

Strategic Writing in History

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-56004-330-0

Product Code: ZP285

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	iv
POWERPOINT LECTURE NOTES	S1
POWERPOINT HANDOUTS	H1
LESSON 1: WRITING IN HISTORY	1
LESSON 2: THE WRITING PROCESS IN HISTORY	3
LESSON 3: TASK, AUDIENCE, AND PURPOSE	6
LESSON 4: READING AND RESEARCHING	13
LESSON 5: CATEGORIZING, ORGANIZING, AND PREWRITING ..	18
LESSON 6: THESIS STATEMENTS	22
LESSON 7: WRITING INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS	27
LESSON 8: BODY PARAGRAPHS—TOPIC SENTENCES	30
LESSON 9: BODY PARAGRAPHS—EVIDENCE	33
LESSON 10: BODY PARAGRAPHS—EXPLANATION	37
LESSON 11: CONCLUDING SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS	42
LESSON 12: REVISING	45
CONCLUSION	48
ADDITIONAL IDEAS AND TOOLS	49
WRITING ORGANIZERS AND RUBRICS	53
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES/WORKS CITED	62

INTRODUCTION

For students to “do history,” they must engage in the writing processes that guide them into the discipline. Through writing, students learn to synthesize, to explain, to argue, and to interpret. In short, they learn to think in the ways that historians think. Reading and scrutinizing a variety of historical sources, along with engaging in disciplinary talk, provide critical support to the whole enterprise.

Writing in the history classroom cannot be an optional or occasional activity done at the end of a unit. Rather, students must daily and systematically engage in tasks that require them to think about—and ultimately learn—history through writing. By writing, students learn to see the complexities of history as they move from mindless memorization of trivia to creating their own interpretations of the past based upon the available evidence. By writing, students develop historical empathy, entering into the experiences of historical actors and considering the roles of point of view and bias.

As students think about the past and demonstrate that thinking through writing, they are much more likely to remember historical content. Writing in history encourages personal learning, critical yet creative thinking, and engagement in a discipline often maligned as boring or dead. Additionally, writing provides students an essential opportunity for developing skills, some specific to the discipline of history, but many transferrable to other disciplines and activities that promote success in future endeavors.

For all of these worthy benefits of historical writing to become realities, the role of the history teacher is indispensable. By providing opportunities to write, clear expectations of excellence, useful tools and strategies, consistent modeling, regular practice, and specific feedback, teachers actively promote the growth of both student thinking and learning of writing and history. This is arduous, inglorious work, but one of the most beneficial things we can do as educators.

When I first started teaching, I learned the hard way that unless I taught my students to write, the vast majority would not learn on their own. The blank looks on students’ faces when I told them the assignments (and equally blank pages when I collected their work) helped me realize that I had to teach them to write. Even though I was ostensibly a history teacher, I became one who taught with and through writing. My students grew tremendously as writers, providing me some of my most valuable and cherished experiences as a teacher. (As a side note, my students also did well on standardized tests.)

About a year ago I bumped in to one of my former students. She told me, “You know all that writing stuff we did? It really helped me.” That brief exchange caused me to reflect on what our students are really taking away from history classes. We, of course, hope they enjoy our classes and learn some history and citizenship skills. Writing provides an opportunity to do it all: engagement, thinking, and learning. Ultimately, for students to learn history, to develop as citizens in this age of unrelenting information, and to navigate our increasingly complex world, they must learn to write. For in learning to write critically, they are learning to think critically.

The aim of this kit is to provide a toolbox for teachers and students for developing some of the essential elements of writing as a historian. The lessons are designed to provide practical yet disciplinary tools for helping students move from understanding writing's different purposes, to revising and completing tasks and papers. To that end, a teacher's guide with tips and techniques is included, along with student handouts incorporating strategies and checklists.

The kit is structured as follows:

- A one-page summary (except for lesson 1) on a specific element of historical writing. The summary contains support material for teachers primarily, but also contains some help for students in relation to the given element.
- A teacher page that provides a concise lesson. Lessons take approximately 20 to 45 minutes, including time for student practice. As such, the lessons are not meant to take up a whole period of instruction, but are intended to serve as mini-lessons in concert with course content. Along those lines, the content of the lessons may need to be adjusted at times to appropriately match the topics of the course.
- The lesson, correlated to the presentation by page number. PowerPoint® handouts may be copied and given to students for taking notes during the mini-lessons.
- A practice page for students to initially apply what they learned from the lesson. Student practice should be extended and applied within additional assignments, since proficiency and mastery will not be attained through one worksheet.
- Additional ideas and tools for supporting the teaching of writing in the history classroom, including sample organizers and rubrics. Students should use the organizers and rubrics (or modified versions) to support and direct their writing.
- Posters highlighting portions of the elements, which students may refer to during and after the lessons.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This unit has been designed to maximize instructional flexibility while developing student capacity to write a historical paper. The lessons may be taught either sequentially or as stand-alones. As such, a teacher may identify the portions of the resource that directly address students' needs and focus on them, or the teacher may go through the lessons one by one over a period of weeks. Ideally the teacher can use current course content and blend in writing assignments. This way, students simultaneously develop writing skills and content knowledge.

