WRITING HISTORY

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A compulsory course for first year module
0.5 Units, taught in the first term

Course convenor 2013-14: Adam Smith

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Welcome to Writing History. This is a half-unit module that will help to develop your skills and confidence as a writer, get you thinking about how best to study and introduce you to some of the resources available to you as a historian at UCL. History is a discipline grounded in reading, reflection, and writing. However good your ideas are, and however sophisticated your understanding of historical sources, you will only get the credit if you can express yourself clearly on paper. Nothing is more critical to your success as a History undergraduate than your ability to write well. Some students arrive at university believing they have nothing more to learn as a writer. Some arrive with very little confidence in their ability to write even though they've done well in exams. Even more arrive here never having really reflected on the *process* of writing at all, at least not since primary school. Writing is a skill – a *craft* – that you can, and should, continue to work on throughout your life. As with any craft, there are basic techniques that you can learn if they are explained to you, but the best way of improving is by observing others' craft (in this case by reading) and, above all, by practising yourself. And, like all crafts, the people who become most proficient at it, tend to be those who *enjoy* it. We want you to become better writers, and to do that we believe you need to enjoy the process of writing: thinking about how to best convey an idea, what word is most appropriate in a given context, how an argument 'flows'. Great history essays are not (just) those that display the widest reading or the most work, they are also those that display insight, clarity, even wit. When you decided to come and study History at university you made a stunningly good decision for many reasons, but one of them is that you have chosen to work in a discipline that still values good writing. There is no need for jargon here. Historians *want* to communicate to a wide public. We *want* our work to be accessible, not just decipherable to those with inside knowledge. This is one of the reasons why History graduates are so employable – they are *great at explaining things.* This course will give you the tools to become an even better communicator than you already are.

It is not the purpose of this course to make you adhere to a set of 'rules' about what constitutes good historical writing (although there are plenty of 'rules' out there, and we will talk about them) but to get you to think critically about your own writing, to learn how to evaluate what makes effective writing, and to offer constructive feedback to your peers. Stop for a moment and think about this paragraph. You've just read it, but how readable is it? What is its purpose? Does

it achieve its aims, or does it rely too heavily on sub-clauses (and parentheses?) Is it as clear as it could be? What other styles could it have been written in?

Much of what makes for good historical writing applies to most other forms of writing. It should be clear and direct, with a sense of purpose. Assertions should be backed up by evidence. Never use three words where one will do. Never use a jargon phrase when you can write in straightforward language. Above all: don't hide. This is *your* writing. We want to hear *your* voice and *your ideas.* I've already said that one of the rules of this course is that it will not give you a formula or a simple set of 'rules' for you to follow but like all rules, that rule is now going to be broken. So here is a 'rule': banish the passive voice! Never write 'it can be argued that…' (can it? Then argue it!). Feel free to use the first person. It is *your* writing. Let's hear you!

Like all disciplines, however, History has its own conventions. An academic 'discipline' is a way of organising knowledge and understanding of the world in a coherent way. If you were studying Anthropology, English or Politics (all disciplines which overlap with History), much of what you learn in Writing History would still apply. But there would be differences, and the lectures address some of those History-specific conventions, to do with the nature of argument and scholarly conventions like referencing (the 'technical' side to this course). All good historical writing (here's a generalisation coming), whether a 200-word précis, an essay, or a book, needs to combine *clarity* with *complexity.* The world is a complicated place, evidence is rarely clear-cut, narratives are never one-dimensional, motivations impossible to discern with certainty. The task of the historian is to deal in a sensitive, nuanced, intelligent way with the mass of uncertainties in front of her (or him) *and yet* still produce writing that is engaging and clear. Simply presenting unorganised, undigested complexity is not history, it's just *stuff.* Conversely, presenting a simplistic (albeit satisfying) story that denies complexity isn't history, it's fiction. We, as historians, need to tread that fine line: telling a story or making an argument about the past that makes sense without being overly simplistic. How can this be done? Historians have adopted many approaches. Some are self-consciously 'literary'; others hew close to the evidence, larding their writing with quotations or statistics. Some build an argument in a very structured way, much as a social scientist might do; others prefer to allow an argument to 'emerge'. Different strategies suit different topics, different personalities, different groups of readers and different *genres* or types of writing. In this course we will look at historical writing in different forms, but our focus will be on the essay, since this is the principal form of writing that you will have to master during your time at UCL.

