STUDYING HISTORY

CHRISTOPHER HARRISON

Keele, 1996, revd. 2002

Parts of this guide were produced by two former tutors in the department, Dr Graeme Small and Dr David Laven, whose work is acknowledged here with gratitude.
PROLOGUE
The skills needed successfully to complete a History degree at Keele will not be learned overnight. Some you will have developed to a certain extent already, others will only come with practice and experience. This handbook attempts to set down some broad guidelines for the development of study skills. These suggestions do not claim to be comprehensive, and you may wish to follow through some of the suggestions made here by reading any of the following:

D. Rowntree, *Learn How to Study* (Sphere Books: repr. 1991) [LB1049]
H. Arksey (ed.), *How to get a first class degree* (Lancaster University Publications, 1992)

Help is also available from the Learning Support and Academic Guidance Office who produce a series of helpful manuals which are well worth consulting.

The skills necessary to read History at university are, in the jargon of education-speak, transferable. If you can manage a twelfth-century charter, a market research report should hold no terrors for you. If you can analyze the production figures of a sixteenth-century iron-works then a factory production report should be easy. Learning to read large numbers of books and articles, to "gut" their contents, and produce coherent summaries followed by conclusions is in principle no different from providing a House of Commons Select Committee with a precis on a complex subject such as global warming. In summary, the capacity to assimilate quickly a large amount of information on an unfamiliar subject, produce a synthesis, and then draw conclusions is a valuable skill. What follows is our attempt to help you develop those skills.

However, do not forget the intrinsic value of History; our subject has value beyond the skills necessary to study it. So too does the environment in which you learn. Lord Lindsay, the founder of Keele, told Keele's first intake of students in 1950 that they were engaged in:

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The pursuit of truth in the company of friends
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The pursuit of truth or, as I would put it the quest for understanding, and friendship are, of course, more important than any skills, nevertheless, the skills you will acquire should prove useful in your future careers.
TIME MANAGEMENT
The common denominator in all study-skills is the ability to manage and use your time effectively. One way of finding time for all your various activities is to draw up a schedule for the week, dividing each day into three sections (morning, afternoon and evening). Set down your formal commitments for that week (timetabled classes, informal meetings, social life etc.). In the free blocks of time then left to you, establish exactly what you might get done. Be realistic: you will not get an essay written in two hours of free time, so that block might be better spent completing a shorter task, such as reading and annotating a lengthy article or chapter, drawing up the outline of a seminar presentation or such like.

You will work more effectively if you prioritise the work you have been asked to do, and if you set yourself clear and limited objectives for the time in which you are able to do it. Set yourself earlier deadlines than the official deadlines: this will help you avoid "essay panics".

Good time and task-management will enable you to:
find the necessary materials
complete your work to deadlines
spread your workload

CLASSES
Teaching at Keele takes two main forms: the lecture, in which an audience of students is addressed by a member of staff on a clearly defined topic; and the seminar, in which a small number of students address a subject or problem through group discussion in conjunction with the tutor. Each of these formats requires and develops special skills.

Lectures
Lectures are live performances, and as such they are often more memorable than reading. However, note-taking from lectures is naturally more difficult than note-taking from books, where you are able to move back and forward within the text. For this reason, your first priority in a lecture is to listen carefully, rather than to take down everything the lecturer says. You should note only the most important points and elements of the argument. These should be signposted by the lecturer. Some of these points will be illustrated with factual evidence or anecdotes, but for note-taking purposes the illustration is less important than the point being made. You should listen to the lecture with a questioning attitude, making sure that you do not uncritically accept the lecturer’s line. This positive, challenging attitude to lectures will help you remember what was said.
There are a number of ways of taking notes from lectures. You may prefer a linear style, writing out in shorthand the central points of the lecture in clearly differentiated blocks. Alternatively, you may prefer a patterned form of notes, setting down the main points of the lecture in diagrammatic form and linking them together in logical sequence. Whichever form of note-taking you adopt, you should **always read your notes after the lecture** to ensure they are clear. It may also be worth comparing your notes with those taken by classmates to make sure you have not missed points. Store your notes safely and in ordered sequence.

**Seminars**

Seminars require more interactive skills. Different tutors have different methods of conducting seminars. Individual students may be invited to present a paper on a given topic, the subject of which will then be discussed by the whole class. In other cases, different members of the class will have been assigned some aspect of the topic to investigate, and they will be expected to present their findings in the course of a structured discussion. In larger classes, students may be paired off or divided into "buzz groups" to iron out a specific historical problem, and then brought together in a plenary session in which all members of the class participate. To make the most of these different teaching formats, a few golden rules should be observed.

