

# How to Write a Scholarly Monograph like a Historian



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## Overview and Introduction

When people hear I'm a history major, they typically ask "Why would you ever do that to yourself?" I imagine I receive this reaction because many people imagine historical research as reading hundreds of pages of dusty old books and writing neverending research papers about old dead guys. Before entering the historical discourse community, this is the idea I had as well.

However, I have come to realize that this is not exactly how one should write a scholarly monograph, in other words, a specialized book, like a historian. Through my experience as a history major and my interview with Dr. Mir Yarfitz, one of my history professors, I have learned that there are three fundamental qualities to historical writing: the three main genres are historical narratives, social histories, and intellectual/cultural history, research is essential, and you need to consider the audience your piece will attract and what this implicates. In this guide, I will fully explain each of these necessary qualities and outline why they are important to the historical discourse community. By the end, whether you're an aspiring history major or not, hopefully, you will gain insight on how to write like a historian.

## Part 1: Research

History by definition is the study of past events. For this reason, if you're writing like a historian you *must* use sources from the past, primary sources, and

the work of other historians interpreting these events, secondary sources. In my interview with Dr. Yarfitz, he emphasized that the most important of historical writing is research, “For historians, we value huge quantities of research about what other historians have already written, but you must also physically go to the archives to look at stuff, preferably stuff people haven’t looked at yet and form a unique argument.” Dr. Yarfitz even told me how for his own book, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in the Golden Age Argentina*, he traveled to Geneva and the New York Public Library to find archives of Yiddish newspapers.

In order to write a historical scholarly monograph, you have to look through heaps of archives to find a bigger picture. When analyzing primary sources, you must ask: who wrote this? Why did they write it? What is and is not included? What are the limitations? You can not read primary sources as transparent portals into the past, but instead, you must use a critical lens and realize that people of the past were equally as prone to bias as we are today.

Historical writing is unique, as Dr. Yarfitz stated, “Historians do not get to produce new data, you can only use things from archives. You can’t ask living people to give you new information. You are restricted by what records have been preserved, trying to figure out what new questions and new answers you can get from those sources.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Yarfitz

## Part 2: The 3 Genres

Now that we have outlined how important research is prior to writing your piece, we can begin discussing the forms historical writing takes. Every discourse community has different types of genres or written methods of communicated ideas. Genres can include lab reports, novels, proposals, and more. For history in specific, the most important genres are historical narratives, social histories, and intellectual/cultural history, “There are three genres in the historical discourse community. The first genre is historical narratives, in other words, the story of famous historical figures doing things and how that unfolds. Some people think that historical narratives are outdated ‘Great Man History.’<sup>2</sup> People outside the historical discourse community may be unfamiliar with the term “great man history.” It stems from the 19th century Great Man Theory which states that “prominent leaders throughout the course of history were born to lead and deserved to do so as a result of their natural abilities and talents.”<sup>3</sup> As time progresses, more and more historians believe this theory to be very outdated or even “childish, primitive and unscientific.”<sup>4</sup>

The second historical genre is social history, which Dr. Yarfitz explains as “stories where the characters are not famous and maybe entire classes of people.”

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Mir Yarfitz

<sup>3</sup> Villanova University. “The Great Man Theory.” *Villanovau.com*, 2019, [www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/great-man-theory/](http://www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/great-man-theory/).

<sup>4</sup> Villanova University

Social history is essentially sociology but of the past. It is becoming more and more popular with historians as social history can give a better glimpse of what life was *actually* like for an average person during that period, not just for a wealthy ruler, like Julius Caesar, for example.

Finally, the third genre is intellectual/cultural history, which “describes how ideas change over time.”<sup>5</sup> Yale University describes cultural history as something that “brings to life a past time and place. Culture can imply everyday attitudes, values, assumptions and prejudices, and the rituals and practices that express them, from magical beliefs to gender roles and racial hierarchies.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, intellectual/cultural history is the intersection of anthropology and history.

Despite the distinction between these three genres, Dr. Yarfitz stressed the importance of balancing narrative and analysis to keep your reader engaged and create a wider audience for your piece. In his words, “You have to figure out what story you can tell with the sources you have. To tell that story, you need to use either a narrative form or a more analytical form, but ideally, there is a balance because using stories adds interest to the book.”

### [Part 3: Audience](#)

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Yarfitz

<sup>6</sup> Yale University. “Cultural History.” *Cultural History* | Department of History, [history.yale.edu/undergraduate/regions-and-pathways/cultural-history](http://history.yale.edu/undergraduate/regions-and-pathways/cultural-history).

Finally, the third most important historical element of historical writing is considering the audience of your piece. It is important to keep this in mind for any discourse community or any writing in general, but in history, specific audiences have certain implications. For example, when Dr. Yarfitz was writing his book on Jewish sex work in Argentina, he wanted to make sure his book appealed to Jewish history lovers, Jews in Argentina who don't want to talk about sex work, scholars and activists who are interested in sex work, people who think sex work is bad and those who think sex work is a form of agency.

This is not to say that you can't argue a specific viewpoint or opinion in your historical writing. One misconception I personally had was that when writing history papers, you need to simply report the facts without adding your own thoughts. I then began receiving negative comments from my professors saying I needed to push the envelope and actually argue something. With historical writing, it is important to balance evidence and creating a unique argument or interpretation of that evidence.

When analyzing all of your primary sources, if you begin to notice a trend among all of them, you can certainly write a paper arguing why this trend was pertinent during the time period. For instance, in my British history class, I am currently writing a research paper on witch trials in Early Modern England. I analyzed about ten primary sources (my paper is on a much smaller scale than a Professor's published book so I don't need as many) and noticed a trend that many of the witch hunts were rationalized due to the fact that women were seen

as inferior and therefore more susceptible to evil during this period. So now, the argument of my paper is that witch hunts in Early Modern England were motivated by hatred of women. My paper could attract a wide array of people; women's and gender studies scholars, sociologists, people interested in witch hunts, and of course, historians. By considering my audience, I have created a greater appeal to my paper.

## Conclusion

When entering any discourse community, it is extremely daunting to adapt practices of experts. Honestly, this entire project, especially the interview with Dr. Yarfitz, was extremely helpful for me too. I used many of his tips while writing my history final papers. To summarize, the three essential qualities to historical writing are the following: the three main genres are historical narratives, social histories, and intellectual/cultural history, research is extremely important, and you need to consider the audience your piece will attract and what this implicates.

When I asked for advice on entering the history discourse community, Dr. Yarfitz said, "Listen to your professors, read a lot in the field of history and notice they are doing. Allow yourself to be disciplined within a discipline." While I cannot guarantee this guide will secure you an A on your next history paper, I hope it has helped you write more like a historian. Happy writing!

## Works Cited

1. Yale University. "Cultural History." *Cultural History | Department of History*, history.yale.edu/undergraduate/regions-and-pathways/cultural-history.
2. Villanova University. "The Great Man Theory." *Villanovau.com*, 2019, [www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/great-man-theory/](http://www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/great-man-theory/).
3. Interview with Dr. Yarfitz:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XLDWJI4YhvieEMGL51DC\\_7d3KqlMwvEx8xd54mCq8zw/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XLDWJI4YhvieEMGL51DC_7d3KqlMwvEx8xd54mCq8zw/edit)