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# WRITING IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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*EDUCATION OUTREACH  
THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION*

This article was written by Peter Pitard, Teacher, Bath County High School, Hot Springs,  
Virginia

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## Writing in the Social Studies Classroom

Writing in the Social Studies classroom is often misunderstood. Most students think of writing in a history or social studies class as answering an essay question, writing a research paper, or answering a Document Based Question for the state or AP exam. It is more than that!

Steffens and Dickerson, editors of a book; Writers Guide to History, (a valuable resource!) state that “the process of writing is as critical to the study of history as reading...” Specifically,

“\*WRITING IS A FUNDAMENTAL INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY. It does not just communicate what one has learned, but it causes one to learn. It promotes discovery, problem solving and organization.

\*WRITING HELPS YOU TO LEARN HISTORY. We learn best not as passive recipients of lecture and textbooks, but as active participants, making meaning for ourselves.

\*WRITING CLARIFIES YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBJECT. Writing what you know helps you to review, organize, and remember the material. You can write your way to understanding. By putting your questions on paper, by writing about your confusion, you begin to see where the difficulty lies.”

When students ask why they have to write in a Social Studies classroom, point to the above three concepts. Post them in the classroom, put them on an overhead to show to students, distribute them to students to post in their class notebooks during the first few weeks of school.

Students must write often if they are going to learn to write well. Length is not always important. Daily writing is very important. Eventually, longer writing will happen with teacher’s guidance. Students should be asked each and every day to summarize at the end of the period what they learned that day. Have the students keep a daily summary section in their social studies notebook. Ask a different class every other week to turn in the summary they like best. These can be “scored” very quickly with a plus or check mark, a comment or two to give the students the sense that these are important. Have students keep track of how many they write. When notebooks are “graded” students can tell you how many they have done and

you can give a grade on the total. Some teachers will give an extra point or a plus or minus to students who have completed all the assignments.

Students can also read their summaries to a partner. At first many students will argue that they did not learn anything that day. But with judicious partnering and continued insistence on the teacher's part, the summaries will improve. Some teachers check the summaries as students enter class the next day. If they find a good one, they ask the student to phrase a question on an overhead from their summary and this becomes the opening question that students have to answer as you take roll.

Have students write at the end of other assignments. If you completed a project, have students analyze their part in it and what they have learned. Has it changed any of their thinking about the subject?

Toby Fulwiler in Steffens and Dickerson also lists ten different kinds of journals history students can keep in their notebooks. "Observation, speculation, questions, awareness, connections, dialogue with historical people or the teacher, information, revision of previous journal entries, problem posing or solving, and synthesis" are some of the ideas suggested. Many of these journal types can be turned into types of questions students can be asked in the end of class summaries. Many teachers use primary documents from ancillary materials provided by textbook publishers and material, reproductions, artifacts, art, photographs gathered from other sources to assist students in writing.

### Writing is a Process

It is important to remember that writing is a process and students are definitely works in progress. Most of our English, Language Arts colleagues have the writing process on a chart in their classrooms and it is a good idea to collaborate with them on writing assignments.

Ask for help! Assign sample essay prompts to groups of students and if they are in English class together, have the English teacher go through the writing process with them as they refine their essays. The English teacher can grade on a Language Arts rubric and you can grade for historical content.

Another good idea is to have students write their "research papers" on butcher paper (6' by 4') instead of turning in a paper that only you, the student and the parent who typed it late at night will read. Post the papers

around the room ask students to walk-about and view the papers. Students can work in teams to produce the paper. Have the students hand write or print all the information on the paper, including a bibliography. Students still do the traditional collection of notes, etc., but post all the information and conclusions on the butcher paper. A good way to end the year!

Probably one of the most difficult tasks for the history teacher is to get most students to write a multi-paragraph essay.

Some students do not see the difference between an historical essay and the language arts essay. The historical essay must be directly taught. Below is a chart developed in California that can be copied and posted in the classroom to remind students how to write for the history class. Give students their own copy to post in their notebooks.

### Helpful Hints for the Historical Writing for Teachers and Students

- Assume your audience knows nothing about the historical topic.
- Historical writing is based on fact.
- Chronology and sequence are important for organizing historical writing.
- Historical facts should support statements or reasons. (Historical arguments)
- Use the appropriate historical time frame. (Setting)
- Make historical writing interesting to the audience by:
  - Providing details from the time period
  - Organizing historical information clearly so that it makes an impact on the audience.
  - Using first person, if writing as a historical figure.

