



The University of Kansas
KU Writing Center

Writing Guide: What Is Historiography? Two Definitions

Conal Furray and Michael J. Salevouris, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1979), 223-4, 231:

A university professor once berated a young graduate student for what he termed “stale historiography.” A fellow student later said this sounded something akin to bad breath. What the professor meant, of course, was that the student was not familiar with the most recent scholarly interpretations in a particular subfield of history.

“Historiography” is not a word one normally finds in casual reading; nevertheless, the concept behind the word should be familiar to every student of history. In fact, you probably already know the concept even if the word itself is unfamiliar. Literally, the word means “the writing of history.” In modern usage, however, the word refers to the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing, if you will. When you study “historiography” you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians. To acquaint yourself, for example, with the variety of ways historians have tried to explain the coming of the American Civil War is to become familiar with the historiography of that subject. Graduate students in history spend years mastering the major interpretations in their particular specialties, including the most recent scholarship.

...Examining a few important interpretive “schools” and trends [will] help you read history more critically. (...) Trying to summarize even a few historiographical trends in capsule form is a sin only slightly less serious than omitting the subject altogether. Not only is the topic immense, but any secondhand account of another historian's work should be viewed with suspicion. If you want to know what a historian says about a subject, you should read that historian's work. Furthermore, every historian's work is to some extent unique, reflecting individual values, assumptions, interests, and abilities.

(...) If one can perceive a trend over time, it is this: historical writing has become more eclectic, more rigorous and imaginative in its use of evidence . . . History as a discipline is alive and growing, telling its story of change but telling also how tenaciously the past survives in the present.

From Donald V. Gawronski, *History: Meaning and Method*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975), 59-60:

Whether making a selection for a book report or review, choosing works for inclusion in a term paper, or consulting works for an advanced research report, the student of history should possess a sound understanding and knowledge of the historiography of his or her field.

Historiography is the study of the various approaches to historical method, the actual writing of history, and, primarily, the various interpretations of historical events. Historiography is the study of the techniques employed by the individual historian. It is not necessary to study primary materials, i.e., original source materials, in order to study historiography. For historiography is concerned mainly with what has been written about historical events—the various schools of thought and interpretation centered around any particular historical occurrence—not with the source materials from which the historical fact was derived, although the methodology employed by the historian may be scrutinized to substantiate his or her conclusions. The primary sources of historiography are the works of historians.



History, especially American history, is often regarded as a cut-and-dried subject. But there are many significant, controversial topics in American history. These topics possess numerous legitimate, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations. The following is a partial list of the more controversial topics on which the interpretations of historians do not agree: causes for the various American wars, the handling of post-Civil War reconstruction, the evaluation of progressive Republicanism, considerations on the importance of the New Deal, the significance of the so-called Jeffersonian revolution, the importance of Jacksonian democracy, the role of the capitalist in the development of an industrialized America, the significance of the frontier experience, and so forth.

It should be emphasized, however, that the study of American historiography is a deep and penetrating subject, requiring a thorough knowledge not only of historical fact but of individual American historians as well.

Fortunately, several high competent historians have at various times published detailed studies on the development of the writing of American history. Also, the various national professional historical journals such as the *American Historical Review*, the *Journal of American History* (successor to the old *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*), plus the many regional, state, and specialized journals contain considerable information on this type of material.

Various examples of historiographic schools or approaches:

American Historiography:

The foundational period
The Romantic School
The Scientific School

European Historiography:

Greco-Roman historical writing (ancient)
Early Christian historical writing (ancient-medieval)
Medieval historiography
Renaissance historiography
Reformation historiography
Rationalist historiography
Nationalist historiography
Marxist historiography

Other approaches to history:

Political history
Military history
Intellectual history, History of ideas
Economic history
History of science
Diplomatic history
Social history
Cultural history
Women's historiography
Black historiography
Minority/ethnic historiography

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