

Spend the first few sentences setting up the topic, but be careful not to rehearse all of human history in a few lines. Provide a way into the material that sets up the specific question, not a window into human nature in general. In fact, try to keep it within the frame of the course, so that the general idea is still within specific boundaries. **Provide a precise thesis statement that includes the texts or ideas at the core of the paper, with a statement of the viewpoint you plan to prove.** *Follow it up with a road map, in which you state that exploring one topic, following the implication to a second topic, and combining those two in a third is a necessary sequence to prove the thesis.*

Start first body paragraph with a transition sentence that links the topic of this paragraph to your thesis statement. Collect all your evidence on this topic in this paragraph, but be sure to analyze each piece of evidence. It is stronger to use one or two pieces to prove your point, rather than more, as long as you direct your reader how to assess the evidence. Never start or end a paragraph with a quotation, always with an analysis proving the specific point of the paragraph.

Provide a transition that links with the previous paragraph but also with the overall thesis. By doing so, you are making sure your reader knows where you are in the sequence of your argument—why this topic follows naturally on the first, but also why this sequence is functioning to prove your overall argument.

TIPS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE HISTORY PAPERS

1) Make a *main claim* (a.k.a. thesis, or argument) about the text that you can prove within the *page limit*, don't just summarize the entire thing. What is your reading revealing about this text, rather than what everybody should be able to figure out by just reading the original? I.e., why should we be reading you, not it? (Notice that this presumes we are reading you for a point about the historical era, not you for a point about the present-day.)

1a) A corollary: Main claims are proved in logical sequence with evidence taken from the primary source and the history of the era. Think geometry (if A, then B; if B, then C; if C, then D, which was my hypothesis. QED), rather than sermon (personal reflection here, tidbit of politics there, historical info over there, biblical passage here, all generally gesturing towards a theme, ending up leaving the audience with food for thought.)

---In other words, we are lazy readers. Don't make us figure out what you think, or come up with our own argument about the suggestive material you are bringing together. Tell us what you think you can prove about this text, and provide the evidence for your claim.

1b) Make a main claim you can prove in the space allotted. If you include all the evidence for a 10-page paper for a 3-page assignment, you will be short on structure and analysis.

2) Don't let the primary source dictate to you. If you follow the organization of the early Christian author, explaining each bit in its original sequence, you may end up summarizing it rather than being in control of your material. I.e., I want to make argument x, for which I will take material from pages 1, 7, 9, and 3 in order to prove my logic within the page limit. If you think the original sequence is part of your proof, be explicit that you think the author organized it in this way for a reason, and that your discussion in order is going to reveal that reason.

2a) Organization is critical. Use *transition sentences* to signal what stage of your argument you are at with each new paragraph. This means you need to understand the logic of your argument, then you need to take your readers through a sequence that will make sense to them (not necessarily the sequence from which you got your inspiration).

2b) Do not use your intro or first page to explain the history of the world up until the time of your primary source. Use your intro to set up the specific details we need to enter the world of that one text. (The history of the world may start you writing, but don't leave it in for the final draft. There's a difference between a technique to get you past the blank page, and what your reader needs to know.)

2c) Do not use your intro or conclusion to discuss the modern world at length. It just means you talk about the historical document less.

2d) Make sure your conclusion goes beyond your paper. If you have successfully organized your paper and analyzed your evidence (see 3), your reader will agree with you, so repeating the whole paper without taking it one step further is just repetitive.

3) Always analyze your evidence. When (not if) you quote from the text, introduce the quotation with a general explanation of where you are going with it/why this topic is important, include the actual quotation, then follow it with a discussion of the quotation itself. If it is important enough to include the actual words, then you need to tell your reader what is important about those particular phrases in terms of your specific thesis.

3a) Part of analyzing textual evidence is paying attention to its immediate context. A *close reading* of a Christian author is similar to biblical exegesis—what comes right before and after your quotation that affects your interpretation of it? What sections before and after? Etc.

3b) Never start or end a paragraph with a quotation. Doing so prevents proper transitions (2a) and proper set-up or analysis of the evidence (3, second sentence).

3c) Do not provide laundry lists of evidence that you never analyze. Choose the most compelling pieces of evidence and analyze them thoroughly. Cut the rest.

4) Be sure to use the secondary sources read for class to contextualize the attitude of the author and audience of the primary source.

4a) If it is not a research paper, you should not need to cite other sources. If you find another source because you are perplexed about a particular issue, be sure to cite it, and be sure it is an academic source. Wikipedia and faith-based Protestant websites are not reliable sources for even-handed assessments of early Christian material.