How to write a “History of Ideas” paper
[adapted from Istvan Hont on University of St. Andrews website, as quoted by Brad DeLong who himself got it from Adam Tooze]

How to write an excellent paper on a classic text

1. Openings are crucial. Plunge in with something substantive about the theory/ text in question. Never begin with potted biography or history, or generalities about the meaning of life.

2. Get the balance right between explaining the text from the author’s (apparent) perspective and highlighting its blindspots, failures, errors, and/or sins of omission. Some people are over-eager to show their critical powers: avoid hatchet jobs; it shows lack of sympathetic understanding: your author may be wrong or racist but he or she is not stupid. Other people, by contrast, are not eager enough to show their critical powers: avoid tame plot summaries; make sure that your paper tells your reader something about the text that s/he might not have recognized when reading it.

3. Make sure your paper has a guiding conceptual framework. Give clear direction to the argument, a sense of how your claims relate to each other. Some papers are structured as “beads on a string”: many pretty paragraphs, but they’re held together by little more than a sense that “here’s something else that is interesting.” A stronger paper is structured as links in a chain. You may want to hang some beads or a locket on the chain, but it should be a chain.

4. Most works of political or social thought, as well as literature, operate on the basis of fundamental (often unstated) assumptions about how the world works, about what logic is, about how people know what they know and why they do what they do. If you can identify and “unpack” one or more of those assumptions (that is, show its effects for the rest of the text), you will be on the way to having written a very good paper.

5. You cannot cover everything in a paper of 2500 or 5000 words. You cannot cover everything in a book of 120,000 words! Identify a specific question you can answer or theme you can meaningfully explore within the word limit; then indicate how that answer or exploration relates to the text/author more generally.

6.Quote from the text, using brief phrases, integrated with your own sentences. Avoid the most boringly famous quotations. Avoid large chunks of displayed quotation. Cite specific chapters or sections of the text. Acknowledge your sources, both primary and secondary.

7. Get the balance right between text and context. The essay should be structured as an account of a theory and a text, but along the way you may well need to indicate how the author/text responded to circumstances and traditions of a political, intellectual, or biographical kind. Try to avoid long paragraphs of “background information” while simultaneously remaining alert to the situation in which the text was produced (and, perhaps, those much later moments in which it was read).

8. Remember that human beings (including authors of famous works) are complex and often do not know their own motives. Don't pretend to know more about "why" than you can know; think in terms of "How?" and "With what consequences or effects?"

9. Texts matter not just for "what they say" but *how they say it*. Interpreting a work of social or political theory is much like reading other literature; be sure to pay attention to images, metaphors, illustrations, questions of genre, etc. When reading works classed as "literature," pay attention to their implicit or explicit social, political, and/or religious claims.

10. Your goal is to offer your own analysis/interpretation of a particular text. You must not steal ideas and interpretations from others, but you should also not worry that you have to read every existing interpretation in order to make sure you are saying "something original." You may find it useful to read what others have written about the text, but be careful: you do not want to write a paper the thesis of which is "I agree with what *A* has written about *y.*" You might, however, want to write one with the thesis "*A* argues *x* about this text and *B* says *not x*; here I show that their views actually coincide more than they diverge because they both miss *f*." Regardless of your thesis, your paper should show that you have read the text for yourself.

11. Many classic and remote texts continue to be read and taught because they have things to say to our current moment. Others are read and taught because they offer insights into a radically different time-place and therefore remind us that society as we know it is neither natural nor necessary. You may want to make connections and draw contrasts between your text and "how we live now." But do this briefly and carefully: it is hard to do without falling into clichés.