Writing a History Paper
Step 3: Formulating an Argument

History is not a self-sufficient discipline. Historians freely borrow from fields like sociology, anthropology, economics and literary analysis in order to construct their arguments. This methodological diversity can make it difficult to determine what kinds of arguments are permissible, but many problems can be avoided by following a few simple guidelines.

1. *Know your audience.*
   What are the course expectations? Are you expected to employ certain methods? Have you discussed what kinds of arguments are acceptable?
2. *Make your assumptions explicit.*
   Both you and your reader should be aware of the methodological assumptions on which your argument is based. If you, for example, appeal to a certain economic or behavioral model, make sure it's one you're comfortable defending. Try to take as little as possible for granted.
3. *Balance what you <u>think</u> with what you <u>know</u>.*
   A well-argued paper is constructed of both things the author knows and things he has surmised based on what he knows. If your paper is made up entirely of things you *know*, you might simply be reporting accepted fact, which leaves no room for argument. If there are many more "I thinks" than "I knows", you probably need more evidence to back up your claims.

Special Issues of Historical Logic

There may not be a uniform or ubiquitous historical method, but certain issues are particularly likely to come up in the construction of historical arguments. Here are a few you should be thinking about:

1. **Causation & Complexity**
   If you are attributing a cause, ask yourself:
   How much explanatory power does this causal relationship have?
   What is the burden of proof implied by my claim?
   Have I equated correlation with causation?
   Have I equated causation with responsibility?

2. **Intention**
   If you are attributing intent or motive to an historical actor, ask yourself:
   Have you avoided an over-simplistic psychological model that reduces motives to only unconscious or conscious elements?
   Have you assumed that human motives are stable, completely knowable or single?

3. **Generalization**
   If you are generalizing from an example, ask yourself:
   If you are assuming an individual to have the characteristics of a group, or a group to be represented by an individual, on what basis are you doing so?
   When you use big collective nouns – "society", "Americans", "Puritans", the "public" – is there no smaller group that would do?