The following are general guidelines for writing a history research paper. For more detail, refer to Mary Rampolla’s *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, which has sections on writing different kinds of assignments, like book reviews, annotated bibliographies, and essay exams; on working with different kinds of sources; and on the correct way to quote and give references in footnotes to many different kinds of sources.

The paper should begin with an **introduction**. This should usually be less than one page, in which you set out the question(s) that you are posing, and briefly explain how you intend to answer them. The **topic** (or subject) of the paper should be described and put into context. Even more important: you should announce your **thesis**, which is the proposition or argument that you are making from your source materials, and which you are going to prove in the body of the paper. You must be clear about the distinction here: a topic is a descriptive statement of content, while a thesis is an argument that you are proposing, for example:

  Topic: Kaiser Wilhelm's relationship with Britain.
  Thesis: The Kaiser was taken by surprise when Britain did not remain neutral at the outset of the First World War.

Build your argument piece by piece, in a fashion that flows with clear connections between the paragraphs. Robin Winks once published a collection of essays, called *The Historian as Detective*, and that is how you should think of yourself, assembling evidence and laying it out to convince the jury of readers. As in a courtroom, you should sum up your case, in the last page or two, with a **conclusion**, briefly tying all the strands of your argument together, in order to assure the audience that you have indeed proven your thesis.

Your paper should show references to all the sources from which you have drawn evidence. Include these in the form of **footnotes** at the foot of each page (rather than endnotes at the end of the paper, and certainly not in that ghastly social-sciency format in parentheses at the end of a sentence). The footnote numbers should come at the end of a sentence, not in
the middle of it. Rampolla has many examples of how to quote correctly different kinds of sources, such as books, articles, dissertations, documents, and even online sources.

A research paper also needs a bibliography, with the sources listed in alphabetical order by the authors' surnames, and divided into two parts for primary sources and secondary sources. The word “Print” should not appear in your reference, even if your word-processing program wants to add it (or “Web”) to your book titles in the bibliography and every footnote.

You may be asked to write a one-page abstract in advance of the main research and writing. This should be a summary of much of the above, identifying the topic and at least a working thesis (which you are certainly allowed to modify as you get stuck into the research in greater detail). Explain how you intend to try to prove the thesis from various sources. Obviously you cannot posit a firm conclusion yet.

It is crucial for you to number your pages, because sometimes papers fall apart, even if stapled. They are especially likely to fall out of those plastic covers that I can’t stand! A heavy-duty staple is best. If you don’t own a stapler (they’re not expensive!) and don’t know where to borrow or find one, I worry about you when you go out after graduation into the big, wide world!

Pet Peeves
I have three red rubber stamps, which I use a lot, in order to save myself from writing in longhand the following comments over and over again!

a) Please write in complete sentences! A sentence has a main verb. Any arguments to the contrary notwithstanding. Ooops! That last phrase did not have a verb, therefore it won’t do in a formal essay, even though you may talk like that in informal conversation. Please check your essays carefully for this, or you will find my red rubber stamp, telling you: NOT A SENTENCE!

b) Rubber stamp #2 says: DON'T MIX TENSES! It's poor style to shift indiscriminately within the same paragraph between the past and the present tense. You are writing about the historical past, so unless there is some overwhelming reason to the contrary, you will want to use the past tense for most of your essay when you are talking about events in the past. That sounds straightforward, but you may find yourself slipping into something like: The Prussian king then calls Bismarck, who pushes through the army budget over the heads of parliament. The deputies did not like this at all. This problem can easily be corrected by proofreading your paper.

c) NO APOSTROPHE! is the rubber stamp I use most of all! Please use care in distinguishing between singular and plural usage: The ordinary Germans’ love of a parade was far outstripped by Kaiser Wilhelm’s infatuation with uniforms. In that sentence Germans’ is plural; if I had wanted to talk about the ordinary German, it would have been German’s. Here it does not especially matter, but consider the following: Germany and Austria entered a defensive alliance against Russia. Parliament’s participation in these negotiations was minimal. Which single
parliament is meant here? Or does the writer mean both Germany and Austria? It is unclear and confusing. The other big problem is its and its. With the apostrophe this always and only is an abbreviation of it is, so that a teacher may say of a class: its major shortcoming is that it’s never clear about who the chancellor was.

