

Reading and Writing History

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

There are many online resources and books aimed at helping students to improve their performance in assignments. This annotated bibliography provides an overview of some helpful resources. However, it should be used in conjunction with two pieces of advice: know yourself and know your institution. In this context, knowing yourself means understanding what you find most challenging about assignments and what you tend to do well at. Looking over previous feedback and talking to tutors will help you to direct your attention to the most important areas to work on. Knowing your institution means knowing what resources are available and using them. This ranges from module-specific guidance on particular assessments to departmental marking criteria to institution-wide study skills support. There is almost certainly a lot more support out there than you realize. Guidance that is tailored to you and to your degree programme is likely to be most useful, although general guidance of the kind recommended here can be a useful supplement.

General guides

Stella Cottrell, *The Study Skills Handbook*, 6th edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

This handbook is not specific to history degrees but covers many different aspects of study skills. It is particularly helpful on aspects such as learning strategies and time management that are less often addressed on skills

modules, but also includes guidance on skills such as effective reading and note-taking, critical and analytical thinking, and writing essays and other assignments. It includes activities that will help you to understand and improve your working practices.

Mary Abbott, *History Skills: A Student's Handbook*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

Whereas Stella Cottrell's *The Study Skills Handbook* is formatted like a textbook, this edited collection consists of essays on different aspects of university experience. It is designed to support students from the first year right up to the final dissertation and thinking about jobs afterwards. The chapters on 'Libraries – physical and virtual' and 'Examinations' provide history-specific guidance on topics less often covered in equivalent print books. Because it was last updated in 2008, the book is out-of-date on some important areas (such as digital resources and AI), but still provides excellent advice on core study skills.

Writing essays and other assignments

Rebecca Stott, Anna Snaith and Rick Rylance (eds), *Making Your Case: A Practical Guide to Essay Writing* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2001).

While not history-specific, this is an excellent guide to the basics of essay-writing that is useful for students in all humanities subjects. Chapters on 'Paragraphs: the building blocks of essays', 'Summary skills' (how to paraphrase), and 'Editing skills, or adventures in densely packed sentences' are especially helpful in dealing with fundamental aspects of essay-writing that are rarely covered in much depth.

William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, 4th edn (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Although the title might imply that this book deals solely or mainly with writing skills, the first half explores issues such as search techniques, using the library, note-taking and footnoting, with the second half devoted to writing well, building an argument, crafting a structure and other aspects of writing history. Published before the AI revolution and before the widespread move in many institutions to digital resources, some aspects may not chime with current students' experience, but the guidance on research skills and writing well remains excellent.

Penelope J. Corfield and Tim Hitchcock, *Becoming a Historian: An Informal Guide* (London: University of London Press, 2022).

This book is aimed at research students and independent scholars, so undergraduate students are likely to find parts of it less relevant. However, the first two sections (on starting research projects and on writing, analysing

and interpreting) contain much of use for students embarking on independent research projects. This guidance is likely to appeal particularly to students who feel that other texts aimed at undergraduates sometimes ‘talk down’ to them.

Writing style

John Peck and Martin Coyle, *The Student’s Guide to Writing: Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

While there are now many tools to support students in crafting text, understanding the principles underlying effective writing will help you in situations where these tools cannot be used, such as written examinations. Moreover, at present, AI-generated prose often reads as lacking personality (probably because it wasn’t composed by a human). If you struggle to communicate effectively in writing or have always found it difficult to understand the rules of grammar, this is a very good, easy-to-understand guide that will help you not only to avoid making mistakes, but to find your own voice.

‘The Writer’s Diet’: <https://writersdiet.com/> (accessed 10 October 2025).

Helen Sword is an academic writing specialist and author of *The Writer’s Diet*, a book that puts forward a ‘fitness regime’ for good writing. The book is not aimed at undergraduates, but the online ‘Writer’s Diet’ resource provides diagnostic tools for extracts of writing and can help you to pinpoint where improvement is needed.

AI and history

‘Generative AI, History and Historians, A Reading Guide’, *Historical Transactions*: <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2025/10/02/generative-ai-history-and-historians-a-reading-guide/> (accessed 10 October 2025).

At the time of writing, university historians are still working out how to respond to the enormous changes in the student learning experience that AI has prompted. *Historical Transactions*, the blog of the Royal Historical Society, provides a regularly updated reading list of items discussing what AI means for historical practice. These recommendations discuss a range of practical and ethical issues around AI use in historical research and writing.

Conclusion

The last decade or so has seen wide-ranging changes in university learning environments and in what is expected of students. Some changes represent

a deepening of trends that have been evident for a while – towards more varied assessments and the use of digital resources, for example. Others, such as the widespread availability of sophisticated AI tools, are much more recent. This means that older printed works on study skills are likely to seem old-fashioned in some respects. However, the core skills necessary to good historical practice – the ability to read, understand and analyse a wide range of texts, and to marshal the interpretation of these texts into a compelling evidence-based argument – have not changed. There is still much to be gained from honing your independent skills in researching and writing history, and from engaging with older texts that discuss effective ways of building these skills.