Past, Present, and Personal
Teaching Writing in U.S. History
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Part Two: Present History

Position and Local History Research Papers

Analyzing documents and mastering factual content are critical to the writing process. But a student’s understanding of historical subject matter lies in her or his ability to explain cause-and-effect relationships, interpret the significance of past events, and clearly articulate a position and defend it. These skills are best demonstrated through the writing of the position and research papers. I call these papers “present history” because they are contemporary interpretations of past events. They are also present history in the sense that today’s students are, increasingly, integrating more progressive methods of analysis in their papers. Much like professional historians, students are being encouraged to explore the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and statistics as a way to gain important insights into the past. The social sciences also fascinate high school students whose earlier experience with history class tended to emphasize a dry, vocabulary textbook-controlled approach.

The position paper is a short composition that interprets a single subject and gives the view of the writer. Position papers can be given as a homework assignment or as a timed, in-class test. The advantage of the former is that students can process, over a longer period of time, their understanding of a subject and are permitted to consult the text. The timed, in-class test, on the other hand, is often used by teachers as a quick way to determine a student’s mastery of the subject matter. I have used the position paper in both ways, though my expectations are, of course, higher for the take-home paper because students have a longer time period to produce the essay as well as to integrate factual material from the text.
Students will write an average of 8 to 10 position papers a year in my class. About half of those papers are in-class test essays, the other half are take-home assignments. More recently I have required that they save all of the graded papers in a portfolio that is handed in three or four times over the course of the school year. Portfolios allow me to see the “starting point” for each student as a writer, and to gain a better understanding of students’ strengths and shortcomings, how to challenge them to become better writers, and to determine their growth as writers as the year progresses. I will discuss portfolios in greater depth in the conclusion.

There are three major steps in writing a quality position paper, whether it be an in-class test paper or a take-home assignment: (1) forming the argument; (2) writing; and (3) revising.2

**Forming the Argument**

Forming the argument is done by analyzing the question being asked. Students must learn to look at the words carefully. Often questions begin with one of three phrases: “compare and contrast”; “evaluate the following statement”; or “identify cause and effect.” Students must be sure of what the question asks. Once that is done, the appropriate information should be collected and organized according to the themes that are to be developed in the argument. The best way to do this is to create a rough outline.

The outline begins with a thesis statement. This is the writer’s position, or viewpoint, which should be delivered in no more than two sentences in the opening paragraph of the position paper. While the thesis reflects the student’s personal position, it is not an opinion. By definition, an “opinion” does not require any substantive evidence; it is nothing more than the unsubstantiated feelings of the person holding it. A thesis, on the other hand, must be defended with factual support, concept, and a rational explanation. Accordingly, I do not allow my students to use the first person “I” in their writing of the position paper, such as “I believe . . .” or “I think . . .” The thesis, like the position paper itself, is to be written in the third person, narrative form. By doing so, the writer affords the necessary distance between her- or himself and unsubstantiated opinion, giving the paper a more forceful tone. The thesis statement also provides an organization for the essay by identifying those points to be addressed and in the same order they will appear in the paper. Often the thesis evolves from the information that has been gathered. But students must still take the time to think through their beliefs on the topic and how they will prove it with the information gathered. Let’s take an example.

The following outline was completed by a student writing a take-home position paper on the question: “Compare and contrast President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies with his management of the economy during
World War II. Which was more effective in bringing the country out of the Great Depression?

I. Thesis: Although the New Deal was responsible for a degree of relief and recovery, America’s war effort was much more effective in bringing the country out of the Depression. World War II immediately and drastically lowered the unemployment rate, raised farm income, and increased industrial productivity.

II. Body sections

A: Unemployment rate

1. New Deal:
   a. In 1933 nearly 25% unemployment.
   b. National Industrial Recovery Act—over $3 billion for public works
   c. By 1937, unemployment reduced to 15%

2. World War II
   a. In 1942 unemployment reduced to 5%
   b. War industry demanded longer hours
   c. By 1944 unemployment lower than 2%

B: Farm income

1. New Deal
   a. 1933 farm foreclosures at all-time peak with more than 50,000.
   b. Agricultural Adjustment Act—paid farmers to cut production

2. World War II
   a. Increased demand for food for soldiers and allies
   b. Higher prices, increased production added $20 billion to land value
   c. By 1945 farm foreclosures down to less than 5,000

C: Industrial productivity

1. New Deal
   a. 1933—83% drop in industrial production
   b. NRA created but little gains in industrial production

2. World War II
   a. 1939—creation of Industrial Mobilization Plan
   b. 1945—U.S. industrial production doubled that of all Axis countries

III. Conclusion
This student had been experiencing some difficulties in organizing earlier position papers, so I asked him to turn in an outline to me before he wrote the paper. While students should be doing this on their own, I usually don’t require them to hand in the outline for a take-home essay. When I do, they usually make a stronger effort to think through the argument before handing in the outline. As you can see, the outlining process gave this student a clearer understanding of the assignment by forcing him to examine, in a comparative way, the New Deal and World War II. Accordingly, the three measures of evaluation he chose—unemployment rate, farm productivity, and industrial production—flow out of his thesis statement and form the basis of the comparison. Note that he has also chosen to use statistical data to defend the thesis as each body section contains statistical information on both the New Deal and World War II. The outline reflects the comparative nature of the essay as well as the factual data necessary to prove the thesis. Now he is ready for the second stage of writing the position paper.

Writing the Position Paper

The writing stage begins with the formation of the introductory paragraph. The introduction should give the reader a clear idea of the topic being discussed and the author’s viewpoint. A broad, general comment on the topic itself serves as a starting point. This opening statement serves to catch the reader’s attention and to set the historical context of the essay by identifying the time period being discussed. Then the introduction gradually narrows the focus of the topic to the thesis statement itself, which is essentially an answer to the question being asked.

After completing the introductory paragraph, the student is ready to turn his attention to the body sections. In a position paper, the body sections may be only a paragraph in length, or they can be multiple paragraph sections. Here the factual information gathered to support the argument is presented in a way that demonstrates the student’s understanding of the topic. I instruct students to offer at least two pieces of factual evidence to defend their thesis in each body section. One piece of evidence is too few and might be considered by the reader to be an “exception” rather than a “consistent pattern.” Three pieces of evidence are too many for a position paper because of time constraints in an in-class test, or staying within a word count for a take-home essay. I don’t care what type of evidence the students use. Primary source quotations, statistical data, and indisputable dates and events are all acceptable forms of evidence. More important is how that factual evidence is integrated into the argument.
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