Here are more pet peeves!

1) A common error nowadays is that people write may have when they mean might have.

There is a very clear distinction between the two:
What might have happened could have but in fact did not
What may have happened perhaps did and perhaps did not, but we don’t know yet.
An example:
Hitler might have been killed at the Wolf’s Lair in July 1944...if the bomb had exploded inside his concrete bunker, but he survived because the daily briefing was moved to a light, wooden hut.
If, on the other hand, we say: Hitler may have been killed at the Wolf’s Lair in July 1944, we are immediately opening up the suggestion that perhaps he actually was, even though it has never been proven.

2) Please note the proper use of hyphens when using nouns as adjectives, as in the following example:
In twentieth-century Britain the working class began gradually to adopt some of the middle-class values they had rejected in the nineteenth century.
Middle-class is hyphenated as an adjective, but otherwise is the middle class.
Nineteenth-century is also the adjectival use, but there is no hyphen in the nineteenth century.

3) And as the American poet Ogden Nash has pointed out, the past tense of the verb “to fit” is “fitted”:
Those authors I can never love
Who write: “It fit him like a glove.”
Though baseballs may be hit, not “hitted,”
The past of “fit” is always “fitted.”

Ogden Nash, *Laments for a Dying Language* (IV)

4) “Ascension to the chancellorship” Ascension is something that Christ did in order to get up to heaven. There is an Ascension Day in the church calendar. But earthly mortals like kings and queens accede to the throne. Thus there is an Accession Day in the British calendar to mark the anniversary of the day when Queen Elizabeth officially became the monarch. It’s not a public holiday, unlike the date of Hitler’s accession to the chancellorship during the Third Reich.

5) Here is a further list of the common and frequent errors made by students. Students are increasingly often writing “purposefully” [= “resolutely” or “with determination”] when they merely mean “purposely” [= “deliberately” or “on purpose”]
“Timely” is an adjective, NOT an adverb. You need to say something like “it happened in a timely manner.”

“Thusly” is a ghastly and unnecessary neologism that seems to have crept into American dictionaries! “Thus” is the perfectly good word that you mean, as in “it happened thus.” There is no need whatever for an extra syllable.

Widespread confusion with the words “cite” and “sight” and “site”. They are not interchangeable! E.g. The author cited in his book the various occasions when the army caught sight of the strategic sites that it wanted to capture.”

“Lose” and “Loose”. If your belt is loose, you will likely lose your pants!

“Rein” and “Reign”. “After putting reins on his horse, the king rode in state through the city to celebrate the tenth year of his reign.”

“Quite” and “quiet”, “The view that it was “All Quiet on the Western Front” is a strange claim to make in view of the quite deafening artillery barrages that constantly rained down on the trenches.”

“Morale” and “Moral”. “When soldiers lose confidence in their officers, morale suffers. The moral of this story is to keep them well supplied with beer and wine.”

“Amount” and “number”. Please use an amount for things, but not people. “A considerable number of faculty could not make it to campus because of the amount of snow that fell in Gainesville last night.”

Similarly, “things that” occur, but “people who” do something, is preferable to “people that”

Something cannot be “completely” or “very” unique. It’s either unique or it’s not, and there should be no qualifier. The same goes for other words, such as “incessant.”

“Must” and “had to”. Please note that the past tense of the verb “must” is not “must”! You’ll have to say “had to”. “I must go to the library now, in order to check some references for my research paper, because yesterday I had to stay at home and look after my sick roommate.”

“Then” and “than”. You should know then, that the sum is greater than the parts. The comparative is always “than.”

