Writing a History Paper
Step 2: Selecting Sources and Presenting Evidence

History may not be a science, but just as in a scientific experiment, the conclusions an historian draws can only be as good as his or her data. Although historians use a wide variety of kinds of sources – from novels to artifacts to government statistics – quality evidence can only be extracted from quality sources understood in context.

First, select quality sources appropriate to your project.

In short writing assignments, we work with strict limitations on our time and resources, but it is still important to make sure that we select the best *possible* primary or secondary sources.

When selecting sources, ask yourself:

1. Am I using the best sources available to me within the confines of the assignment?
2. Do my sources allow me to answer my research question? If not, is it necessary to revise my question to reflect the sources available?

Second, understand your sources in context.

Whether using primary or secondary sources, historians never have an unmediated relationship to their subject. Therefore, it is always important to be aware of the prism through which your source allows you to view the subject of your inquiry.

Questions to ask of your sources:

1. *Who wrote/produced this source?*
2. *Why did they write/produce it?*
3. *Who was the intended audience?*
4. *What sources did the author use?*
5. *Under what preconceptions or prejudices did the author operate?*

Third, select and present your evidence accurately and fairly.

Once you have selected quality sources and are confident that you know enough about the context in which they were produced, it is important to select and present evidence in a way that takes what you have learned about your sources into consideration.

To avoid some common pitfalls, ask yourself:

1. Have you selected evidence based on an explicit, objective framework appropriate to your topic? (i.e. not chosen facts that are simply juicy, morally enlightening or convenient)
2. Have you provided the context your reader needs to interpret your evidence?
3. When generalizing from an example, have you done so in a way that is justified?
4. Have you taken sources to be more literal or precise than they are?
5. Have you applied anachronistic standards or categories to your sources?