Begin the first few lessons early in the year, since they connect with the larger notions of thinking and writing in history classes. Beyond these initial lessons, the series of lessons has been designed to unfold over the course of a quarter (if compressed) or a semester (if extended). The following quarter or semester would see repetition of key principles from the PowerPoint® slides and teacher's pages, and further development depending on students' needs. Along those lines, a possible pacing of the lessons might be one per week.

Additionally, this resource provides ideas and tips about some of the secrets to developing a successful writing program. The section, titled "Additional Ideas and Tools," provides suggestions for teachers on topics ranging from grading issues to feedback and rubrics. These resources provide some of the essential elements for teaching writing and keeping your sanity.

Students will not develop proficiency just by doing the lessons. Proficiency requires modeling, practice, feedback, and repetition. As students work the skills in these lessons into their writing, needs will surface which may be addressed through this resource and others.

LESSON 2: THE WRITING PROCESS IN HISTORY

The Writing Process refers to the discreet steps that writers often follow when producing an academic work. This process typically entails the following steps:

1. Researching
2. Prewriting
3. Drafting
4. Revising
5. Editing
6. Producing a final draft

In history this process is largely similar. When referring to history it might be helpful to recall that history is both the “stuff” that has happened in the past as well as the record produced to tell the story of or explain what happened. To that end, historians generally utilize the following steps:

1. Research by reading and examining available primary and secondary sources.
2. Identify facts, inferences, and main ideas, and their application to the task.
3. Frame a question or thesis. In the case of a “writing assignment,” understand the question/prompt that has been posed and formulate a thesis.
4. Sift through sources to develop the relationship between the thesis and evidence.
5. Organize and connect ideas to create a coherent text.
6. Craft a fresh interpretation enlisting and integrating as much of the evidence as possible.
7. Get feedback from peers.
8. Revise.
9. Edit.
10. Publish.

William Kashatus, in his book *Past Present & Personal: Teaching Writing in U. S. History*, has identified three basic steps that encapsulate this process. He refers to these steps as “research, organize, and write” (pp.3–4).

Of course there are many types of writing in history classrooms that do not follow these steps—quickwrites, journals, learning logs, etc. (which should be a regular part of writing in history classrooms). The steps above, however, list the processes utilized in disciplinary writing at the highest levels.

For a historical example of the writing process, consider the Declaration of Independence. There was a purpose for writing a document declaring the colonists’ beliefs and decisions. They distilled and incorporated ideals from other thinkers, such as John Locke. Evidence of grievances was applied to convince a local and global audience of the worthiness of the cause. A draft was created and reviewed. Peers provided feedback. Dialogue and discussion ensued. Further revisions and edits were made. Finally, the Declaration was published.

LESSON 2: THE WRITING PROCESS IN HISTORY

Teacher Page

Length: Approximately 30 minutes

PowerPoint® slides: 4 and 5

Procedure:

1. Ask students to define the word “process” and to come up with one example of a process.
2. Have students share their ideas and examples with a partner for the purpose of adding to their original definition and example.
3. Come up with a class definition of the term “process.” Generally speaking, the definition should include something along the lines of the following: a series of steps or procedures taken to achieve a desired result.
4. Explain to students that they will be exploring the writing process in history. Students should have some familiarity with the writing process in general. Brainstorm these steps with students. These steps typically include researching, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and producing a final draft.
5. To transition into the writing process, project slide 4 (“Thinking About a Document”). Discuss the four questions with the class and help them to begin thinking about the writing process in history.
6. Project slide 5 and present the content found in the slide notes.
7. Dialog with students on the final question listed in the slide. Answers will vary, but underscore the point that all of the steps are crucial.
8. Make an effort to underline the parts of the writing process in history that are somewhat unique to historical writing, particularly the development of a thesis with supporting evidence.
9. Following these steps, students should work on the handout, “The Writing Process in History: Practice.” Have students do this without using slide 5, since most of the answers can easily be gleaned from that slide. For this particular practice students need to recall the content from the PowerPoint® and teacher instruction. Working with a partner might make this more manageable. The appropriate order is as follows:
 - Consider a question or problem
 - Read and analyze multiple sources
 - Form a thesis
 - Organize evidence
 - Write a draft
 - Peer review/feedback
 - Revise
 - Edit
 - Submit for publication or assessment

THE WRITING PROCESS IN HISTORY

Practice

Directions: Complete the sequence map below to represent the steps you would take if you were writing a book about the creation of the Constitution of the United States. The first box has been filled in for you.

Include the following terms in your sequence map in the appropriate order: revise, publish, write a draft, form a thesis, edit, organize evidence, read and analyze multiple sources, consider a question or problem, peer review/feedback. After you are finished, prepare to share how and why you came up with that order.

