

What is a historiography essay?

Although you might hear slightly different definitions that add or subtract, emphasize or deemphasize, various elements, a historiography essay whoever defines it contains some common ingredients. Essentially, they are a historical analysis of the ways that historians have written about and represented various themes, issues, events. In the most general sense, they cover some of the main issues, debates, arguments, books, and scholars within a particular field of historical inquiry. They may focus in on specific books and arguments to compare and contrast them or they may delineate how a field has changed over time. In a historiography essay you must synthesize large amounts of information and be able to talk about related elements between books and 'schools' or methodologies.

One of the most important aspects of a historiography essay is that it analyzes how the central intellectual themes and theories, perspectives and approaches of a book and its author, relate to contemporary historical events. Rephrased, many historiography essays make linkages between the authors, their books/arguments, and the social, political, cultural, and economic context in which they live and write. These essays sometimes present books as products of particular historical moments and current conditions. For example, 'The New Social History' emerged from 1960s and early 1970s social movements and radicalism that saw fundamental flaws in American society, which were rooted in American History. One result of this convergence of historical event and scholarship was an interest in 'marginalized' groups that did not fit into the exceptionalist narrative of consensus historians. This, in turn was related to social movements seeking justice for marginalized peoples in the U.S.

Historiography essays are not the same as reviews of the literature, though they share some elements. They are not annotated bibliographies or strings of independent book reviews tied together by neat transitions. When writing a historiography of labor relations, for instance, you would consider several of the main approaches of labor historians, group like-minded books together, and then analyze the differences/similarities within AND across those groupings. Frequently you would start with and focus on themes and arguments that appear (or do not appear) in books, and subsume specific books to the general discussion of a theme or issue, using those specific books as illustrative examples. This is in contrast to starting with a specific book, moving to another, and then another, talking about them separately. Again, the key here is synthesis and analysis of themes, issues, debates and arguments as they appear in books. NOT the books themselves in isolation.

There might be a general structure or organizational framework to them, but this is tentative. Your introductory paragraph might contain an interesting hook or quote that illustrates something essential to the point you want to make regarding the literature. You might start your paper by laying out the main debates and arguments, threads or veins of discussion in particular field. You might make a statement about which are most convincing or least engaging. Then you may summarize some main categories or themes you will cover. Next, you provide a roadmap or preview of how you will discuss the books. Your ensuing sections should be logically organized around specific themes, commonalities among books, similar debates, etc. You might organize it in different ways, but you should not simply start with a book, summarize it, move to the second book, the third, etc. You might collectively summarize books that are similar, then evaluate them, but do not write an annotated bibliography.

Depending on how you organize it, you might conclude the essay with overarching comments about the state of the field, interesting avenues for new research, promising but unacknowledged approaches, etc.