Firstly, and most importantly, everyone is expected to have done the preparation assigned to them. A seminar cannot work unless everyone pulls their weight.

Secondly, everyone should **participate** to the best of their ability in the class discussion. At first the seminar may seem an intimidating environment, but always remember that if you have done the work, your contribution can be as effective as that of anyone else in the class.

Thirdly, you should accord as much respect to the opinions of your fellow students as you do to those of the tutor. The tutor is there to facilitate and guide the discussion, to provide factual information and to respond to questions. She or he is not there simply to give yet another lecture. For this reason you should be prepared to direct your contributions to the other members of the class as much as to the tutor.

You should find that there is little time in seminars for taking notes. Immediately after the class, therefore, you should set down in note-form the principal points which came out of the discussion.

In lectures scholars share their knowledge and understanding with you. In seminars you share your knowledge and understanding with others.
READING
Inevitably while studying history you will spend a great deal of time reading. It is no accident that you are said "to read for a degree". While lectures and seminars are of value, there is no substitute for reading, not just textbooks but monographs (specialist works dealing with narrower topics), articles, historical records and the literary works of the age. Nor should the so-called "material culture" of the past be neglected — paintings, pottery, sculpture, furniture, buildings, and for the modern historian, film, radio-recordings, and T.V. programmes. Even the landscape can be "read" by the historian.

However, most of your study will be based on the printed page. How then should you go about reading? The first thing to recognise is that the same standards should not be applied to everything you look at. The vast majority of textbooks should be "skimmed" to gain the maximum information at the quickest speed. Your treatment of sources, articles and monographs should be rather more thorough. Sources especially should be looked at with great care: they are the very substance of the subject.

If you are simply seeking basic information, speed up the process by making full use of the table of contents and/or the index of the book. If, on the other hand, you need to read and digest an article or a larger chunk of a textbook, other strategies apply. It is sometimes a good idea to read the introduction and conclusion of a text to establish the author's objectives and findings. Once you have done this, the rest of the piece will fall into place more easily as you read it. Another tactic is to scan the first and last sentences of individual paragraphs, identifying key words which establish the basic point being made. By doing this for a number of consecutive paragraphs, you will have reconnoitred the text and established a clearer idea of the argument and its constituent parts. These methods will speed up your reading, and will make a lengthy text more manageable. They will also develop your analytical skills, and enable you to recognise new ideas and new pieces of information as you come across them.

Closest attention of all should be paid to primary sources from the period you are studying. (A primary source is something produced at or near to the time of the event you are studying. A secondary source is something written about that event at a later date.) Some important primary sources may need to be read more than once; quickly to get a sense of the argument then again to make notes.

The more you read, the more you will know.
The more you know, the more you will understand.
TAKING NOTES

Books
Note-taking is, of course, a very personal process and it is not possible to make hard and fast rules; everyone will develop their own way of doing it. However, there are a few general words of advice which can be given.

Do not copy out huge chunks of books. Making your notes onto cards rather than A4 paper encourages brevity and analysis. Always try to summarise arguments and evidence. Verbatim record should be made only of the most apt and distinctive passages or phrases. Always make it clear through parenthesis, inverted commas or a different coloured pen where you have copied something so as to avoid inadvertent plagiarism.

Make a full bibliographical record at the time. Six months later you will forget where you took the notes from. Always mark down the author, full title and place and date of publication of a book, and, if you wish, the library catalogue number, e.g.


At the top of each subsequent page of notes summarise this as e.g. Craig (1955) so that if your notes get out of order you can sort them out easily. Number each page of notes consecutively. Always make a note of the page number of the book in the left hand margin of your notes so you know exactly where the information in your notes came from. If you make a habit of doing this it will become automatic.

Articles
Treat articles in the same way. If you are making notes on an article make sure that you note the bibliographical information much as you would for a book, e.g.

R. W. Scribner, 'Civic unity and the Reformation in Erfurt', Past and Present, no.66(1975), pp.29-60. [per DI.P2]

This is also how you should present bibliographical information at the end of your essays.