It is essential for students to practice this exercise often. Putting examples on the overhead (anonymously), and going over the steps in class, with peer review in small groups is very helpful. (Again consult with your colleagues in the English Department).

Model an essay, outlining what you would include, the special words we all use, the opening and transition sentences. The web site: [About Educators http://7-12educators.about.com](http://7-12educators.about.com) has an excellent example of How to Write a Five Paragraph Essay. (See sample on page 11.) They also provide teachers with an example of how to teach a compare/contrast essay.

Another effective way of using writing with thinking is the use of a reaction journal in their notebooks. Some days instead of posting a question for the

beginning of class, post a quotation from the time era you are studying. Quotes can be gathered from the text, ancillary materials, or from history quotation books found in local bookstores. Ask students to respond or react to these quotes in one of the formats suggested below.

### KWL Journal

What do I know?	What do I want to know?	What did I learn?
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### Senses Journal (any combination of the following)

I see...	I hear....	I taste....	I feel...	I smell....	I think...
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### Various Quotes Journals

Various Quote Journals	Reaction
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Initial Reaction	Quote	Reaction after finishing book
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My Reaction	Quote	Class discussion Summary
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Using these response/reaction journals, have students examine them at the end of their discussion or when they reach the end of the chapter or unit. Have students reexamine their comments, have they changed their minds, conclusions? This activity often helps clarify issues and thinking. These quotations can often become the basis for short answer essays on tests.

Have students respond to the quotations as if they were a person in that time period. What would they say, knowing the culture, politics and mores of that period?

In this same vein, have students select two persons from this time period and using photographs, paintings, etc. copy the picture of a generic person on an 11"x3" sheet of construction paper. Attach the two people to a regular 8 1/2" x 11" sheet and on that sheet construct a dialogue between the two. This takes some research, and it is a good way to teach perspective and different viewpoints.

Another idea is to create a news magazine in the style of Time, Newsweek etc. Students in teams, using artifacts, pictures, and drawings are responsible for creating sections with information about the time, etc. This draws a lot of participation from all the students in a team.

## Bibliography:

### Web sources:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/4868/write.html>

Good lesson plans for grades 4-6 on how to write paragraphs. Could be used with primary sources in the history classroom.

<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/history/histg.html>

Another excellent site for resources. Although not a site with writing suggestions per se, it has links to many other sites with suggestions for lesson plans that incorporate good writing.

<http://www.powa.org>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant. A very good site with ideas for different types of writing. Over 174 sites in one section alone on writing! Four writing sections

<http://www.geocities.com/dboals.geo/write.html>

A great resource for history teachers with connections to other sites. Ideas on writing, critical thinking and other suggestions.

### Books:

Writing for the Social Studies, McDougal Littell, 1998, Evanston, IL. ISBN #0-395-86909-9

A excellent resource for the teacher and student. Combines suggestions, ideas, how to's and samples to teach report writing, essay writing, and research papers.

Sensenbaugh, Roger. Writing Across the Social Studies Curriculum. ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies and Social Science Education. Bloomington, IN. ISBN# 0-927516-05-5

An superb teachers resource of ideas and suggestions for activities and lessons using writing in the classroom. Every teacher should have this book in their collection.

Steffens, Henry & Dickerson, Mary Jane. Writer's Guide: History. 1987. DC Heath Co. ISBN # 0-669-12002-2

This book is the standard in many colleges. It has been reprinted many times. It is the classic reference writing book on the history teacher's shelf.



# Articles on Writing Across the Curriculum - History

Listed below are articles on this topic from the Campus Writing Program library. Short summaries and citations are provided when available.

- [Beyer, Barry K.](#) "Using Writing to Learn in History."
- [Dillon, George L.](#) "Dialogues with the Dead: The Rhetorics of History."
- [Holsinger, Donald C.](#) "Writing to Learn History."
- [Law, Joe.](#) "WAC Profiles: Department of History."

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**Beyer, Barry K.** "Using Writing to Learn in History." *The History Teacher* XIII.2 (1980): 167-179.

