Writing Tips and Style Guide

Writing Tips

Use spell check to check for misspellings and typos.

Keep your writing clear and concise. Main characters are often the subjects of sentences; main actions should be the verbs of sentences; verbs should be introduced early on in sentences.

Be consistent—proofread your work and make sure that you are consistent throughout.

Watch for subject-verb agreement—the police was at the station should be the police were at the station.

Make sure your pronouns match your nouns—the state should be it, not they.

History is always written in past tense so the story of your episode should use the past tense. One exception might be if you are writing about a source—In The Promise of the New South, Ayers discusses the violent South.

Vary your word choice by not using the same word over and over—The act directed the state of Arkansas to direct the profits… should be The act instructed the state of Arkansas to direct the profits OR The act directed the state of Arkansas to use the profits…

Avoid passive voice—The bill was signed by the president should be The president signed the bill. Watch for using is, was, or were too frequently. It helps to try to think about who is doing the action. Instead of The area was terrorized—who was doing the terrorizing? The Ku Klux Klan terrorized the area.

Similarly, try to avoid weak verbs such as said, exist, or state.

Make sure the body of your description actually proves the point you are trying to make. In other words, make sure your evidence is relevant and matches your point. If your point is that the South was a violent place, make sure your description shows that.

Have an organized structure to your episode. Use your primary source to tell a story and then draw a conclusion about how it fits in the bigger picture of history. If you must begin with brief context get to the story as soon as possible.

Style Guide

Acronyms: always spell out acronyms on first mention—American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS).

African American: do not hyphenate. You can use African American interchangeably with black, but you should not use the terms Negro or Colored unless they are contained in a quote.

Assumed Knowledge: be careful of assumed knowledge in your descriptions. Do not assume that when you refer to items the first time the reader knows what it is. On first mention, use the whole description. For example, the battle, the act, the president, and the war should be the Battle of Bull Run, the Fugitive Slave Act, President Abraham Lincoln, and the Civil War.

Centuries: write out centuries—nineteenth century or the twentieth century. Hyphenate when used as an adjective—nineteenth-century books or twentieth-century morals.
Commas: use in introductory phrases (Before the war, the South...), in a series of three or more (I want an apple, a banana, and an orange.), in compound sentences (The North won the war, and the South did not recover for years.), and generally use the comma to make your episode easier to read.

Contractions: do not use contractions (don’t, won’t, shouldn’t) in your episodes unless they are part of a quote.

Dates: write specific dates as January 3, 1861, so the sentence looks like: On January 3, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln OR President Lincoln signed the bill on January 3, 1861. Do not use January 3rd, 1861.

Descriptions: the body of your episode should stand-alone. The reader should not have to refer to the label/title or the dates to understand your episode. For example, if the label/title is “The Homestead Act,” your description should not begin with “Legislators passed the act...” because it assumes the reader knows you are discussing the Homestead Act. Instead your description should begin “Legislators passed the Homestead Act...”

Labels: the title to your episode should be brief but descriptive—the readers should have a sense of what the episode is about from your label. Do not use a full sentence for your title, and all words should be capitalized except articles and short prepositions (the, a/an, of, to, and, on, in) unless they are the first word of the title.

Numbers: spell out numbers from one to nine, then use the numerals—one banana, 12 carrots. You can also spell out round numbers—one thousand vs. 1,265. Use a comma to separate more than three numbers—300 vs. 3,000.

Percent: always spell out percent and do not use the symbol (%). Use numerals with percents—20 percent, not twenty percent.

Personal names: you should use first and last names on the first mention. Thereafter use last names if possible on subsequent mentions. Obviously if you are referring to a slave who only has a first name, using first names is fine.

Start Date/End Date: the reader should know what your dates reference. For example, if your label/title is “The Birth of John Doe,” then they will understand that the dates refer to his birthday. But if your title is “The Violent South,” you may need to explain in your description what your dates refer to.

South/North: always capitalize when you are referring to the regions of the country. Do not capitalize them when referring to direction—The South lost the war vs. I went south on Interstate 81.

United States: should be spelled out when you are referring to the country, but it is fine to abbreviate as an adjective: the United States grew vs. U.S. agriculture.