

How to Write History

Stephen Cox

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

This work has been identified with a <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/NKC/1.0/>>Rights Statement No Known Copyright.

Recommended Citation

Cox, Stephen. "How to Write History." *The Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 261-267.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12091>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

How to Write History

STEPHEN COX

I MUST CONFESS that I stand in awe of historians. They are conscientious, intelligent, and diligent—even tenacious—and they seem to enjoy what they do. They work at the same time with the most minute details and with the broadest streams of human action and thought, and I am more than awestruck—I am even a little envious of their ability to do that. Historians are astonishing, too, because they are as diligent at the keyboard as they are in the archives. Once they begin to write, many historians resist the temptation to stop. When they sit down to write—nowadays at the keyboard of a personal computer, more often than not—they produce manuscripts of 500, 700, or 1,000 pages without a backward glance.

Occasionally a public controversy flares up over the difference between narrative history (in which amateurs or professional historians write for general readers) and what might be called technical history (in which professional historians write monographs addressed to each other, and which are meant as contributions to social science). That controversy too quickly becomes a debate over historiographical theory, over *How to Write History*; the contenders may lose sight of two authentic underlying issues of the more practical topic that can be written small: how to write history.

The first issue is illustrated by an encounter I had with the author of an excellent monograph in American history. It is a good book: ingenious, thorough, well composed—and brief. It had received only good reviews. Yet the author was dismayed to have received a royalty statement showing a payment of zero for the year. We talked awhile about shrinking library budgets, about the famous twigging phenomenon in scholarship (smaller

"How to Write History" was delivered as a talk at the Mid America History Conference in 1982 and the Missouri Valley History Conference in 1983.

and smaller groups are interested in narrower and narrower topics), about who exactly buys monographs in history. This author could list by name the principal readership for his book. He came to be reconciled to the fate of his good little book: He came to recognize that there is a very small market for monographic history. "But next time," he vowed, "I'm going to write a book that sells." In fact, within a few months of our conversation he had packed up and moved to Boston. He had left academia for a high-ticket job in banking. Partly, the issue between narrative and technical history is one of market: there is a big readership or market for good books and journals of narrative history; there is a much smaller readership or market for good books and journals of technical history.

A second issue underlying that controversy is that technical monographs are so seldom written in an accessible and interesting and plain style. Some people claim that historians have failed to write well. That puts the thing negatively. I prefer to be positive. I contend that historians have positively learned to write poorly. That is, ever the optimist, I contend that historians are educable—that they (and dozens of other human beings) can learn to write better, more persuasively, than they do. What is required is the will to do it, a lot of hard work, and some native cunning.

In this article I have assumed a peevish air and the imperative mood, and it may seem that I have exaggerated for emphasis. Much of what I say may sound familiar. I only mean to reinforce what many persons have taught before—how to write economically and engagingly—by offering eleven rules for writing history.

Rule 1: Use Strunk and White. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York, third ed., 1979), runs only 105 pages. It is a little book—in fact, some people call it *The Little Book*—and it costs \$2.25 in paperback. It is a great bargain. There are many books about writing style, but I am going to keep this simple. If a writer does everything Strunk and White say, that writer's editors and readers will be delighted. In style and substance, much of my advice comes from *The Little Book*. Read Strunk and White as soon as you finish this article, or read it instead of this article. Read it again before you begin the next

draft of your article for *The Annals of Iowa*. Apply what you learn. And read it before you begin to revise.

Rule 2: Revise. When you have the manuscript the way you want it, set it aside for a week or more. Then do another draft, concentrating on style. Ask the historians who read your manuscripts for you to tell you what is ineffective or awkward or boring, and revise with their comments in mind. Find a clear-headed, dependable English teacher who will go over your manuscript, checking for typographical errors, misspellings, infelicities, grammatical errors, flab. I gave up on this suggestion some time ago, and I revive it here only with a new angle: Pay the English teacher so that he or she will have a stake in the task. If you lack cash, offer to Rototill his or her garden. And pay attention to what the English teacher tells you. If you can persuade a grumpy English teacher to read your manuscripts, all the better. After you have revised to take your readers' comments into account, go back through the manuscript once or twice or ten times to polish.