Do make use of the academic journals in the library, and online. Many students display a remarkable fear of using academic journals. It is far from rare to find even quite hard-working third years who do not know where journals are kept in the library or how to use the online periodical catalogue. It is wise to remember that articles often contain neatly summarised arguments which are much more manageable than when presented in longer monographs. Reading several twenty-page articles enables you to experience the views and styles of several historians in the time it takes to read a single book (which by the time you have finished it you might consider unconvincing anyway). Most journals carry reviews of recently published books, so by occasionally
glancing at the latest editions in the periodicals reading room you can keep abreast of the latest research. Get into the habit of using them.

Photocopying
Many students photocopy chapters in books and articles. This is a helpful tool, but photocopying is no substitute for reading and taking notes. Above all, avoid the temptation just to highlight parts of your photocopy. It is much better to make conventional notes.

OTHER STUDY AIDS
Chronologies
There are published historical chronologies in the reference section of the University Library. More useful is the chronology you make for yourself on each topic you study. If you are fully aware of the sequence and timing of events you become more sensitive to their significance and context. If you are dealing with a particularly complex series of events (e.g. the Reformation, Thirty Years War, 1848 Revolutions) over a broad geographical area, you might want to allocate a column for each country or region. Looking at 1848, for example, this would enable you to see how the timing of, say, Metternich's fall in Vienna related to the risings elsewhere in the Habsburg Empire. Another approach would be to have separate columns for political, socio-economic and intellectual developments.

Maps & illustrations
History happens not only in time but in space. Maps are crucial to our understanding. How can you write on modern Palestine, for example, if you don't know where it is? So, always add a map (xeroxed from a book or historical atlas) to your notes.

Similarly, how can you write about Rembrandt, for example, if you don't have some copies of his paintings in your notes? What hope do you have of grasping the essence of St Benedict's Rule if you don't have an idea of what a monastery looked like? Here an architectural plan would help. In brief, add illustrative material to your notes.

The Internet
There is a vast amount of information on the world wide web; much of it is rubbish and/or full of error. Do not use an internet site unless it is ported on a respected academic site. Because of problems of copyright, much narrative material on the web is old and often out of date. For this reason you should note the origin of the internet material used.
Files
Keep your notes and essays in a separate file and do not carry them around with you. Every year people lose their notes. Make sure that if you do mislay something, it is only a fraction of the total.

Computer Files
Many of you will keep notes on your personal computer. Always make back-up discs so that if you have a major failure such as a hard-disk fault, you have your material safe.

WRITING ESSAYS
You will write many thousands of words during your time at Keele in the form of essays, book reports and in your final year a dissertation. Advice on writing dissertations will be given by your final year tutor. Book reports and other written exercises require many of the basic skills dealt with above. However, a significant proportion of your writing will be devoted to essays, and for good reason. The essay enables both you and your tutor to assess your progress at university. It deepens your understanding of the subjects you have studied.

Last but not least, the essay enables you to develop your powers of self-expression. Although there is no one good way to write a history essay, the following guidelines may be useful in helping you to develop your own skills.

The reader will be looking for four main things in your essay:

(a) How well informed are you?
(b) Have you understood the implications of the questions set?
(c) Have you marshaled your material effectively?
(d) Do you present your argument and its supporting evidence in a coherent fashion and in a literate form?

To meet these requirements, approach your essay in the following fashion:

(i) Read the question carefully.
Above all, make sure that you have pinpointed the key words of the question, and that you have understood its slant and phrasing. Expressions such as "How far..." or "Is it true to say that..." should not be regarded as gratuitous. It is sometimes a good idea to write down the essay question and have it before you at every stage of the essay-writing process. This will encourage you to stick to the subject as you research and write. You should also consult
dictionaries at this stage to make sure you have fully understood what is required of you.

(ii) Gather the material.
It is never too early to get down to your reading; the longer you leave it, the more difficult the books will be to find (see earlier remarks on time and task management). When reading and taking notes for your essay, bear in mind the points made above. It is particularly important in this type of reading that you gather your material with a clear purpose in mind, and that you compile it accurately. You may also find it useful to look at any relevant lecture notes at this stage, although remember that the lecturer will not have been dealing with exactly the same question as you. Never start writing until you feel you have all the material you require. By frequently re-reading your essay notes you will be able to gauge whether you are ready for the next stage.

