

HISTORY WORDS

History, like many disciplines, has its own distinctive styles of writing. While learning to think about the past, history students must also learn to write history in a clear and convincing manner. Those who are already strong writers will relish this challenge but others may find it confronting.

This page contains several lists of 'history words' to provide you with a head start in writing history. You will encounter many of these words when reading history while others are useful descriptive words you can use in your own writing. These lists are not comprehensive or exhaustive but may prove useful for inexperienced writers.

If you are new to history, or have difficulty finding the right words, save or print off these lists and keep them to hand. If you would like to suggest words for these lists, please make contact with your ideas.

Sections or groups in society

| | |
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| academia | People who work in schools and universities, teaching or undertaking research |
| agrarian | People involved in producing crops and livestock through farming |
| aristocracy | People who possess noble titles and privileges, often with wealth and power |
| artisans | People involved in the manufacture or repair of items, such as mechanics |
| <i>bourgeoisie</i> | People who own capital, such as land, factories and raw materials |
| capitalist | As for <i>bourgeoisie</i> (above), people who own capital and the means of production |
| clergy | People ordained by the church to carry out its functions, such as priests, monks and nuns |
| commercial | People involved in trade, such as importing and exporting, buying and selling |
| economic | People, institutions and activities that produce society's wants and needs |
| establishment | The political, social and economic elites who wield power in a society |
| gender | Refers to the rights, roles and conditions of men and women in a society |
| industrial | The mass production of wants and needs, particularly on a large scale |
| intelligentsia | People who develop ideas, theories and policies in a society |
| middle class | The social classes who own some property and enjoy safe and stable standards of living |
| military | A state's defence forces, such as the army, navy and air force |
| monarchy | The institution of hereditary royalty, led by a king, queen or emperor |
| nobility | People who possess noble titles, either from birth, royal grant or venality |
| peasantry | People who work the land, usually as tenant farmers and often in impoverished conditions |
| <i>philosophes</i> | Intellectuals and writers who engage in critical study of society, beliefs and ideas |
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| political | The people, bodies and processes that govern and make decisions in a society |
| proletariat | People who work for wages in a society, particularly in the industrial sector |
| provincial | The areas of a nation outside major cities, such as lesser towns, rural areas or colonies |
| upper class | The upper levels of a society, such as royalty, aristocracy and the very wealthy |
| urban | The people, actions and conditions in large cities |
| village | A small agricultural community, usually in a rural area |
| working class | The lower levels of society, whose members must work to survive |

Political systems

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| absolutism | Any political system where the ruler or government wields absolute power |
| anarchism | A political system that seeks to abolish the state and create a communal society |
| autocracy | A system where political power is concentrated in the hands of a single person |
| capitalism | An economic system where most companies, land and other resources are privately owned |
| colonialism | A system of claiming, settling, ruling and maintaining one or more colonies (see imperialism) |
| communism | A political-economic system with no state, minimal class differences and economic equality |
| constitutional monarchy | A political system with a monarch whose power is limited and shared with the people |
| democracy | A political system where the government or parts of it are selected by the people |
| divine right | A form of political authority where power is said to be ordained by God |
| fascism | A political system marked by authoritarian rule, nationalism, state and military power |
| feudalism | A medieval socio-political system with a hierarchy of kings, lords, knights and vassals |
| imperialism | A system where a powerful state conquers territories (colonies) for its own gain |
| Marxism | A system or world view based on material factors, inequalities of wealth and class struggle |
| mercantilism | An economic system designed to increase national power by increasing wealth and trade |
| militarism | A system where military needs are prioritised and the military exerts political influence |
| nationalism | An ideology urging loyalty to one's own country; to put your country first |
| popular sovereignty | A form of political authority where power is derived from the consent of the people |
| socialism | A system where the government rules in the interests of the workers or common people |
| syndicalism | A form of socialism where the workers collectively control their factories or workplaces |
| theocracy | A system where government and laws are determined by religious leaders and teachings |
| totalitarianism | A political system where the power of the state often overrides the rights of individuals |
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| welfare state | A system that provides necessities of life to the homeless, unemployed, sick or elderly |
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Political concepts

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| assembly | A body of people, elected or appointed to form government or make decisions |
| autocracy | A form of government where one person is responsible for decision making |
| constitution | A document defining systems of government and the limits of government power |
| democracy | A political system where government is formed by popular elections |
| divine right | The idea that governments and autocrats derive their power and authority from God |
| elections | The process of voting to select others, usually to form a representative government |
| <i>executive</i> | The branch of government responsible for leadership and day to day decision making |
| government | A system responsible for leadership, making decisions and making laws in a society |
| ideology | A system of ideas and beliefs that shapes one's views about politics and government |
| legislature | An assembly that exists to pass new laws or review, amend or abolish existing laws |
| parliament | An elected legislature from which an executive government is also formed |
| participation | The involvement of ordinary people in selecting government and in political discourse |
| popular sovereignty | The idea that governments derive their power and authority from the consent of the people |
| representation | A political concept where some individuals act, speak or make decisions on behalf of others |
| sovereignty | The supreme authority of a government, the basis for its power and autonomy |
| state | 'The state' describes an organised society and the political system that governs it |

