

Writing History!

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**WRITING
HISTORY!**

A COMPANION FOR HISTORIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Historians do not only know a lot about the past, what we conventionally call history, by writing about it they also *make* history. By interacting with other historians, both past and present, and in dialogue with the public of their own time they contribute knowledge and insights that help a society to be conscious of its relation to the past. This does not only apply to the history of our most recent times: thinking about history is interesting and relevant from the earliest appearance of the humans as distinctive creatures on this planet. History is about a past that can be constantly approached from countless angles with new ideas, insights and techniques – and that is why there is an exclamation mark in the title of this guide. *Writing History!* appeals to the ambition to actively explore the possibilities of the discipline and then encourages you to follow your own path.

An important key to writing history is the historical method of source criticism, which is also a recurring subject in this companion. Most historical methods and techniques have been developed through what we would call an ‘analogue’ context: starting from unique archival documents, printed books, collections of objects, visual sources and recorded accounts and stories. However, the rapid developments in information and communication technology as well as digital imaging techniques do have a great deal of influence on the methods and techniques of writing history. They change the access to our sources as the sources themselves acquire a different character. Communication between historians about their results is taking on new forms and archiving is done in new ways. Prospective historians are in the middle of these changes and will help to determine their impact on the historian’s craft.

This companion is therefore a 2.0 version – it does not anticipate technological innovations and what the future might hold with respect to using ‘big data’, image recognition, the reconstruction of historical sounds and other developments we can expect. *Writing History!* is intended to

connect the customary academic historical methods and techniques and the digital means that are now available to the historian. IT puts source criticism in a new light. It is also important as it expands the historical debate, both by reducing geographical divisions and by offering more opportunities for immediate interaction with readers. A conscious use of methods and techniques for our discipline will allow prospective historians to make an important contribution to such renewal.

The Dutch edition of *Writing History!* is about practising history in the Dutch language, which, of course, is not the same as practising Dutch history. Likewise, the English version of this book is not about writing a history of the English-speaking world, but about practicing history in English. However, language is not just a neutral vehicle for communication; different language traditions have generated differences in historiography as well. *Writing History!* does not explore such differences, but offers a translation of the Dutch companion, in order to facilitate its use as a course book in both Dutch/English bilingual and in English history programmes. The book is structured as a guide to historical methods and techniques. It is aimed at everyone who wants to develop the skills needed for writing history, both within and outside of academia. We hope that all prospective historians find this book to be a useful companion as they write history.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Writing History! consists of six chapters and concludes with two technical appendices.

Chapter 1 discusses the process of historical research in general, the emphasis being on the importance of formulating a good historical research question. All the phases and techniques of historical research are dealt with briefly and will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters.

- 1.1 Subject and research question:** designating a subject / types of question: descriptive, explanatory, exploratory / the research question/ criteria for historical research questions
- 1.2 Orientation and questions: the historical context:** *status quaestionis* / availability of sources / your own contribution to writing history
- 1.3 Standpoint and historical debate:** criticism and self-criticism/ defining your position: facts, interpretations and philosophical viewpoints
- 1.4 The research plan: questions, material and methods, planning:** main question, sub-questions, structure / planning and feedback

In **Chapter 2**, the emphasis is on the building blocks of historical research: literature and sources. It deals with the distinction between primary sources and secondary literature, the diversity of primary sources and how these are embedded in various academic disciplines and traditions of collecting, with a brief indication of how you can find them in libraries, archives and museums.

- 2.1 Primary and secondary sources:** primary sources: originating from the context / secondary sources: academic historical literature

2.2 Finding your way in academic historical literature: literature of all types and lengths, from textbooks to journal articles / search strategies for literature research / looking further / consider your search results

2.3 Orientation on primary sources: can everything be a source? Sources of all shapes and sizes: from text to image and sound / interaction between sources and interpretation / access to collections of sources

Chapter 3, which deals with how to apply the historical method, discusses how you do research with the help of a step-by-step plan. When searching for and organising information, you must constantly make intrinsic choices – where to look and how to read, how to collect your sources and how to interpret them. All these actions require you to make conscious decisions and to repeatedly return to your research question. Next, we deal with a number of methodological questions about using literature and researching your sources.

3.1 Five steps to a definitive research plan: after the provisional research question: reading strategies on three levels / back to the research question / research into sources / the importance of source criticism

3.2 Organising literature and sources: making a well-founded reading list / making notes / keeping a record of sources / practical tips for saving computer files

3.3 Organisation is reasoning: source criticism and the historical method: ‘silences’ in texts / periodisation / selection / image analysis / use of oral sources

Chapter 4 continues with a focus on the writing process. Writing is a concentrated way of thinking that compels you to formulate a train of thought clearly. However, it is also a technique and of great importance to a convincing historical presentation. Moreover, for historical accounts there are a number of conventions concerning notes with which every historian should be thoroughly acquainted. In discussing the structure of a text – its overall structure and on the level of paragraphs and sentences – we shall address the intrinsic aspects of the voice of the author and the implicit or explicit debate of which they are a part.

4.1 The structure of a historical text: introduction / introduction and preface / the argument / the conclusion

4.2 Guidelines for the division of paragraphs and sections: one paragraph per point or one message per paragraph / examples of organising principles at paragraph level / section, subsection, subheadings

- 4.3 Argument and debate:** the voice of the author in the historical account / the voice of others in the historical account / original work and plagiarism/examples of one's own argument and references to others
- 4.4 Questions of style:** personal pronouns/ past and present tenses / general and specific statements / rules for annotation

Chapter 5 addresses the 'oral' variant. Speaking and writing are related to each other, but still fundamentally different. This chapter deals with various forms and styles of giving a presentation and the importance of you, yourself, taking part in the historical debate. Oral presentation and debate are just as important for preparing for a career as a historian in the history course as being able to report in writing.

- 5.1 Form and style:** from working paper to poster presentation / presentation styles / a few tips and guidelines
- 5.2 Feedback and debate:** critique and support

Chapter 6 very briefly considers the practice of the discipline. Historians' relationship, written and oral, to their colleagues and to society as a whole, is based on their study and knowledge of the past. In this, depending on the subject, opinions about the present can play a role. Historians are not oracles who can clarify the present or foretell the future. Generally speaking, they are somewhat reticent about giving their 'historical judgement'; interpretation, offering a context – that is primarily the field in which historians are trained. This guide intends to contribute to that training in the hope of offering a good basis for the future practice as a historian.

- 6.1 Professional opportunities**
- 6.2 The importance of publishing**

The guide concludes with two appendices. **Appendix I** consists of the guidelines according to 'De Buck' that are most commonly used for notes in historical research in Dutch-language publications. They have been put in a separate appendix to facilitate consultation. Publications in other countries or related (social sciences) disciplines use too many different styles of annotation to be dealt with here.

Appendix II contains a brief presentation of a number of those other styles of annotation.