(iii) Organise your material.
Two of the greatest problems in undergraduate essays are, firstly, the tendency to lapse into narrative without formulating a clear argument; and secondly, the tendency to write too much. You can avoid these pitfalls by drawing up several plans of how you might best organise your material. Essay plans should be simple. They should work out a sequence which leads to the conclusions you would like to make. They should incorporate arguments and counter-arguments, and they should make some reference to the supporting material you intend to use. They may take the form of linear or patterned notes (see above under "Reading and note taking"). Once you have established the broad outlines of your plan, refine it by working out the central point which will be made in each paragraph, and how you will lead on from one central point to the next. With this more detailed plan to hand, you can begin to write your essay.

(iv) Write the essay.
You should begin by writing the main body of your essay first. The introduction and the conclusion are best left until last. The introduction should serve as a "launching pad", but should not be used to give unrelated background material or an advance statement of your conclusions. The conclusion itself can be used to weigh up your main points, and to indicate where your judgement falls in relation to the question. Never add new material in the final paragraph.

Your essay need not be a highly polished piece of prose; the clarity and persuasiveness of your argument are more important. However, it should read as a clear, grammatical and fluent piece of work. To this end you should avoid unnecessarily complex sentences, spelling or punctuation errors, the confusion of words, and common or garden waffle. You should also avoid long
quotations from secondary sources, for these betray a lack of confidence in your own powers of self-expression.

A good way of ensuring clarity of expression is to read your essay thoroughly after the first draft. Read it aloud: this will help you to pick up infelicitous expressions. It might be useful to show your essay to a friend or classmate for their comments. You may then find it necessary to write a second draft of all or part of your essay. This is a very useful exercise, and helps ensure that you have said exactly what you wanted to say.

(v) Presentation of your essay.
Word-processed essays are the norm now. Use a minimum point-size 12 for your essays. Do give page numbers; do leave a substantial left-hand margin and at least one inch at the top and bottom of each page; do use double-line spacing.

(vi) Bibliography
At the end of your essay you must give a full bibliography of all the works you have consulted. This is also the place to list page references for the quotes or ideas which you have lifted from your sources. References can be written in a number of ways, but you will not go too far wrong if you adopt the following procedure for books:

Author + full title (underlined or italicized) + place and date of publication (in brackets) + your page reference. (There is no need to name the publisher of the book.)

Example:

For articles, things are a little more complicated:

Author + full title of article (in inverted commas) + full title of periodical (underlined) + volume and year of periodical (year in brackets) + page references of article + your page reference.

Example:

EXAMINATIONS
Although there is now a greater emphasis at Keele on continuous assessment, the traditional written exam remains a central element of the History course. Exams require special skills too, such as preparation, concentration, time-management, stamina and writing skills. Although the prospect of exams may seem intimidating, it is important not to get them out of proportion. Many of
your most brilliant tutors will have failed an exam at some point in their lives. The following tips may be useful in making exams seem less of an ordeal.

Remember that examiners do not generally like answers which fail to address the question, which show no knowledge of the topic studied, which are too heavily laden with details, and which are poorly presented in terms of their structure, coherence or legibility. Nor do they like exam scripts which betray poor time-management; for instance, exam scripts which contain one long answer and one that is excessively short or lightweight.

Revision
To get the balance right, you should establish clear procedures for your revision. Begin by examining past papers. This will familiarise you with the type and level of question you might expect on the day.

Continue by re-reading all of your notes, carefully choosing those parts of the course which you intend to revise in greatest detail. It is difficult and even counter-productive to revise absolutely everything, and you will perform most effectively in those areas which you understand best and which you enjoy the most.

Next, establish a realistic timetable for your revision. The efficacy of last minute "cramming" is a myth. Instead, you should aim to allocate equal amounts of time to those areas of the course you intend to revise, thereby avoiding the temptation to spend most time on selected areas in which you feel at ease. Several strategies should guide your revision at this stage.

Firstly, you should establish the central issues in each part of the course. To help you here, it is sometimes a good idea to work out chronologies of events, relationships between key protagonists, and the ways in which the different themes of that part of the course link together. These outlines may all be done on separate pieces of paper to ensure that they are clear and easily understood, and you may wish to cross-reference them to the notes in your folders. It is a good idea to number the pages in your folders to facilitate this process.

Secondly, you should condense your notes and prepare summary sheets which revise the main points. This process will enhance your understanding of the issues involved, and will provide you with a more manageable body of material to look over in the final stages of preparation. It should also help you to detect those areas where your knowledge and understanding is weakest. Any such gaps can be filled at this stage by carefully targeted reading.
(Remember that you should not be assimilating huge chunks of new material at this stage, but some new reading will give you greater insight and will provide light relief from the grind of revision).

