

HEY KIDS!

THIS IS
GREAT!

Here's a wacky fun-filled romp*
through the crazy world* of
4-7 page history papers!

OH BOY!!

LET'S GET
STARTED!!

by D. Herzberg.

* a step-by-step guide

* it's going to be really, really fun.

STEP ONE:

Read the question. It concerns a series of historical events, and asks you to provide a logical explanation for why they happened the way they did.

Sometimes a professor will provide you with a particular historian's explanation of a series of events, and will ask you to evaluate it. In either case the task is the same: understand a hypothesis about the events, and then discuss how well it fits with the available evidence. Here are a few example questions:

- 1) After the defeat of Napoleon, France's government continued to be unstable, and the country underwent revolutions in both 1815 and 1848; in Britain there were no such uprisings. What accounts for this difference?

This question is relatively straightforward. The historical events it concerns are the governmental changes from 1815-1848 in England and France. Your task is to look at those events, and find a logical explanation for why they differed so greatly from one country to another. In other words, you must find an internal logic for each country which allows you to understand why what happened happened, then compare the two, explaining why one favored revolutions and the other reform.

- 2) In her study of the Revolutions of 1848, Priscilla Robertson concludes that: "Nationalism characterized, in fact corrupted, every revolution in 1848. Yet the specter of social revolution hung over Europe in the summer of 1848; doubtless it was unreal. But the specter was there, and it spread a sinking fear among all those who had something to lose. Thus in the final analysis, all of the revolutions of 1848 turned into class struggles, and failed because they did." Please examine carefully the course of the revolutions in France and Germany from their outbreak to their defeat, and, in so doing, evaluate the validity of Robertson's conclusion that "all of the revolutions turned into class struggles, and failed because they did".

This question concerns the revolutions that took place in France and Germany in 1848. The specific focus is why the revolutions failed to accomplish their stated goals. In this case, the professor has provided you with P. Robertson's explanation; your task is to understand how she has made sense of the evidence, and then evaluate whether her explanation is completely true, partially true, or utterly false. Again, you will need to take the given thesis and subject it to scrutiny, compare it to evidence, and decide whether it is successful or not.

- 3) Compare and contrast Herbert Hoover's economic policy with that of the Populists.

This question concerns the actions of two political entities in the United States. The professor would like you to come up with a thesis describing the

logic behind the actions of each, and also exploring the relationship between the two. One could have been a precursor to the other; one could have been a reaction against the other; they could have little or no relation to each other at all. Which of these you choose -- or if you decide one is partially a successor but also entirely new, or some other mixture -- will depend on your understanding of the position of the Populists and Hoover.

- 4) The years between the defeat of Napoleon to the revolutions of 1848 were nearly free of warfare between European countries; yet there were five major wars in the twenty year period from 1850 to 1870. What could have caused this sudden change?

This question concerns the events after the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Specifically, the professor would like you to give a logical reason for something that, on the surface, makes little sense: why were there suddenly so many wars in Europe after 1848? Your task is to look at the evidence and try to understand what could have changed in each country to lead to the warfare.

- 5) How did the appearance of overt political anti-Semitism reflect the new realities of the European political situation in the late nineteenth century?

This question concerns the events of the late nineteenth century in Europe. The professor would like you to describe briefly the major changes which have taken place during the nineteenth century. She clearly believes that overt political anti-Semitism, which was new to the late 1800s, was an important indicator of the new political situation; your task is to find logical reasons why overt political anti-Semitism came into being, and explain how those reasons illustrate a change from earlier in the century.

If this all seems simple when I do it, but you are faced with a question and are lost, DO NOT START WRITING YOUR ESSAY YET! Approach the professor, or the TA if there is one, and say: what exactly are you asking? What is the key issue you want me to discuss, explain, compare? Do not begin the essay until you could write a paragraph defining exactly what the question concerns and what your task is.

The key is to look for a relatively simple issue to discuss. Notice here that "simple" does not mean "simplistic"; your "simple" thesis could be that Foucault's writings imply a metaphysical position denying the validity of historical reality. What I mean by "simple" is that you must be able to say clearly and briefly what you are going to prove. A short essay is not going to give a full picture of, for example, the European revolutions of 1848; it will only try to prove something about those revolutions.

STEP TWO

Choose an explanation. Decide why you think what happened happened (or decide whether you believe the given explanation, and why). Say it out loud, to a friend, or to the wall if you're shy. Here are a few sample thesis statements for a few of the questions I gave above:

1) I posit that a revolution requires a combination of economic hard times, large groups of discontented people, leadership to unify and direct these masses, and no way to settle the grievances within the structure of the legitimate government. Both Britain and France shared these factors but to different extents; I will argue that this resulted from the two countries' differing histories and cultures.