The rest of the rules describe some of the objects of all that revising, all that reading and rereading of Strunk and White.

Rule 3: Be brief. Decide before you begin writing how long the article or book will be. As you revise, cut. Instead of saying "His mother was a woman who took in laundry," say "His mother took in laundry." Cut so that the completed manuscript is shorter than at first you intended it to be. Be willing to omit the results of some research that is irrelevant, no matter how hard won. Tell your reader less than everything you know. Shorten or omit extracted quotations—readers skip over them.

Five good reasons for cutting are these: (1) The manuscript will cost less to publish. The list price of a clothbound scholarly monograph in history now runs twelve or thirteen cents per page. A 400-page book may cost \$45.00. A 160-page book will cost \$20.00. Do you want scholars to buy your book? Do you want journal editors to be able to publish your work without going bankrupt? Then write short. (2) An article or book of manageable size, partly because it is more economical to publish than a longer manuscript, partly because it requires less editing time, partly because it can be scheduled for publication with more confidence, can be published sooner than a long manuscript. Do you want your work published expeditiously? (3) Do

you want scholars (and students, and the general public) to read your book or article? Then be concise. Wordiness, repetition, and flab will try your readers' patience. Out of courtesy, write short. (4) Do you want your work to be considered for publication? Then write short. Editors are readers, too, and are more likely to publish a good, short manuscript than a good, long one. (5) Finally, and most important, cutting is the best way I know of refining, of polishing your prose. When you have what you consider a final draft, set yourself a goal of cutting it by 25 percent. Try the tactic of shortening each typewritten page by five or six lines. You will be surprised how much irrelevance you can remove.

Rule 4: Be positive. Your reader comes to your article or book to learn what you know. Instead of apologizing for the lack of sources, tell the reader what you know. When you reach a conclusion, state it. Instead of qualifying every statement and wallowing in imponderables, say what you think. If you want reviewers of your work to use words like "masterful" and "impressive command of the subject," then take charge. Never let up. That's the only negative statement in this article: Never let up. Every time you find "no" or "not" or "never" in your prose, try to get rid of it by stating the same notion positively. Rather than "He was not very often on time," say "He usually came late." You will have to practice this to see the remarkable effect it will have on your writing and, indeed, on your life. Prefer *and* to *or*. *And* is affirmative, *or* suggests hesitation, vacillation.

Being positive also means being confident. Stand on your own two feet. Look good and stand tall. Do you hide behind authorities, beginning a paragraph with "Turner observes"? If you do, then quit it now. Keep notes to a minimum. Be brave.

Rule 5: Be emphatic. The emphasis in English prose falls at the beginning and end of a clause, sentence, paragraph, chapter, book. Put first and last what you wish to emphasize. Let prose rhythm carry your meaning, use punctuation to sway your reader. Put substance in the opening sentence of every paragraph, the first page of every chapter or article, the first chapter of every book. Stop tuning your fiddle and begin the dance. It is all right to be cunning. Write a winning first page, and your reader will forgive some stilted prose later on.

How to Write History

Rule 6: Be clear. Stick to the point. Before you begin, write a one-page description of what you will do in the book or article, and then do it. And write that abstract in good, vigorous prose. Avoid ambiguity. The reader is counting on you to be forthright. If one of your readers says something is unclear, then rewrite it without hesitation. As you type, you know when you are being vague—you fall back on jargon, your sentence structure gets tangled. Revise for clarity.

Rule 7: Be plain. Use hearty Anglo-Saxon words and avoid latinisms. Avoid jargon. Especially, avoid inventing your own jargon—there are plenty of good words already. If you write complex sentences poorly, then write simple sentences.