This is a module of two halves. The first half will be delivered via lectures and large group 'workshops' (see below for details) and address general issues to do with writing. The second half will be delivered in small group tutorials will be related to one of the Survey Courses you're taking. So while the first part of Writing History deals with historical writing in a more generalised way, the second part will give you the opportunity to think about writing as it applies directly to the material you are covering in one of your other courses. There will be three teaching sessions for this part of the course.

This module will have succeeded if it makes you more aware of your writing and more interested in it. Hopefully it will enable you to *enjoy* your writing and be more *confident* about it.

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SYLLABUS

Registration week

Department Tutor Lectures 1 & 2: Introduction to studying History at UCL
These sessions will cover: using libraries, using the internet, expectations about essays, other forms of writing you will do at UCL. We will also talk about the various types of historical writing that you will encounter as a student: monographs, articles, book reviews and so on.

Library Tours: conducted by the Subject Librarians

Cumberland Lodge

Workshop I: What is 'good writing'?
In this session we will compare some pieces of historical writing in order to analyse what makes them work. Among other things, we will think about: audience, purpose, the use of 'rhetoric' (or techniques of persuasion), argument, evidence.

Week 1

Workshop II: Reading for writing
In this session we will discuss how to find out things: the most efficient ways of reading and note-taking and will include a practice 'speed-reading' session. We will talk about how to read speedily, efficiently and purposefully, by thinking about contents, indexes, and things like topic sentences.

Week 2

Workshop III: Assessment
This session will explain the marking and feedback process in the department. We will look in detail at the department mark scheme and you will have the chance to 'mark' a piece of work. About half of the assessment on your degree comes from exams, so this session will also focus on the particular challenges of writing in an exam setting. How to prepare? How do you know what to expect? How might an exam answer differ from a coursework essay?

At the end of each of the three workshop you will be asked to spend exactly 3 minutes sitting and writing down your reflections on what you've learned in that

session. Those reflective commentaries (only a couple of sentences long in all probability) will form part of the Portfolio of writings that constitute 25% of your mark for this course. (See below for more information on the Portfolio).

Weeks 3-5

2x 45-min Tutorials

The tutorials will have no more than 4 students in them.
Your tutor will be familiar with, and will probably be teaching on, one of the Survey courses you are taking this year.

In each tutorial, students will prepare in advance a *short* piece of writing – basically a paragraph of **no more than 200 words** -- and circulate it to the rest of the group. Your tutor will explain to you exactly what form the writing should take but it will probably be one of the following:
i) the introduction to an essay
ii) a *précis* of an essay (i.e. a summary of the argument you would make were you writing the entire essay)
iii) an explanation of a key *concept* that has been addressed in the Survey course
iv) a review (or summary) of a book or article
(Note: the purpose of using the tutorials to discuss such short pieces of writing is because one can see clearly, in concentrated form, the strengths and weaknesses of writing. Remember the famous quote by George Bernard Shaw: "I'm sorry this letter is so long, I didn't have time to make it shorter."[1]

These pieces of writing will be circulated in advance by email. In the tutorial, each student will offer a short commentary or critique of the others' writing. These may or may not be written in advance. This discussion of each others' writing replicates in miniature the process of 'peer review' with which historians – and most people for whom writing is a key part of their professional life – are familiar. When professional historians write, they always expose their writing to feedback from their peers – in research seminars, by 'readers' for journals or presses, and informally among their colleagues. While most of your writing at university will be assessed by a tutor, the judgements they hand down should not, in the end, come as a surprise to you. One aspect of the learning you will undergo while an undergraduate is learning to assess your own work. The 'peer assessment' we will practice in these seminars is an example of that.