Economic concepts

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| capital | The resources needed to produce things, such as land, raw materials and equipment |
| commerce | The business of buying and selling, particularly on a large scale |
| debt | Money owed to another party, usually because it has been previously borrowed |
| deficit | The shortfall that exists when spending is greater than income |
| exports | Resources or goods sold and shipped to another country, which boosts national income |
| finance | Describes the sections of an economy concerned with managing money, such as banking |
| imports | Resources or goods bought and shipped in from another country, depleting national income |
| industry | The production of raw materials and manufactured goods within an economy |
| inflation | An increase in prices for goods and services, reducing the purchasing power of money |
| labour | The people who provide work to enable production or delivery of services; the workers |

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| laissez-faire | French for “let it be”; an economy free of trade regulations, tariffs or costs |
| manufacturing | The process of making or producing goods, particularly on a large scale |
| production | The process of making things, particularly things that have additional value |
| profit | Financial reward obtained from business or investment, where income exceeds costs |
| revenue | Money received for normal activities, such as sales (business) or taxation (government) |
| taxation | Money collected from individuals and groups by the government to fund the state |
| trade | The buying or selling of goods, usually in exchange for money |

Words for describing historical cause

| | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|------------|---------------|---------------|
| agitated | aroused | awakened | brought about | catalyst |
| developed | deteriorated | encouraged | exacerbated | fuelled |
| generated | incited | inflamed | instigated | kindled |
| led to | long term | motivated | popularised | propagandised |
| prompted | promoted | protested | provoked | radicalised |
| reformed | rocked | roused | set off | short term |
| solicited | sparked | spurred | stimulated | stirred up |
| transformed | triggered | urged | whipped up | worsened |

Words for describing historical effect or consequence

| | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|
| boosted | catastrophic | consolidated | crippled | decimated |
| demoralised | depleted | disastrous | disbanded | disoriented |
| dispersed | dissolved | divided | drained | elevated |
| emboldened | enriched | exhausted | fatigued | hardened |
| heartened | improved | inspired | mobilised | prospered |
| punished | restored | sapped | scattered | separated |
| stimulated | strained | strengthened | stretched | unified |
| united | unsettled | uplifted | upset | wearied |

Words for describing historical continuity

| | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|----------|--------------|-----------|
| blocked | calmed | censored | clamped down | concealed |
| conservative | contained | curbed | deterred | dispersed |

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| froze | halted | held back | limited | mollified |
| pacified | oppressed | overpowered | prohibited | quashed |
| quelled | reactionary | regressed | repressed | resisted |
| restored | restrained | restricted | smothered | stabilised |
| stemmed | stunted | subdued | suppressed | wound back |

Words for describing historical significance

| | | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| adverse | calamitous | catastrophic | destabilising | destructive |
| devastating | dire | disastrous | essential | expedient |
| far reaching | far sighted | fateful | forerunner | ground breaking |
| healing | important | innovative | meaningful | modernising |
| negative | ominous | opportune | profound | pivotal |
| positive | revolutionary | ruinous | serious | shaking |
| shattering | significant | spear heading | timely | trail blazing |
| transforming | tumultuous | unsettling | uprooting | vital |

Words for evaluating historical sources

| | | | | |
|----------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| balanced | baseless | biased | convincing | credible |
| deceptive | dishonest | distorted | doubtful | dubious |
| emotive | exaggerated | fallacious | far fetched | flawed |
| honest | imbalanced | impossible | inflated | limited |
| misleading | one sided | overwrought | persuasive | phoney |
| plausible | propagandist | realistic | reasonable | selective |
| sensationalist | skewed | sound | spurious | unrealistic |
| unreliable | untenable | useful | valid | vivid |

Command words for history tasks and activities

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| analyse | Examine and discuss the important structure or parts of something |
| annotate | Record written questions, comments or explanations on a document or visual source |
| annotated bibliography | A list of books that contains a note about the content and usefulness of each book |
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| argue | Present a case, to express and explain a particular reason or theory |
| brainstorm | Gather and record thoughts and ideas spontaneously, without sorting or evaluating them |
| cite | Refer to an authority or trusted source, as evidence of your information or idea |
| compare | Examine two or more propositions and identify and discuss similarities between them |
| concept map | A visual chart or diagram, using shapes and lines to organise and connect topics or ideas |
| conclusion | The last paragraph in sustained writing, it restates the contention and 'rounds off' the text |
| contrast | Examine two or more propositions and identify and discuss differences between them |
| critically analyse | Analyse something and offer views and judgements about the merit or value of its parts |
| define | Provide precise meanings and explanations about something |
| describe | Provide a detailed and graphic account of something |
| discuss | Provide a balanced commentary about something, mentioning arguments for and against |
| evaluate | Analyse something and form final conclusions about its value, credibility or merit |
| explain | Provide a clear, straightforward and detailed account of something |
| historiographical activity | A task requiring discussion of historians and their interpretations of a particular topic |
| interpret | Examine something to extract its meaning and express it in your own words |
| introduction | The first paragraph in sustained writing, offering a contention and an outline of the text |
| issue | A topic or question that is open to discussion, debate or dispute |
| justify | Provide clear reasons, grounds and evidence for a particular argument or conclusion |
| outline | Provide a basic overview of something, describing only its main features |
| paraphrase | To describe someone else's words, statement or meaning, in your own words |
| review | Read or examine something and offer your own thoughts and judgements about it |
| signpost | Use phrases and sentences outlining the direction or structure your writing will take |
| summarise | Briefly describe the main points or attributes of something, without going into much detail |

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