Thirdly, get some practice in answering specific exam questions. There are a number of ways of doing this. You may decide to write a brief answer plans for a number of questions from past papers, or even to write whole answers in a timed exercise. You should only do this at an advanced stage in your preparation, and you can show such plans to your tutor for his or her comments. Even better, you may decide to think up questions which you feel may be asked of the topic you have revised. This will give you some insight into how the examiner's mind works.

Last but not least, keep in touch with your tutor and especially your classmates during the revision process. There is a great temptation to lock oneself away during revision for exams, and this may be counter-productive. Consider holding joint revision sessions with your friends to iron out specific problems or to pool resources. Attend any formal revision classes put on by your tutor, if only to maintain contact with the outside world. Talking through problems is often more effective than hammering away at them in your room into the wee small hours.

**Personal care**

Take good care of yourself both before and during the examination period, i.e. do not go to a morning examination without having breakfasted. In some respects exams are almost as much a test of stamina and will as they are of learning and intellect. Take care of the basics too, such as the place and time of exams, and the materials you will need to get through them (pens, watch, polo mints etc.).

**In the Exam Hall**

Once in the exam hall, ignore all distractions and concentrate on your exam techniques. Read the instructions at the top of the exam paper and follow them carefully.

Skim over the paper, identifying the question areas you have revised for. Spot the questions you can do, then read them carefully in much the same way as you would an essay question (see above, "Writing").

At this stage, it is often a good idea to take five or ten minutes to jot down answer plans for each of the questions you intend to tackle. However, if this makes you anxious, simply jot down a plan for the first question and get on with your answer. You may find it reassuring to attempt your best question first to settle the nerves.

Your plans should focus on the key words of the question, and should incorporate notes on those parts of the course which are relevant to it. You should only begin writing when you have established a clear idea of your main
argument, its constituent parts and the supporting evidence you will use. Other ideas and information will come to mind as you write, but do exercise careful judgement in incorporating them.

Make sure that you leave an equal amount of time for each of your answers to ensure a balanced exam script, and try to write as legibly as possible.

After the exam
Finally, once the exam is over, relax! Don't brood over any problems you might have had. You must pace yourself during the examination period, and a couple of hours spent with friends or in front of the telly will do you more good than a further session of revision.

GOOD ENGLISH
Like it or not, the degree which you are finally awarded is almost entirely dependent on the quality of your written work. Being scholarly and thoughtful is not enough. It is essential that you develop the ability to put your arguments down clearly on paper. You are, therefore, required to write good English. If you do not, you will be penalized. You will lose marks for poor prose and grammar. This is not because we are old-fashioned or pedantic (although some of us are!) but because, if you make mistakes or write in an ugly fashion, you will not communicate your ideas clearly.

There is some excuse for an occasional error. All of us make some slips. Some of you will arrive at university having been allowed to develop bad habits. There is no excuse, however, for not trying to eradicate mistakes and not bothering to improve your style.

Guides to writing well
With regard to punctuation, you should read G.V. Carey, Mind the stop (Penguin, 1939). Although sometimes a little pernickety and opinionated, H. W. Fowler's Dictionary of modern English usage (Second edition revised by E. Gowers; Oxford University Press, 1965) is also very useful both on points of grammar and on style.

Dictionaries
Outside the examination hall, you should never write an essay without access to a good dictionary: Collins, Chambers or the Shorter O.E.D are all first rate. If you do not already own one buy one immediately – you will require it when reading as well. If you are uncertain of the spelling of a word, look it up; if you are uncertain of a meaning do the same. It is also wise to acquire a thesaurus or learn to use the one on your computer. Your powers of expression will greatly expand if you widen your vocabulary. You will find
that writing essays becomes a great deal easier and more enjoyable as you improve your command of English.

**Computer-based aids**
At some stage the majority of students will use a personal computer of some description. Most word-processing programmes now have spell-checks, grammar checks and a thesaurus. If you are using a computer take advantage of them, but they should be used in conjunction with a dictionary. They are not adequate substitutes. Moreover, most available software is from the United States and, if you rely too heavily on it, ugly Americanisms are likely to creep into your work.

**Tutors's comments**
Many tutors correct errors in student essays. When you receive an essay back from your tutor, look at the mistakes that have been corrected and learn from them. Not to do so is to waste everyone's time.