3) The differences between Herbert Hoover's ideology and that of the Populists are another illustration of the classic division between liberal and radical social thinkers. [...] I will argue that Hoover and the Populists differed fundamentally in their perception of American capitalism, and their strategies for fixing its ills differed accordingly.

4) I will argue that the areas of conflict were constant; what changed was the disappearance of reasons for the Great Powers to not wage war. As a result of the revolutions of 1848 and the economic boom soon after them, internal turmoil and the fear of revolution were no longer powerful enough to enforce cooperation among the Great Powers. In addition the regimes evolved to meet the new demands of the post-revolutionary period in ways that pushed them towards war.

5) Modernity had made its debut, the Europeans' self-image had changed, and the old world would never be exactly the same again. [...] What exactly is modernity? One way to clarify some of the most important aspects of what it meant to Europe would be to study a result of it, the emergence of political anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century.

STEP THREE

Divide your thesis into sections. For a short paper, you will normally find yourself with between three and five logical groupings of arguments. Here are a few examples, still following the same essays:

- 1) I posit that a revolution requires a combination of economic hard times, large groups of discontented people, leadership to unify and direct these masses, and no way to settle the grievances within the structure of the legitimate government.

Here the author has provided a clear skeleton for essay to rest on: first she will discuss the economic times in each country, and explain why they were more conducive to revolution in France than Britain; then she will do the same for each of the other factors.

- 3) I will begin by examining each ideology [Hoover and the Populists] in turn, and then follow the rationales to their logical conclusion in actual political and economic strategies.

- 4) I will argue that the areas of conflict were constant; what changed was the disappearance of reasons for the Great Powers to not wage war. As a result of the revolutions of 1848 and the economic boom soon after them, internal turmoil and the fear of revolution were no longer powerful enough to enforce cooperation among the Great Powers. In addition the regimes evolved to meet the new demands of the post-revolutionary period in ways that pushed them towards war.

Here the division is slightly less clear, but nonetheless present. The author plans to use the following skeleton: first he will go from country to country explaining how the governments felt more confident after 1848; then he will go from country to country and explain how the methods the governments used to gain this new security not only freed them from the fear of revolution but actually pushed them towards war.

- 5) The rise of nationalism, the new economics, and the emergence of mass politics were the three major pillars of modernity, and together they threatened to issue an ominous answer to the eternal question of what to do with the Jews.

Where did these divisions come from? Practice. Unfortunately, there is no "right" way to divide your thesis; the examples I gave are just certain authors' specific solutions. If there seems to be no clear way to do this in your paper, DO NOT START WRITING IT YET! Talk to your professor, or a TA, or the writing workshop, and hammer out some handy division.

STEP FOUR:

Simply state the claim you are making in each section of the essay. For each section, you will be proving one claim; say this claim out loud, and write it down. Here are some examples of claims:

1) [economic hard times]: ... social unrest was preceded by economic hard times during this period. (Hobsbawm, p. 145; Bury, p. 62) There is a qualitative difference, however, between the economic hardships suffered by the lower classes in France and Britain during this period, and this affected the likelihood of revolution in each country.

Note that this is not obvious; it is a CLAIM, and the essay must proceed to give evidence to prove the claim.

[discontented people]: In Britain, the people... respected the fundamental right of the ruling elite to rule. (Webb, p. 211) People had complaints about specific policies, or about people within the government, but more often than not these were local problems. (Webb, p. 254) [...] Many French people's self-image was caught up with social revolution.

Once again these claims are not obvious, and must be proved, even though some of them were taken directly from the reading.

[unifying leaders]: Both Britain and France had enough potential middle class or intellectual leaders; I will argue that these people had little motivation to lead a revolution in Britain, [...] whereas in France there was not much cause for those classes to be satisfied.

[governments]: Here there is one major distinction: Britain was ruled by parliament while France was ruled by a king. In France, if the king did not like the ministers around him, he could dismiss them... and create the government he wanted.

Here the claim is clear, but how it affected the likelihood of revolution in each country is not immediately obvious. The author must look at what each government did and show how it affected the situation.

STEP FIVE

Decide why you believe each claim. Find specific reasons which prove each point and list them briefly underneath your claim. For example:

1) [unifying leadership]

- aristocracy in Brit. were often businessmen themselves; thus gov't was friendly to new ec. class
- through reforms the middle classes were let into Brit. gov't
- goals of Brit. middle classes same as goals of gov't: stop rev. so expanding industries could give occupations for growing educated class
- in France, O'Boyle said (quote) too many educated intellectuals, no jobs open to them; "overproduction of intellectuals"
- both aristos and non-noble middle classes in Fr. had little voice in gov't, cause not enough polit jobs to go around
- Fr. gov't not as friendly to new economic classes: wanted to create legit. after Napoleon fiasco and give power back to old nobility; regressive

3) Claim: "The Populists were not primarily political; their goals were economic."