Rule 8: Be exact. Rather than “mid-1890s,” say “1895.” If you know the date was May 13, 1895, then say that. Rather than “numerous,” say how many. Use plenty of proper nouns—write about real people, places, and things. A page sprinkled with capital letters—Herbert Hoover, Waterloo—tells me that the historian is getting down to cases.

Euphemism, and what Fowler calls “elegant variation,” a kind of overinterpretation or gratuitous interpretation, stands in the way of exactness.¹ Instead of “the educational center of the state,” write “Iowa City” or, perhaps, “Ames.” Instead of “the nation’s capital,” write “Washington, D.C.”—we know it’s the nation’s capital. Often the facts, if presented well, will speak for themselves. Then, when you do offer interpretation, it will be emphatic.

Use well-chosen words, and use them right. I know an editor who understands how to use the verb “to comprise” and uses it as often as possible. I scarcely know the difference between “to comprise” and ten miles of bad road, and I avoid both.

Rule 9: Be active. History is about people doing things. Write with nouns and verbs. Choose active verbs, and eschew the passive voice. Save adverbs and adjectives for when they can be most effective.

Rule 10: Give it your best shot, every time. Show your readers a manuscript you are ready to send to the printer. Submit to

1. By “Fowler” I mean H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1926). In his acerbic article on elegant variation, beginning on page 130 of my copy of the 1961 printing, Fowler heaps scorn upon the second-rate writers, minor novelists, and reporters who yield to this literary fault and, at the same time, seems to pity them for falling prey to an “incurable vice.”

the publisher a complete manuscript, ready to go to the printer, even though you must later revise and revise. Type everything double-spaced—notes, bibliography, extracted quotations, tables, everything. Use a fresh ribbon in your typewriter, and if you compose on a computer use a truly letter-quality printer rather than a dot matrix, and use good white bond. If the manuscript is a book, include a title page and all the proper front matter. Give it your best shot, every time.

Rule 11: Heed my pet peeves. Here are six of them, and I make bold to say that there is a lesson in every one.

Peeve 1: Avoid the split infinitive—that is, avoid introducing an adverb or an adverbial element between the *to* of an infinitive and the following verb: rather than *to always go*, write *always to go*. Some people say it is okay to split an infinitive, and some conservative writers say it's wrong.² Right or wrong, a split infinitive calls attention to itself. Even readers unaware of what you have done will be vaguely troubled by a split infinitive. More careful readers will either write you off as illiterate if you split one or, giving you the benefit of the doubt, will stop and puzzle: "Now, why did this historian split this infinitive? There must be a reason. Perhaps the reason is that the historian is ignorant." Whatever runs through your reader's mind, at the very best he or she will have stopped to puzzle, will have lost your train of thought, and will have slipped away from you just a little. You want your readers' confidence, and that means that you want every word of prose to seem intentional. To command your readers' attention and respect, avoid splitting infinitives. In your prose style, be conservative.

Peeve 2: Avoid the logjam, my own term for what occurs when nouns in a great pile are used as adjectives. Historians learned the logjam from political scientists. If there were a Museum of Writing, the type specimen of the logjam would be "voter turnout." From that came "county voter turnout." And then "county election voter turnout." And then "county election Republican voter turnout." And so on.

2. Fowler's instructive, exquisite, kindly, and discriminating article on the point—pp. 558–61 in my copy—exhibits both good and bad specimens.

How to Write History

Peeve 3: Avoid anachronistic jargon. Some current examples are "lifestyle," "management style," and (a Golden Oldie by now) "employment opportunities."

Peeve 4: If you have forgotten how to spell "accommodate," please look it up.

Peeve 5: Write "unaccountably" rather than "for some reason." If you know what the reason is, then say so. If you fail to understand what happened, at least have the grace to state your bewilderment positively.

Peeve 6: Absolutely and without remorse, avoid opening a paragraph and, especially, a chapter with "Although." Be positive. Be confident. Be emphatic.

Be clear. Be plain. Be exact. Be active. Be brief.
Give it your best shot, every time.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.