**Tips to help you produce better essays**
There is, of course, a great deal of nonsense talked about essays. Writing them need not be at all daunting and many perfectly able students get quite unnecessarily worked up over so-called "essay-crises". Essay writing should be a pleasurable activity but do not expect it always to be easy. If you think you are able to dash off a startling piece of prose with no effort, you are sadly mistaken. For most of us writing is a painstaking process which does, however, grow a good deal easier and more enjoyable with practice. Do not despair if you find it difficult at first. Do not get upset if your early essays are criticised. You are bound to improve.

1. **Programme**
   You should try to organise your timetable so that you do not have to write all your essays in a hurry at the end of seminar. Space your essays through the semester so that you can give each the time it deserves.

2. **Essay plans**
   Many essays are badly structured. Construct a plan and then stick to it. Obviously there are no absolute rules as to how to structure an essay, but as a general principle the introductory paragraph should state your general thesis and the concluding paragraph should summarise your case. Never introduce new material in your final paragraph.

3. **Narrative**
   Many of the books you will read will adopt a narrative approach. Many students are tempted to do the same. Although it is *possible* to answer an...
essay question in narrative form. It is very rarely advisable. Usually it
betrays indolence and a lack of thought. As a basic rule, therefore, do not
write narrative. You will find that by thinking about what the question is
going at and by careful planning you should avoid the pitfall of "just telling
the story". By contrast a well developed analysis is likely to score highly - so
it is worthwhile developing standard analytical approaches to common
historical problems.

4. Avoid plagiarism
Plagiarism is passing off someone else's ideas or, more commonly in the case
of undergraduates, words as your own. You should never do it. To do so is
both lazy and dishonest. It is also remarkably stupid. Very rarely does anyone
get away with this sort of cheating - copying from a book or article is almost
always detected and treated seriously. By plagiarising you also miss the
creative opportunity offered by writing and you are indulging in an activity
with no intellectual benefit. Remember that changing the odd word here and
there does not mean you are avoiding plagiarism.

5. Avoid waffle
Do not use unnecessary verbiage. The following examples are taken from
student essays:

Briefly turning our attention to ...
Concluding this section about ...
In order to answer this question, it is necessary first ...
This question demands that we examine the following factors ...
To answer this question fully, it is necessary ...

Such remarks add nothing to the reader's understanding. They waste time.
They lack style.

Many students also mistakenly believe that sentences which begin
An outline of events is necessary to answer the above question
Before actually describing the motives ...
It is perhaps practical to give a brief outline of events.
are sufficient to justify long and usually tedious narratives with little relevance
to the essay title. They do not. Indeed, the writer is guilty of waffle as well as
narrative.

6. Avoid the complex sentence
Waffle is frequently combined with the over complex sentence. Consider the
following example:

It is worth noting that the documentation that has come down to us from
Tudor times and the information gleaned may provide only an
incomplete picture which can simply be the basis of conditional
speculation and the admissions of ambiguity left by the source which cannot clarify the complex interaction of events that took place.

What the student probably meant was:

The information in surviving Tudor documents is incomplete and ambiguous. As a result, our analysis of the complex interaction of cause and effect is only speculative.

Complex sentences are usually the result both of sloppy thinking and of sloppy writing. The remedy: write shorter sentences and think more rigorously. But do bear in mind that an excessively staccato style is also unattractive and can indicate a lack of thought. Aim for clarity first, and then elegance.

7. Avoid being pompous and verbose
Writing elegantly and using a broad vocabulary does not mean you have to jettison everyday words in favour of long, pompous ones. For example, do not use *anticipate* when you mean *expect* or *aspirations* when *hopes* or *aims* would serve better. As a rule, a short word of Anglo-Saxon origin should usually be preferred to a long Latinate word of the same meaning.

8. Tautology
Tautology, using a word which pointlessly repeats an idea in another word of phrase, is another common failing. For example, in the phrase “*unmarried spinsters*”, unmarried is tautological because the word spinster includes the concept of being unmarried.

A common modern tautology is to say or write “*in this period of time*” when one simply means "*in this period*".

9. Evidence
History without supporting evidence is not History; unsupported statements are of minimal value. This does not mean you have to provide endless lists of examples. One or two brief and pertinent examples are all that is necessary.

When writing it is also wise to think if you can find any counter-examples that might undermine your thesis; include these to give your essay balance.

