

Common Language Errors in History Essays

- 1) **Thesis hedging:** The best, strongest approach to an introductory paragraph is to make a direct statement that shows your argument, instead of a prediction about what general issues the reader will see. Using the first person also undermines the impact of the introduction.

Totally Feeble: "I will discuss in this paper the issues of land in the War of the Pacific and the Chaco War."

Weak: "This paper will show the connection between territorial questions and both the War of the Pacific and the Chaco War."

Stronger: "Both the War of the Pacific and the Chaco War arose in part from disputes over unclear boundaries."

- 2) **Quotation Errors:** In general, paraphrase the words of secondary sources, unless you are specifically analyzing the secondary source, or if there is just no way to paraphrase it and keep its impact.

Quotations **must fit into the sentence grammatically**, and the sentence must flow smoothly from your words to the quoted words.

For quotes of over four lines long, use the **block quote** format: separated from the paragraph by a double spaces, single-spaced inside the passage, indented on the left, and without quotation marks.

Footnote numbering at the end of a quote always goes **outside** the quotation marks. As illogical as it may sound, punctuation at the end of a quote always goes **inside** the quotation marks, even if the punctuation is not in the original passage.

Example: "... the Chaco War."¹

"...the Chaco War," which....

This "*caudillo* test of wills" led to....

- 3) **Titles, underlining, and italics:** Every essay you write, even on a take-home midterm, should have a title. Titles are a quick, cheap, and easy way to introduce the reader to the paper, without having to come up with a complete sentence. They are the opening shots in your effort to persuade the reader and inform the reader about your argument.

Underlining and italics are for:

- 1) non-English words, except for proper nouns like place names (*caudillo* or caudillo but Argentina)

- 2) titles of books, journals, newspapers, and films
(The Banana Men; *Hispanic American Historical Review*)
- 3) the names of ships and spacecraft
(the *Lusitania*, the *Huarca*, the shuttle *Discovery*)
- 4) The word *ibid.* is a Latin abbreviation (meaning "in the same place") and so is always italicized or underlined and always has a period. It may be used to specify the same source as above, different page: ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Never underline or italicize your own title or your own subheadings, including the words "Bibliography" and "Endnotes." Underlining or italics in a paper's title should only refer to another published work, usually a book. Example: War and Markets in LaFeber's The New Empire

- 4) **Improper citation form:** Every quote and idea that comes from another source must have a foot- or endnote reference that tells the author, titles of the book, journal, article, newspaper, etc., place and company of publishing, date, and page number(s) noted. Every footnote citation and bibliographic entry must end with a period. Footnote sections are single-spaced, and bibliographic entries should be single-spaced with a double-space between each one.

Papers should have footnotes or endnotes, but not a combination of the two. Endnotes go on a separate page, not collectively at the bottom of the last page.

- 5) **Weakening words:** Sentences that use the active voice are usually more persuasive and more historically grounded than those that use the passive voice. In historical writing, the author should at all times convey agency (who did what to whom) and trace the figures, institutions, and factors responsible for events. "War was declared" is poor historical writing, not nearly as informative and rich as "The United States declared war on Mexico." Make the actors involved very clear and precisely defined.

Even in limited assignments like midterm exams, you should write with the voice of some authority, as an historian. Make an argument and support it with evidence, and treat the assignment as your contribution to the field. (This is another reason to title your work. History courses very rarely assign untitled books or articles.) "In my opinion,..." is an unnecessary phrase, since the reader will assume that this is your opinion. Hopefully, the opinion is also supported by evidence and your own reasoned judgment.