- tried a-political solutions like sub-treasury co-op first
- discovered w/ Texas Exchange that no banks would lend them money, and "merchants, bankers, and warehousemen" convinced local gov'ts to tax their warehouses (Goodwyn 73)
- only became polit. when necessary for ec. goals; a friendly gov't could, for example, incorporate a Farmer's Alliance bank

STEP SIX

The introduction. This can be from 1 to 5 or 6 paragraphs long, and should briefly state both the question and your answer. If background information or term definition is essential to your argument, it belongs in the introduction as well. In any case you must include your simply stated thesis and your skeleton for the essay. Here I will give two introductions, both of the short variety; the first works and the second does not.

1) There were general similarities between France and Britain in the decades after the fall of Napoleon: both were ruled by a relatively small elite group (mainly landed nobles) who presided over a country with great social and economic inequalities. Both countries held a large mass of discontented lower classes and middle class intellectuals to lead them. What the two countries did not share was an answer from the malcontents to the most important question facing radicals of that day: "Were they or were they not prepared to... [push for change]... at the price of social revolution?" (Hobsbawm, p. 150) The French Revolution of 1789 had provided a graphic example of how uncontrollable and high the price might be for going too far; no revolutionary of the post-1789 age could ignore the potential consequence of his actions. (Hobsbawm, p. 140) In France this gain of self-consciousness did not prevent -- or perhaps was even a cause of -- more revolutions; in Britain the knowledge seemed a deadweight that kept revolutions from getting off the ground.

There must be extraordinary circumstances for a social revolution to occur in an ordered situation. Certainly history does not show that every time inflation strikes or wages go down there is a violent overthrow of the government. I posit that a revolution requires a combination of economic hard times, large groups of discontented people, leadership to unify and direct these masses, and no way to settle the grievances within the structure of the legitimate government. Both Britain and France shared these factors but to different extents; I will argue that this resulted from the two countries' differing histories and cultures.

2) Everyone was waiting for the revolution. Europe could, by now, read the signs telling that France was ready for revolution. With France's revolution would come others. This was proven time and time again. Europe was uneasy. Those with nothing were looking forward to the immanent revolutions. Those with everything were praying for peaceful reform. Nothing was certain.

France was, of course, in the forefront of the 1848 revolutions...

In the first introduction, the author stated both the question (what accounts for the difference?) and her answer (thesis). Her discussion in the first paragraph, while general, was not irrelevant; she was presenting the question as one which needs answering, by showing that it is not intuitively obvious that one country should have had revolutions while the other did not. After presenting the problem, she offered her solution.

In the second example, the author also generalized, but he did so forgetting the purpose of the introduction. His paragraph sounds introductory in tone; it is general, and it concerns the events which he will discuss. Unfortunately

he does not give us any idea what he is writing in response to, much less what his thesis is. Don't fall prey to this trap, writing introductory-sounding sentences which have no bearing on your essay. Repeat the question, word for word if necessary, and then supply your thesis as an answer.

STEP SEVEN

The body. At this point, if you followed the first five steps, writing the rest of the essay will be almost easy. The body will have as many sections as you divided your thesis into; in a short paper each section will comprise between 1 and 3 or 4 paragraphs, depending on the number of sections you outlined. Typically, each section should begin with the claim it will discuss. The rest of the section will be you writing as simply as possible why you believe that claim. In a paper this length you are not going to be able to document absolutely every claim you make; however, any claim that will not be based on specific data should usually be backed up by footnotes specifying where you got the information that led you to believe it. Often this means footnoting a professor who simply mentioned in class that, for example, "Jews were restricted from most jobs except business-related ones from which pious Christians were excluded." However you choose to base your claim on evidence, you must include the reasoning behind the claim. One cannot, for example, simply say:

2) France's revolution turned into a class struggle. The revolutionaries succeeded in their takeover, but once in power the leaders lost contact with their people. This meant that left-wingers, like Louis Blanc, suddenly had more backers than ever before. This is because he was able to offer the masses the reforms and guarantees that they needed, without any threat to himself.