10. People, places and dates
History is about people at particular times and in particular places. Essays which name neither place nor person and which fail to indicate when events took place are usually weak and boring. No amount of glib analysis or historiography compensates. Unless an essay is specifically on a *historiographical* topic, we do not want simply a discussion of the literature, although to display some awareness of different historians's views can be laudable. Remember that an essay on, say, the Italian Renaissance needs references to specific artists, scholars and patrons, particular cities and regions
and the dates of key events as well as a discussion of broad trends in the arts and sciences.

Take care when spelling names, especially when they are foreign. It betrays sloppiness if you systematically get a name wrong. Take care with dates too. If you are unsure, return to your notes or books and check. There are published historical chronologies in the reference section of the University Library.

11. **Use of tenses**
When writing about the past you should use the past tenses. Many students have a habit of using the present tense, e.g.

*In 1848 revolution breaks out all over Europe.*
*In the late fifteenth century dissatisfaction with the Church grows steadily.*
*Garibaldi then sets out for Sicily.*

There is no reason for these to be in the present tense. There is, perhaps, more justification in using this form when describing a text (e.g. "In *Il Principe* Machiavelli argues that...") , but as a general rule it is best to avoid the present entirely.

12. **Avoid the first person**
Take the following example:

*I think that the most important piece of legislation introduced by Colbert was ...*

This should read either ;:

*Probably the important piece of legislation introduced by Colbert was ...*

or simply

*Colbert's most important legislation was ...*

The use of the first person singular is usually a sign that a student lacks confidence in a statement. If you have the evidence to support your claim, make it without recourse to the "I think ...". If you lack confidence because you cannot back up your argument then you should not be making the statement in the first place.

The use of the first person plural e.g. "Hence we can see that.." is simply pompous. Similarly it is best to avoid the archaic impersonal "one".

13. **Spelling, vocabulary and grammar**
Almost all undergraduate essays are marred to some degree by errors in these fields. The following pages list some common mistakes so that you can try to avoid them in future. Getting it right matters because constant errors of this reading your work harder and prevent the tutor concentrating on your historical arguments. If you do not make mistakes it is easier to read your
work and to advise you on how to improve your performance. An essay littered with mistakes simply alienates the tutor who has to mark it. Take note.

COMMON SPELLING AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

(i) Common spelling errors
Below are listed some common spelling errors. Read them through carefully. You may find that you are making some of these mistakes. There should be no excuse for making them from now on.

There is commonly confusion about words beginning with "per" and "pur".

- Perhaps should be spelt perhaps
- Pursued should be spelt pursued
- Persuasion should be spelt persuasion

There is frequent confusion over the double and single "1" at the end and in the middle of words:

- Compell should be spelt compel
- Fulfill should be spelt fulfil
- Untill should be spelt until
- Fulfillment should be spelt fulfilment
  (But remember that fulfilled and fulfilling both have a double "l". Also instil but instilling and instilled.)

The failure to drop the "e" in certain words:

- Disastrous(ly) should be spelt disastrous(ly)
- Duely should be spelt duly
- Truely should be spelt truly
- Argument should be spelt argument

Using "ance" rather than "ence" in certain words:

- Independance should be spelt independence
- Existance should be spelt existence
- Occurrence should be spelt occurrence

The belief that the ending "acy" is spell with an "s":

- Bureaucrasy should be spelt bureaucracy
- Aristocracy should be spelt aristocracy

Other commonly misspelt words in student essays are:

- Privaledge should be spelt privilege
- Privilige should be spelt privilege
privilege should be spelt  privilege
monastery should be spelt  monastery
emperor should be spelt  emperor
empress should be spelt  empress
definite should be spelt  definite
definitely should be spelt  definitely
surplus should be spelt  surplus
Domesday should be spelt  Domesday

Privileged

Monastery

Emperor

Empress

Definite

Definitely

Surplus

Domesday

(As in Domesday Book)

Separate

Twelfth

Portuguese

Huguenot

(ii) Problems with plurals

The plural of abbey is abbeys (and not "abbies").
The plural of monastery is monasteries (and not "monastries").

The general rule is that a plural of a word ending in "y" takes the form "ies" unless the "y" is preceded by an "e" in which case it is "eys".

The plural of thesis is theses (E.g. Luther's ninety-five theses)
The plural of crisis is crises.

(iii) Past participles

The past of to seek is sought
The past of to lead is led (it is not like "to read/read").

