

Writing and Study Skills Services – Laurier Brantford
Writing a Historiographical Essay

What is Historiography?

Historiography is the study of how history has been written. Instead of looking at the historical event itself, historiographers look at how the historical event has been written about.

Historiographers are interested in this because the way that an event has been written about comes to influence how we understand that event; different writers may have had particular agendas in how they chose to present an event. It is the historiographer's role to analyze the different ways a historical event has been interpreted and to consider how and why interpretations may change over time.

Purpose of a Historiographical Essay

A historiographer gives a detailed overview of the **major** pieces of work on one given historical event or topic by doing the following:

- Engaging in a historical event from multiple perspectives by examining multiple sources. This is accomplished through summarizing, evaluating, and critiquing the arguments of each piece of work.
- Identifying patterns within the sources and explaining why these patterns exist.
- Examining the plausibility of each of the different interpretations of the event/topic.

General Questions to Consider

1. How has the writing on the topic evolved?
2. How do ideological shifts impact the topic?
3. Have discoveries or re-interpretations of sources caused historians to ask new questions?
4. Have historians used different methodological approaches over time?
5. ***Overall, how do all of the sources combined contribute to your understanding of the event/topic?***

Questions to Consider for each Source

1. What kind of source is it?
2. What is the main point or argument made?
3. How does the author deal with counter-evidence?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the source?
5. How does the source relate to earlier sources on the same topic/event?

For more information and to view examples of historiographical essays, check out the following resources:

Conolly-Smith, Peter. "Historiographic Essays." Qcpages.qu.cuny.edu. Queen's College, 2007. Web.

- This resource is available online.

Croce, Benedetto. *History, Its Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921.

- This resource is available online from the Laurier library.

Gottschalk, Louis. *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1963.

- This resource is available at the WLU Waterloo campus library (D13.G75)

Winks, Robin W., and Alaine M. Low. *Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999.

- This resource is available online from the Laurier library. It includes examples of completed historiographical essays