This is not enough. The author had a claim -- "France's revolution turned into a class struggle" -- and began to explain it; but if you were his roommate and you heard him say that paragraph, would you be convinced? He needs to explore the goals of each class to show that they diverged. How specifically? Enough to logically prove his claim, and no more. Enough so that, if someone were to say, "Oh yeah? Prove it," the author could with great ease return and say, "It's obvious the revolution turned into a class struggle; look at how the businessmen wanted longer workdays while the industrial workers wanted labor reform! How could they be expected to agree for longer than a day or two?" The author would not need to examine the writings of different leaders from different classes and provide quotes which prove this statement; he could claim it, because it is intuitively or directly obvious from the readings and lectures.

Do my arguments have to explain everything? No. This is one of the most important aspects of writing history papers: you are only providing one possible explanation for the events. There is no "right" or "wrong" answer, only "plausible and well-supported" or "unlikely and unproven" answers. You are only trying to prove that your explanation fits the events, not that it is THE explanation of why they happened. Further, you are not attempting to explain everything, only to prove your thesis. You should therefore couch

your statements carefully. Pay attention to the limits of your explanation, and be conscious of them as you write; if there is evidence that might contradict it, don't be afraid to say something like, "Of course, [this opposing information] is also true, but (I believe that my earlier arguments are the more important factors//it would still be impossible to deny that [my earlier point] must have affected the situation). Here are some other examples:

1) WORKS: "This is not to say that they [the British laborers] dismissed their troubles and looked stoically to the future; it is, though, an attitude which must have affected their outlook on revolution."

UNWORKABLE: "Because the British economy was so good, the poor people there didn't want to risk losing everything they had in a revolution."

In this case, the first quote defines exactly how the author is using the data to support her thesis; she makes certain not to make any extraneous claims. The second quote doesn't work as well, because it makes too much of an assumption. How could you prove what the poor people wanted? You can only say that it makes sense for them to want what you posit they do.

4) WORKS: "The reaction of most regimes was to modernize. This involved the inclusion of the capitalist sections of the middle classes and their political aspirations into the power structure in some form. The ruling elite defended against the possibility of future revolutions by taking under their wing one of the essential factions of a revolutionary coalition."

UNWORKABLE: "The middle class joined with the aristocrats the moment they got the opportunity, abandoning the lower class and ending the threat of revolution."

Once again, the first quote only says as much as is necessary: European regimes took in one specific part of the middle classes, thus defending themselves against revolution. The second quote makes too many assumptions, for example that the entire middle class joined with the entire aristocratic class. This is unnecessary, and obviously an over-generalization. If you must, avoid oversimplification the easy way and simply say "sections of the middle classes" and "sections of the lower classes"; the key point is to avoid saying more than is logical and necessary for your argument.

STEP EIGHT

The conclusion. The easiest method is to recount in a simple way how you have proved what your introduction said you would prove. Here it would be best to simply provide an example:

5) Jewish thought during this period had a characteristic in common with that of the governments of Europe: it was a reaction to something. This something was a fundamental change in the self-image of European people. The secular ideas slowly planted through the later centuries of the Middle Ages and so explosively spread by the French Revolution and Napoleon took their place in European thought beside religion. The temporal strength of religion gave way to more secular ideas of how to properly order the Earth. Concepts like liberalism, mass politics, racial nationalism, socialism, and the multitudinous others were advanced during this time of peculiar self-consciousness. Political anti-Semitism was just one example of an attempt by the regimes of Europe to find a working system in the very different era after the French Revolution.

In this conclusion, the author briefly restated the theme of the paper, touched on its major divisions, and tied them all together in a logical way. The conclusion, for this paper, turned out to be a brief retelling of the essay without all the proof; it was helpful because it showed very clearly the train of logic which connects the claims of the paper, uninterrupted by discussions of why they are true.

SUMMATION:

In a history paper of this length, you will be asked to evaluate an explanation for a series of events. The purpose of your paper is to make clear why you believe that a certain thesis either fits or does not fit the evidence. I have one final tip, and an extremely important one: be honest. If you believe that a given explanation is right in some places, but wrong in others, go ahead and say that. DO NOT simply choose the slightly better of two bad arguments because you think you have to. Since you should never exclude any evidence relevant to the proof of your claims, you may at times have to reconcile your thesis to reality. Don't try to impose your thesis on what happened. It won't work. If you exclude information that might contradict it, do you think your professor won't notice? Just be honest, simple, and claim no more than you can prove. If that means writing a thesis that sounds like over-cooked spaghetti, fine. There are no ^{easy} answers in history; there will be no thesis like: Revolution took place in Cuba because Batista was a cruel leader. There are always a million reasons, of which you will only be able to discuss the three or four most important. Always hedge your bets and word your statements carefully so that you claim no more than you need to. There is no secret reason why things happened, and your task is not to try to invent one; you are just trying to make sense of what happened.