(iv) Confusion of words

Many students often use words incorrectly or confuse the meanings of words which sound similar. The following are some of the most frequent errors:

To/too

Some students do not know the difference between to and too. The latter means "as well", "in addition", "also", "likewise"; "extremely".

Verb/noun confusions

advise is a verb meaning "to give advice"; advice is a noun.
practise is a verb; practice is a noun.
license is a verb; licence is a noun.

Disinterested/uninterested

The word disinterested does not mean the same as uninterested. The
former means to be impartial and not motivated by personal interest. It is perfectly possible to be very interested in something yet disinterested. Do not get the two confused.

Censured/censored
Censured means criticised; censored means having undergone censorship.

Affect/effect
Affect can only be a verb meaning "to have an effect upon ", or "to influence or assume". The noun is effect. There is a verb to effect which means to accomplish:

"Joseph II effected radical changes in the administration of Austria. The effects of these changes were widespread and often affected public opinion adversely."

Hopefully
There is an increasingly general use of the word hopefully to mean "I hope" or "Let us hope". In fact, it is an adverb which means "with hope". The sentence "I will hopefully get a first class degree" means "I will get a first class degree while feeling optimistic."

Less/fewer
Many, probably most students, use the word less when they mean fewer. The problem is compounded by signs in Sainsbury's saying "Less than eight items" they should read "Fewer than eight items". An example from a student essay is the following:

There were less soldiers in the Austrian than the Prussian army.
The basic rule of thumb is that you can have less of something you can measure, but fewer of something that you can count, i.e. less coal, less wool; less military might but fewer pieces of coal, fewer fleeces, fewer regiments.

Actual
Many student writers use "actual" meaning "real"; "existing in fact" unnecessarily, for example, The actual monasteries were located far from human habitation. Given that one is writing about monasteries in a History essay, we can assume they existed, so the word "actual" is redundant in this context.

(v) Inventing words
Rather than using a dictionary some students coin new words. Common examples of these are:

- coronate for crown
- liberalist for liberal
(vi) The abuse of prepositions
The ugly Americanism "different than" and the grammatically absurd "different to" are creeping in everywhere in place of "different from".
Similarly "in defiance against" and "an obstacle against" are wrongly used. The correct form is "in defiance of" and "an obstacle to".

(vii) The abuse of the apostrophe
By far the most frequent grammatical error is the misuse of the apostrophe. As a general rule you should not use the abbreviated forms can't, wouldn't, didn't, &c in essays. If you are going to do so, at least make sure that you put the apostrophe in the correct place, i.e. where the letter(s) have been omitted.

Remember always that it's means it is and that its is the possessive (i.e. of it).

When referring to a decade, it is incorrect to write 1290's, 1540's, 1860's; the correct form is 1290s, 1540s, 1860s.

The possessive apostrophe
The possessive apostrophe causes the greatest difficulties for students: it is very common to come across errors such as "the aristocracies grievances", when what should have been written is "the aristocracy's grievances", i.e. "the grievances of the aristocracy". You should take the trouble to learn how to use it correctly.

The simple rule is that the apostrophe follows the person, group of people or thing(s) that are in possession. If the possessor is singular an "s" should follow the apostrophe; if plural then an "s" should follow only if the plural does not already end in one. E.g.

Singular: the monastery's revenues; the king's army; Luther's theses., France's borders; Francis's brothers; the lady's servant; Louis XIV's reign; a serf's land., the congress's decision; the cavalry's charge.

Plural: the ladies' furs; the allies' objective; the merchants' demands; the firemen's equipment; the insurgents' weapons.

(viii) Adjectival use of the hyphen
When a noun is used adjectivally, it should be hyphenated. For example:
trade-union rules but the trade unions
middle-class attitudes but the middle classes.

Similarly, when using a century as an adjective, it should be hyphenated. For example:

Many twelfth-century laws survived into the twentieth century unchanged.

Some students are confused about what period a century applies. A few examples may help:

the twelfth century refers to the period 1100 to 1199
the nineteenth century refers to the period 1800 to 1899.

(ix) Could have
Many students use "could of' when they mean "could have". This is an example of how pronunciation can mislead.

CONCLUSION
This little booklet has been about technicalities. They are worth mastering, but in themselves they wont make you a good historian although they will help. What makes a good historian is a mixture of empathy with the past, a sensitivity to the present, and an eye for the significant amidst a sometimes bewildering range of information.

Christopher Harrison
November, 2002