replace men in factories, offices, workshops and farms on the home front (Smith 1999:40). Curtin saw the bigger picture: the need to defend Australia adequately and cooperate with American demands, so he revised his earlier values – an act of political expediency, not hypocrisy.

Conclusion: The Philosophy of Writing History

Remember that a good essay is not one with the “right” answer, because the significance of historical events is partly a matter of opinion. This complicates the task, but it is also good news because it means that it is possible to say something new even when writing about something that many others have studied before – it is the approach to history, the questions you ask and perspectives you bring, that make your work unique. A good essay is one with a convincing argument that effectively persuades the reader to agree with the writer’s point of view. Being an historian is like being a lawyer: we may be certain about what events have happened (be they historical events or a crime) but it is up to the historian/lawyer to explain why they happened and to convince the readers/jury that his or her interpretation of these events is the best one.

By presenting our various interpretations of historical events, we are negotiating – and contesting – the meaning of those events and their relevance to us today. The same event can mean one thing to one group of people and something else to another group (e.g. Australia Day versus Invasion Day).

It should also be borne in mind that over time, general trends in interpretation of history (or of any subject) can change; each trend or phase is called a paradigm. You may think that the way you interpret history is determined solely by your personality, background and values, but it is also influenced by the historical paradigm of the period in which you live. Your history teachers are influenced by the dominant paradigm in the texts they teach you, which originates among the scholars who write these books. From one generation of history scholars to the next, paradigms may change, or the process may occur more slowly. The most recent paradigms in teaching and studying history are called “postmodern” and they are characterised by:

- a critical view of imperialism and nationalism (now that the British Empire has collapsed and its damaging effects are known)
- an acceptance that “low” or popular culture is important and worthy of study (a reaction against earlier focus on élite culture)
- a focus upon everyday lives rather than history solely from the perspective of monarchs, presidents and generals
- cross-disciplinary approaches (combining ideas from history with ideas from other fields such as anthropology or psychology)
- cross-cultural comparisons (comparing/contrasting different cultures) and cultural relativity (historians do not impose unfair value judgements upon other cultures, but try to see things from other cultures’ points of view).
- Some radical approaches even ask what would have happened if a particular historical event were to have had a different outcome (e.g. “What if Hitler had won World War II?”). Movies, fiction and graphic novels have explored such possibilities.

The difference between studying history at high school and at university is that at high school, we tend not to involve ourselves with complex study of historical paradigms (but we should try!). At university, however, history students may go so far as to challenge prevailing paradigms, even creating their own. The very basis of historical research – its theoretical foundation – is not fixed but shifting, just as the earth that seems to stand still may sometimes move in an earthquake.
Improve Your Writing Skills

Compare a sample of your history essay writing with the information above to improve your writing skills. 1) Write down two or three of the strengths of your writing and two or three of its weaknesses. These can be technical elements (spelling, grammar, paragraphing, etc) or aspects of argument (e.g. “I have trouble thinking of an argument,” “I don’t know how to put my ideas into words,” “I’m not sure how to incorporate evidence into my argument”, “I have trouble turning a question into an essay structure”). 2) Classify your strengths and weaknesses as Bones, Muscles or Skin level issues. 3) Look in the relevant section(s) of the preceding text for advice about writing in the level(s) you find most difficult. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses of my writing</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>How could I solve each problem?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have trouble turning a question into an essay structure</td>
<td>Bones</td>
<td>• Identify key topic and analysis terms in the essay question and consider how they apply to your subject matter. What steps will your argument need to go through to answer the question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have trouble thinking of an argument</td>
<td>Bones</td>
<td>• Include your responses to authors’ ideas in your notes (“ME” phrases) and put these ideas together to create a response to the question. Discuss the topic with others to gain ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure how to incorporate evidence into my argument</td>
<td>Muscles</td>
<td>• Include facts supporting your argument in your notes then transfer the relevant ones to your essay draft, wherever they can be used to prove what you want to argue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know how to put my ideas into words</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>• Write your ideas as you would say them, then rewrite these notes in more formal language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strengths of my writing

| Level: _________________________ |
| Level: _________________________ |
| Level: _________________________ |