

1. Description of the Discipline

We study history to learn about the origins of modern institutions, ideas, and values. Studying history allows us to see events, cultures, and people through different perspectives, giving us insight into critiquing our own culture and assumptions. An understanding of the past can help us make informed decisions concerning future events.

At Denison, history is considered multi-disciplinary by nature and can include studies of art, music, race, class, and gender. When studying history, it is important to look at the interplay of dynamic factors over time.

2. Citation Style Used

At Denison, some professors will allow either MLA or Chicago as long as it is consistent. Others only accept Chicago, so you should check with the professor to find out his or her preference.

3. Organization/Required Components

The most important things to have in a well-written history paper are a coherent argument, sources to support this argument, and logical organization.

It is also important to use both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources can be anything from letters, newspapers, or diaries, to art, movies, or music. Secondary sources are important for learning about your topic, but should not be the only sources used in a research paper.

4. Voice

Active voice should be used whenever possible and first person pronouns should be used sparingly.

5. Types of Writing Assignments

The most common types of writing assignments at Denison are short reaction papers, longer formal essays, annotated bibliographies, and research papers. Short reaction papers usually address a specific question about an issue, use a single source, and are concise, around 2-4 pages long. Longer formal essays often draw from a larger, deeper source base, address thematic issues, and are about 6 pages long. Research papers have many components, often including an annotated bibliography, and are usually at least 15 pages long.

6. **Research Process**

Research most often begins with a proposal, followed by a bibliographic project, a draft, the final paper, and an optional presentation.

When starting research, you should choose a broad topic then begin limiting it based on your available sources. Next, you should formulate a thesis, organize evidence, and compile a bibliography. It is a good idea to take notes as you read, including bibliographic references, so you can turn those notes into an outline.

7. **Common Mistakes**

Students sometimes begin papers with overstatements or sweeping generalizations about history that cannot be supported with specific evidence. Also, it is important to answer the question assigned and not veer off to a different topic.

When writing about history in general, it is important not to generalize information, follow clichés, or use anachronisms. Also, be aware of your own biases and do not project these present-day judgments onto people from the past

8. **Preferred Language (jargon, pronouns)**

At Denison, history professors usually do not emphasize the use of any particular jargon, however, there are some language mistakes students often make. For example, when writing in history, you should make sure to clarify pronoun antecedents, to avoid colloquial or informal language, to watch out for redundancy and misuse of pronouns, and to avoid overuse of the passive voice and unnecessary verbiage.

References

Catherine Dollard, personal interview by author, March 28, 2007.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.