“Entry” and “Entrance”. An entry is the proper term for the act of going in, and the entrance is what you go through, such as a door. Following the swimmer’s entry into the competition, he walked through the entrance to the pool area.
6) Finally, there are lots of instances every semester of students stringing together two main clauses, joined simply by a comma, but no conjunction. You need to add an “and” or “but” or something similar. “I’m working on my paper, but I’m finding it pretty hard going.” If you leave out the “but”, it has to be two distinct sentences separated by a period, not a comma.

This bring us to

**The Gainesville Sun Gallery of Illiteracy**

“Experts: Lincoln may have survived with modern medicine” [Headline in the Gainesville Sun, 19 May 2007]

So Abraham Lincoln lives! This suggests that President Lincoln DID survive his assassination, being written in the present tense. The article itself, not being written by the Sun’s grammatically challenged headline writers, correctly states in the past tense: “Abraham Lincoln might have survived being shot if today’s medical technology had existed in 1865.”

“Eleemosynary” [Headline and caption on 16 April 2009]

The headline writer with a limited vocabulary was referring to the local play, “Eleemosynary.”

“In London, seeing the British Museum won’t cost you a pence” [Rick Steves, 22 March 2009]. There is no such thing as “a pence.” “Pence” is the plural of “penny” in Britain.

“A gator may of been laying up, sunning on this wood [sculpture]” [22 March 2009]

Two horrors in just one line here! “Of” is not a verb, or any part of one. It should be “may have been”, which in its contracted form may be written as “may’ve been.” This particular sign of severe illiteracy is now automatically corrected by Microsoft Word’s Spell-check, which is apparently not used in journalism circles.

Second error: “Lay” is a transitive verb that requires an object. You lay eggs, or you lay up a supply of food for the winter. If you are talking about the act of resting in a horizontal position, the verb is “to lie.” You lie in bed, and in the past tense (only!), last night you lay in bed. But today you see an alligator, lying in the sun.

“The bespeckled host...of NPR’s weekly story hour”

No, Ira Glass is not especially freckled or spotty, but he does wear glasses. The Sun’s staff writer meant “bespectacled.” If you’re not sure about the meaning of a word that you do not commonly use, look up the meaning of it!

“Gen. Austin takes reigns of U.S. forces in Iraq” [2 September 2010]

Those leather steering devices for horses are actually reins. A king reigns, but does not usually take the reins of the carriage in which he is being driven. A prime minister, on the other hand, is often said to be taking over the reins of government.

“Young Will Muschamp was indoctrinated into the Gator Nation when the family would walk to the football games at the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium” [14 December 2010]

Yes, probably no-one would voluntarily join a group with such an offensive name, so reminiscent of the right-wing extremist Aryan Nation, without some heavy brainwashing. But perhaps the writer meant “inducted.”
“Hatians gather to remember earthquake” [Headline on 13 January 2011]
Are these “people who hate”, perhaps?

“Dealing with local regulations has been an issue...especially the county ordinance dealing with off-site advertising.... “That really hurt us. People just don’t know we’re here.”” [4 October 2011]
What a splendid idea, to insist that all advertising be placed out of sight! But the regulation probably dealt with off-site ads.

“Money from UF and students make up 51 percent of RTS budget.” [Headline from 11 October 2012]
The subject of the sentence is “money” [singular], not “UF and students” [plural], so it should of course be “makes up.”

“Police say man spit at officer after arrest.” [Headline from 19 October 2012]
A perfect example of the grammatically challenged headline writer not even reading the article carefully, the first line of which is (correctly!): “A Gainesville man spat at a police officer in the back of her patrol car.”

“Rescuers rescued a number of people who spent the night in their cars.” [Headline from 10 February 2013] Who else would rescue them but rescuers?! Or, what do rescuers do except rescue?!

“2 at mall accused of shoplifting...Both M. & W. will face charges of petit theft and resisting merchant detainment” [at JCPenney in the Oaks Mall]. Perhaps they just stole children’s clothes?! This should of course be ‘petty theft.’ [18 February 2013]