

Organization

Clear organization is extremely important in a well-written paper. Generally speaking, history papers should include the following three elements:

1. An **introduction** with a clear thesis statement;
2. **Body paragraphs** that contain evidence supporting your point of view; and
3. A **conclusion** which restates your thesis **and** suggests the implications of your thesis.

What is an introduction?

The introduction should lay out your **central argument** in a clear **thesis statement**. For a more detailed explanation of historical arguments and thesis statements, see our "Writing a Thesis and Making an Argument" aid.

The introduction also serves as a "**road map**" for the reader. It should offer the reader the direction and general ideas contained in your paper, and set up the necessary background for the paper.

What are Body Paragraphs?

A **paragraph** is a conceptual unit that teams several sentences to convey a larger thought or point.

Topic sentence and thesis statement: Each paragraph should begin with a general **topic sentence** that indicates what subject the rest of the paragraph will discuss, what issue it will explore, or what point it will make. Also, every body paragraph should be **reflective of your thesis statement**. The topic sentence should show the reader how the topic of a paragraph relates to your argument.

One topic for each paragraph: If your paragraph talks about several different subjects, it must either be divided up, so you can develop each point separately and effectively in its own paragraph, or be opened by a topic sentence that makes it clear that you want to mention briefly a variety of lesser points.

Length of a paragraph: Following the topic sentence, remaining sentences in each paragraph provide more detail or evidence about the main topic. For an explanation of effective usage of quotes, see our aid "Paraphrases and Quotes." A paragraph should develop the subject or point it is making; hence, it normally contains **at least three sentences** in addition to the topic sentence and may have a concluding sentence as well. (Here history writing differs from journalistic style, which often uses shorter paragraphs.)

Transitions: You should pay attention to making clear, smooth transitions between paragraphs. Between sections you will need a transition or linking statement, indicating that you are moving on to a new topic. Each paragraph within a section should also be clearly related to the one before and the one after, creating an even, logical flow. If the link is not readily apparent, you should include a sentence which describes the transition.

What is a Conclusion?

Your **conclusion** should restate/recap your thesis and major points, showing how you have proven your position. You may also want to draw the reader's attention to possible implications of what you have discussed and your conclusions. Think of this as **an answer to the question "So what?"** In doing so, however, be careful to **stay within the field of history covered by the course**. Do not make vague statements about learning from our mistakes or the fundamental good or evil of humanity, as such reflections are best left to the reader.

How to Check the Organization of your Paper

If you are still not sure about your organization once you have written a draft, we suggest the following two ways to check your organization.

The 'can I make an outline?' method

If you have a good paper with tight organization, someone should be able to take the first sentence from every paragraph, list them, and create an outline of your argument as a result. Try it! If the list jumps around in subject matter or chronology, you know that you need to rethink the way you have ordered your paper. If you end up with an outline that makes no sense, you know that your organization needs serious attention.

The 'cut up your paper' method

One way to check your organization is to cut up a draft of your paper. Trim away the margin space, any extra paper at the top or bottom of your pages, and separate all your paragraphs. Hand the pieces to a friend and ask him or her to reassemble your paper in the order that makes the best sense to him or her.

When he or she is done, look over the order your friend created for your paper. If it matches your original draft, you know that your organization makes sense and that the transitions between paragraphs were smooth. If he or she reorganized your paper, talk to your friend about why the new order made sense to him or her, and work out ways to make each paragraph connect gracefully to the next. If he or she could not put your paper in any order whatsoever, you know you really need to work on the first and last sentences of each paragraph, as well as the strength of your argument.