

MR. WAGENBERG

“Throughout History. . .” Or, How To Annoy the Grader

Students frequently lose points on their history essays because of a few common mistakes that can very easily be avoided. Consider the following:

"Throughout history" There are no worse words to begin a history essay with than these two. The words used to complete this sentence will either be false or say something so utterly banal that it would far better to have skipped over it. Consider the following: “Throughout history there has been prejudice.” *So what!* This is like saying, “Throughout history people have breathed oxygen.” It happens to be true, but including it will not advance your cause. Or this: “Throughout history people have always been interested in making money.” Nonsense. St. Francis of Assisi, many other saints, and even lots of common people during the Middle Ages, considered money, and material things in general, to be worthless and more likely than not to interfere with life's main goal getting into heaven. There are even such people around today, although you might be hard put to find many.

Exaggeration. This is the most common mistake good students regularly make on their essays. (“Throughout history” is one type of exaggeration.) To avoid exaggeration, don't use the words “unique,” “always,” “never,” “all,” “none,” or any similar words. Avoid superlatives such as “biggest in history,” “worst in history,” “longest in history” UNLESS you are absolutely sure you're right. “WWII was the most destructive war in history” is true and shouldn't cause you any trouble. “WWII was the bloodiest war in history” is not necessarily true. The Thirty Years' War was far bloodier than WWII if one defines bloodiness in terms of the percentage of the population who died in the war. (And, you have to agree, that's one of the best measures of bloodiness.) The safest words to use on history essays are word like some, many, several, often, etc.. Slightly more dangerous words: most, a majority, etc. To be safe, understate your case.

“I feel” or “I think.” Of these two, “I feel” is much worse than “I think” or “I believe” because feelings cannot be evaluated and cannot be supported by external evidence. “I feel the Holocaust was the worst thing to happen in all of history.” This tells the grader something about you, but, it does not tell him or her anything at all about history. Someone else might “feel” the Black Death, was worse. Leave your feelings out of your essays. Your thoughts are what graders are interested in and can evaluate. There's no need to say “I think” because if you didn't think it you (probably) wouldn't be writing it. “I think nationalism was the biggest cause of WWI” is no different than “Nationalism was the biggest cause of WWI.” Both are your opinion, and no grader would think otherwise. (You might really believe that aliens from outer space were the biggest cause of WWI, but you would be wise to conceal this peculiar belief from the grader of your essay since there's no historical evidence to support this viewpoint.)

Accuracy. Getting facts and dates right is the duty of every history student. But, bear in mind, there are degrees of accuracy. Consider these: “The Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium on June 18, 1815.” “The Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium in June, 1815.” “The Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium in 1815.” “The Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium after Napoleon escaped from Elba.” “The Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium on June 19, 1815.” The last sentence is false; all the others are true. If you know an exact date, put it down. If you know the month, put it down. If you know the year, put it down. If you're not sure, come as close as you can without getting it wrong.