If students write in a history course they learn to think like historians. As students write for history courses their writing becomes more sophisticated, along with their understanding. The fact that writing is a process, that it is thinking, and that students learn as they write all encourage the development of more sophisticated historical thinkers. Beyer also discusses how to use and teach writing in a history course: assign specific assertions, not general theories; require multiple drafts and revision; assign several short papers rather than a term paper; require students to write for different audiences and points of view; and use writing to advance study of content.

**Dillon, George L.** "Dialogues with the Dead: The Rhetorics of History." *Contending Rhetorics: Writing in Academic Disciplines*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1991. 113-125, notes 172-173.

While the purpose of history is often characterized as "giving voice to the dead," both the rhetoric of historical discourse and its implications in the construction of historical knowledge generate less generally accepted arguments. A brief survey of three historians' (Hexter, White, LCapra) views of the rhetoric of history indicates the grappling with the position of history between social science and literature. Historical discourse resists both the positivist-empiricist forces in scientific rhetoric, it also resists literary criticism's impulse to discount knowledge claims as irrelevant to the construction of meaning.

**Holsinger, Donald C.** "Writing to Learn History." *Social Studies Review* (Fall 1991):59-64.

Argues for incorporating writing into history courses. Holsinger suggests that professors use writing to engage students in the subject matter; use simple writing exercises as preparation for in-class discussions; have students write in response to specific statements and questions rather than vague topics; have students write frequently and freely; have students keep course journals; assign writing in developmental steps; have students revise and resubmit; and have students write to different audiences and from different perspectives.

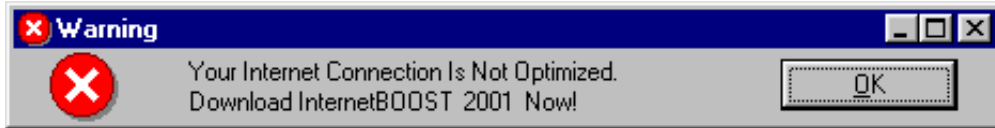
**Law, Joe.** "WAC Profiles: Department of History." *Writing Across the Curriculum* 6 (November 1997): 2-3.

The history department at Wright State University has tried to better students' reading and writing skills through writing assignments.

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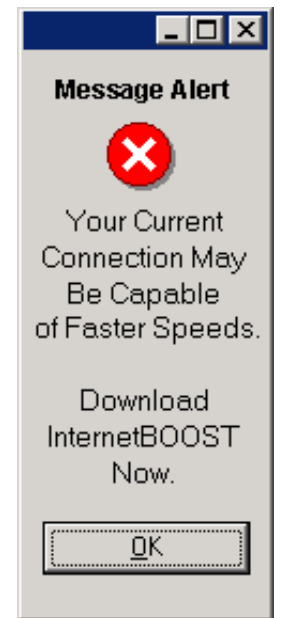
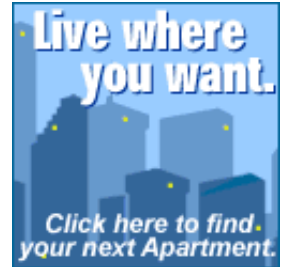
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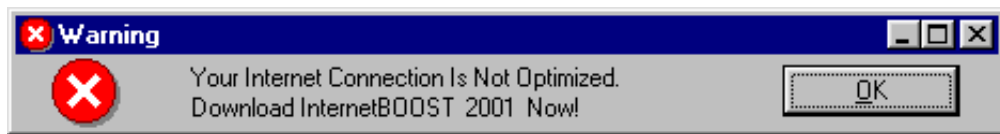
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Difficulty Level: Average    Time Required: 45 minutes

Here's How:

1. Before you begin writing, decide on your answer to the question asked of you. This is your basic thesis.
2. Before you begin writing, decide on what three pieces of evidence/support you will use to prove your thesis.
3. Write your introductory paragraph. Place your thesis along with your three pieces of evidence in order of strength (least to most) at the end of this paragraph.
4. Write the first paragraph of your body. You should begin by restating your thesis, focussing on the support of your first piece of evidence.
5. End your first paragraph with a transitional sentence that leads to paragraph number two.
6. Write paragraph two of the body focussing on your second piece of evidence. Once again make the connection between your thesis and this piece of evidence.
7. End your second paragraph with a transitional sentence that leads to paragraph number three.
8. Repeat step #6 using your third piece of evidence.
9. Begin your concluding paragraph by restating your thesis. Include the three points you've used to prove your thesis.

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