

Tips for Writing a Good Paragraph  
HIST 2020: US since 1877  
Dr. Potter

Your first two homework assignments this semester sound simple: you are to write one interpretive paragraph for each assignment. But their simplicity belies their importance. We concentrate on paragraphs at the start of the semester because they are the building blocks of papers and essays. If you cannot write a good paragraph, you will not write a good paper. Consequently, it is important that you learn how to write a clear, informative, and focused interpretive paragraph.

A paragraph makes and explains a single point. Every paragraph should begin with a statement of that single point, which in this case is *your answer* to the given question. The body of the paragraph should explain the reasoning behind your answer, and it must be based on the evidence you have before you (i.e., the readings and lecture material we have covered in this class). Your paragraph should stay focused on your single main point, and it should be organized so as to clearly, fully, and logically develop that point. Your writing should be clear and grammatically correct.

As you prepare for this exercise, keep in mind that your answer to the question will be interpretive. Your first sentence in your paragraph will provide *your interpretation*, or what you believe to be the best answer to the question. You will then explain your reasoning for that interpretation using evidence and examples that we covered in class and in the reading. Remember that you are only allowed to write one paragraph, so be sure that your answer is clear and focused enough that it can be explained in just one paragraph.

There are a few rules you should bear in mind as you write:

- Paragraphs do not change subject midway.
- Paragraphs are not made up of a string of statements.
- The evidence you choose and the explanation you make should bear directly on the point being made in the first sentence.
- Each sentence in your explanation should follow logically from the one before it.

We will grade your paragraph on your interpretation and reasoning (i.e., your ability to provide a convincing, thoughtful, and compelling answer to the question) as well as your writing. Your paragraph will be graded based on the following rubric:

HIST 2020 Homework Rubric: Paragraph

	<i>Excellent (A/A-)</i>	<i>Good (B+/B/B-)</i>	<i>Fair (C+/C/C-)</i>	<i>Poor (D+/D/F)</i>
<i>Interpretation (30 points)</i>	<i>27-30 points</i> Answer to question is original, insightful, and convincing.	<i>24-27 points</i> Answer to question is reasonable and convincing.	<i>21-24 points</i> Answer to question is reasonable, but a bit vague or superficial.	<i>0-21 points</i> Answer to the question is unclear, incoherent, and/or unconvincing.
<i>Reasoning and use of evidence (30 points)</i>	<i>27-30 points</i> Reasoning behind interpretation is thoroughly, convincingly, and clearly explained using ample evidence. Reasoning reveals a sophisticated understanding of the content covered in the course so far.	<i>24-27 points</i> Reasoning behind interpretation is fairly clearly and convincingly explained using evidence. Reasoning reflects a solid understanding of the content covered in the course so far.	<i>21-24 points</i> Reasoning behind interpretation has some merit, but it is also occasionally unclear, shallow, and/or unconvincing. Uses little evidence. Reasoning suggests minimal engagement and/or understanding of the content covered in the course so far.	<i>0-21 points</i> Paragraph does not provide coherent reasoning behind its interpretation.
<i>Focus and organization (20 points)</i>	<i>18-20 points</i> Topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. Body of the paragraph explains that point clearly and concisely. Each sentence advances the argument of the paragraph. Each sentence leads to the next in order to fully develop and explain the main idea.	<i>16-18 points</i> Topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. Body of the paragraph explains that point. Most sentences advance the argument of the paragraph, but a few may stray slightly off-topic. Most sentences are organized so as to logically lead the reader from one idea to the next.	<i>14-16 points</i> Topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. Body of paragraph meanders off that main point quite a bit, and/or does not systematically advance that main point.	<i>0-14 points</i> Topic sentence does not state the main idea of the paragraph, or does not state it fully. Body of the paragraph does not adequately explain that point. Sentences are frequently off-topic and/or disorganized.
<i>Mechanics and clarity of writing (20 points)</i>	<i>18-20 points</i> Writing is clear and accessible. Author uses clean and correct grammar and uses words correctly. Author introduces all evidence.	<i>16-18 points</i> Writing is reasonably clear and accessible. Author uses mostly correct grammar and uses most words correctly. Author introduces most evidence.	<i>14-16 points</i> Writing is a bit difficult to follow. Author makes a number of mistakes in terms of grammar and word usage. Author does not introduce most evidence.	<i>0-14 points</i> Writing is unclear, with frequent poor grammar and word usage. Author does not introduce evidence.