Weeks 6-10

A one-to-one tutorial (c30 mins)

[1] Or perhaps it was someone else. Most famous quotes are either from the Bible or Shakespeare, but this one is from neither. A prize* will be given to the student who provides the most convincing account of the origins of this phrase, complete with appropriate scholarly references.
*prize to be awarded by the course convenor. The judge's decision is final.

A one-to-one 30-min tutorial will be arranged with the tutor from your Survey course who led your other two tutorials. In advance of this tutorial, you will need to write an essay answering a question set by your tutor. The purpose of the tutorial is to discuss the essay in detail. You will need to submit a revised version of the essay for assessment in the first week of January. *You will find that it is not normal practice in the History Department for tutors to read drafts of essays but this course is an exception:* it is specifically designed to give you the opportunity of feedback before the essay is finally marked. The essay may well be an expansion of the *précis* or the introduction you submitted for one of your earlier tutorials. This essay will form 75% of the assessment for the Writing History module. The re-written version of the essay will be marked in exactly the same way as an essay for any of your other courses, and you will have the opportunity for one-to-one feedback with the tutor. To clarify: although the essay will be on the subject of your Survey Course, the mark for this essay will contribute to your mark for Writing History, not the Survey Course.

Suggested reading

How to write

William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*
Phyllis Creme and Mary R. Lea, *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*
George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", online at
http://theorwellprize.co.uk/george-orwell/by-orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/

Some practical help with writing you may find useful:
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ppd/resources/framework/communicating/writing

Below is a very subjective list of examples of historical writing, grouped according to period, which (some!) members of the Department find striking because of how they integrate *what* the historian is arguing with *how* they argue or express it.

Ancient

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (1967)
M. Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman World* (1999)
Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000)
Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (Eng. trans. 2005)

Medieval

R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953)
Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971)
Francis Oakley, 'Celestial Hierarchies Revisited: Walter Ullmann's Vision of Medieval Politics', *Past and Present*, 60 (1973), pp. 3-48,
Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1225* (2000)

Early Modern
Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Eng. tr. 1972)
Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984)
Quentin Skinner, 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 7 (1997), pp. 301-316

Modern
Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948)
Bernard Bailyn *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (2005)
Michael O'Brien, *Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (2010)

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ASSESSMENT

a. Workshop commentaries (5%)
You will be given 3 minutes to write at the end of the session. Those of you with a laptop and an internet connection can then immediately upload it onto the moodle site. The rest of you will need to do so later. Either way the purpose is to have your commentary on moodle by the end of the day in which the lecture takes place. It will necessarily be short. The commentary should be a personal reflection on what you've learned.

b. Course summary (10%)
a short paragraph, written at the end of the course, summarising what you've learned about how to write effective history essays. You could, if it helps, imagine that you're writing an email (in the first person) to a new student who wants to know how to go about writing a history essay.

c. Tutorial exercises (10%)
the 2 short writing exercises you complete for your tutorials (see above)

d. The Essay (75%)
An essay, c2500-words in length, submitted at the end of term, after a first draft has been discussed with a tutor in a one-to-one tutorial.

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SUMMARY

Aims:

- to develop student's understanding of the requirements of academic writing, and to effective approaches to study, in the discipline of history
- to ensure that students are aware of the resources available to them as writers at UCL
- to give students experience of peer learning and to develop their ability to offer constructive criticism
- to give students the opportunity for a one-to-one formative feedback session on an essay

Teaching/contact hours

3 2-hr lecture/workshops
2 1-hr lectures by department tutor
1 45-min library tour
2 45-min tutorials with 3 students in each
1 30-min one-to-one tutorial
1 15-min essay feedback session
TOTAL CONTACT TIME: 13 hours