

# Writing Essays in Cultural History

Nick Baron

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## *Main general points:*

From past experience, I've found that while students during the first term demonstrate ready intelligence and enthusiasm in analysing primary cultural sources, an increasingly confident grasp of the broader historical and conceptual topics under scrutiny in these modules, and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the motivation, methods and aims of cultural history, they still find it hard to progress for the first written assignment from brief discussion of specific materials to elaborating and pursuing a *sustained, written argument* about a larger and more complex problem. This has prompted me to jot down these few notes.

How to achieve this transition? It's partly a question of structure and developing a core thesis, supported fully by evidence. Partly it's about drawing back from individual sources and understanding the broader relationships between politics and culture.

I want to reiterate that cultural history, which requires that you combine an historically sensitive attitude to the empirical evidence with insight into the nature of cultural phenomena, and that that you *explicitly conceptualise* the (complex and problematic) relationship between the spheres of 'reality' and 'fiction', and the correspondingly different methodologies and forms of knowledge they entail, is not easy. Further, I realise that this is the first piece of extended written work most of you have undertaken in cultural history. It's also probably the first coursework essay most of you will have done in the third year so far, and you will find that expectations are different than at level two.

1. Essays need to demonstrate not only intelligent insight, good research, and sensitive reflection on specific problems but also an understanding of the relevant primary sources.
2. They need to have a strong, core argument unifying the whole piece of work and bringing together sub-arguments and interpretations of individual sources.
3. Structure and development of argument needs to be strong, cogent and coherent.
4. Primary sources must be used (cited/discussed) as evidence in support of argument – but you must demonstrate awareness of the complex and problematic nature of many cultural sources (problems of genre, of medium, of form and structure, e.g. authorial voice, etc.). You must aspire in your answers to sophistication and subtlety. Few answers are simple or straightforward; you will need to qualify and develop any bold assertions that you make (though this should not stop you from being bold!).
5. Most essay questions will require you sensitively to explore and clearly to explain the relationship between history (both as 'the past' and as 'our account/understanding of the past') and culture (both past and present), and the relationship between accounts of political or social history on the one hand, and of cultural texts (the sources), on the other. Usually, you will need to offer an *explicit conceptualisation* of the terms and ideas you discuss, especially if they structure your core argument.

P.T.O.

In sum, focus on developing assertions and arguments which are:

- coherent (i.e. structured so as to be logically connected, consistent),
- cogent (i.e. “convincing or believable by virtue of forcible, clear, or incisive presentation”),
- sustained (i.e. they should maintain their momentum and dynamism through the extended text), and
- original (i.e. based on your own ideas about the general theme and your own interpretations of the primary sources)

**Remember: An argument comprises a sequence of logically connected statements. No statements without evidence. Source of all evidence needs to be cited in footnotes.**

To gain insight into the methods of writing cultural history, you can do no better than to read relevant journal articles in the field, of which there are many (hundreds!) you can access either in your module handbook and reading lists (for the special subject) or via Jstor (for the film/history module).

#### Note on use of historiography

The essay needs to be structured according to the argument you wish to pursue. You need to substantiate your argument by a solid use of sources (but these shouldn't be approached like a series of critical commentaries, rather they should be cited and/or discussed as appropriate where they support your argument). The historiography (background secondary literature) will inevitably shape the argument you develop - you'll probably derive your first ideas about how to approach the topic from reading secondary sources, although doubtless your own reading or viewing of primary materials will suggest modifications to these initial ideas (and, ideally, your argument, based on both an understanding of the existing scholarship and of the sources, will be original and your own).

So, generally, one would expect some critical discussion of existing scholarship in an introduction in order to contextualise your own ideas and concepts. Then, refer to the secondary literature as and when appropriate throughout the essay: you might use it to support your own argument or your own analysis of primary sources [e.g. "as x states, '....' "], or as a contrast to your own ideas [e.g. "although x states "...", it seems more credible that ...."] and so on. Historiographical discussion should therefore be, as indicated above, *critical* - don't take what other authors say necessarily as gospel truth, though respect their interpretative positions, especially if these seem based on substantial research and careful, studied and critical reflection. For you, therefore, historiography is therefore not the *substance* of the essay (as it was with the Exploring Historiography exercise), but may give it form – a framework on which to ‘hang’ your own argument.

## REFERENCING CONVENTIONS: FAQ

"If information is missing on articles such as the volume number, does this matter? "

- All references have to be full, and consistent. This should include the volume number.

"If I cite a historian's opinion that I found cited in a book, do I reference both books?"

- No, you'd usually say 'Baron, cited in ....' and then give the reference for the book where you sourced your ideas/quotation.

"Can I include stuff on the bibliography that I have read but haven't cited in the essay?"

- Yes, it's usual to have read material that you don't quote directly into the essay, but that has informed your views. Bear in mind, however, that you shouldn't include material you haven't read, or have only read very superficially, just to 'bulk out' a bibliography. Not that anyone would do that, I'm sure ;-)

"How does one cite reviews from film journals in our essays? Is it enough just to put the title as (for example), 'Review: The Marriage of Maria Braun'?"

- The usual would be Baron, 'Review' (Title of Film), *Name of Journal*, Vol. X, No. X, pp. xx-xx. Sometimes the issue number can be omitted, when the page numbers run sequentially from one issue to the next during each year. See NfG and/or my separate guidance on essay-writing style and skills for details.

"Do I need to reference a film each time I mention it"

- No, only the first time, include footnote to *Name of Film* (Director, Year). If you are citing dialogue taken from the dvd/video at any point in the essay after this, you don't need to footnote it. However, if you are citing dialogue that you've taken from a published edition of the screenplay, then you do need to cite this in full.

"Should I include a list of films?"

Yes, as well as a list of books (bibliography), your essay should include a filmography. As in the footnotes, the standard referencing format is: *Name of Film* (Baron, 2008).

"I was wondering about references to visual sources (pictures, posters, architectural works, etc.) in our essays. I have assumed that any pictorial source discussed at length (not simply as an example of a trend or theme but subject to a longer analysis) could be attached as an appendix. So I have taken photocopies of those pictures, posters, architectural plans that I intend to use. Should I simply refer to them as appendices, write their origin on the photocopy and attach it to the back of each essay I submit?"

- This is the correct procedure if you're going to discuss a visual source (not a film, for which see above!) at length. What would be ideal is if you could include scans of the images in an appendix after the main text of the essay, but before the bibliography. This would mean you have one Appendix, with each image labelled Figure 1, Figure 2 etc. (and referenced in text accordingly). You MUST also include not only the title of the image, but its the source (i.e. where you scanned it from) underneath each reproduction. If you can't scan the original published image, or your photocopy, then, yes, you can just insert the photocopy/ies in the essay, and write caption/source by hand (and a photocopy of the photocopy for the second copy of the essay)."