Excerpted from Bowdoin College Writing Guide for History

3.a.

Argument Concepts

What is the author's argument?

- What is the thesis question?
- What are the premises underlying it?
- What is the thesis?
- What is the "road map"; that is, given this thesis, what are the individual points the author will have to prove to make the thesis be true?
- What assumptions has the author made which remain unaddressed?

What arguments does the author make that may be challenged?

- Premises underlying thesis question
- Individual points of the argument in the "road map," or body of the work.

If you wanted to challenge this author, how would you go about it?

- Choose one point -- either a premise underlying the thesis question, or a part of the author's "road map."
- What kind of primary source evidence would you be looking for to "test" this point? What kinds of primary source evidence would tend to support the author? What kinds would undermine the author's argument?
- The last step would be to go to the primary source evidence itself, and see what you find.

Two important concepts:

1. The "valid" argument: an argument structured such that, given that the premises are correct, the conclusion *must* be correct. In the following argument, the premises are not correct, but the argument is still valid, for its logic is correct:

p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
p2: All midwives had professional educations
c: Therefore Martha Ballard had a professional education

1. The "sound" argument: a valid argument with true premises. The preceding argument is valid but not sound, for not all of its premises are true (p2 is false).
2. This argument is invalid, and hence unsound (despite that its premises are correct):

p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
p2: Martha Ballard caught over fifty babies
c: All midwives caught over fifty babies

- This argument is sound, for its argument is valid and its premises true:

p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
p2: All midwives catch babies
c: Martha Ballard caught babies

A very important thing to remember: Very often, we confuse good or possible arguments with the arguments a scholar actually made. In evaluating a scholarly argument, you are making claims about what an author has stated. You do not have the freedom to put arguments in authors' mouths; *you must be able to back up every claim you make (about an author's argument) through reference to the text*. There is a distinction between what an author *might* have argued and what the author *did* argue. If it's not in the text, the author did not argue it -- even if it would have made a good argument. It is vital to imagine possible arguments, but remember -- that enterprise is not the same as determining what the author actually argued.

3.b.

Analyzing Arguments

This guide is intended to:

- Help you analyze historical arguments. Once you've determined the thesis question and thesis behind an argument, you can use this information to analyze the quality of the argument.
- Help you construct your own historical arguments by helping you understand what makes a good historical argument.

Consider this thesis question, which is the one Frank Tannenbaum asked in *From Slave to Citizen*:

How did differing patterns of slavery in the Americas lead to differing patterns of post-emancipation race relations in the Americas; specifically, how did these differing historical patterns of slavery make post-emancipation Latin America a better place for people of African descent than the post-emancipation United States?

What are the premises underlying it?

- **There were differing patterns of slavery in the Americas**
- **These led to differing patterns of post-emancipation race relations**
- **Latin America is a better place for people of African descent than the United States**

Now consider this thesis:

As evident in patterns of emancipation, slavery (and hence post-emancipation race relations) in the United States was harsher than in Latin America because -- due to a legacy of Catholicism and Roman law -- Latin American slavery recognized to a greater degree the moral value of the slave.

What is the "road map" for this paper? That is, what is the chain of reasoning this paper *must* pursue if it is to demonstrate the veracity of its thesis?

1. **There were differing patterns of slavery in the Americas**
2. **These determined differing patterns of post-emancipation race relations**
3. **Latin America is a better place for people of African descent than the United States**

Note that thus far the paper is structured around the premises underlying the thesis question. The veracity of these need to be established before any further claims can be made.

1. **Slavery in the United States was "harsher" than slavery in Latin America.**
2. **Differences in harshness were due to differences in the degrees to which the institution of slavery recognized the "moral value" or humanity of the slave.**
3. **Differences in the degrees to which slavery recognized the "moral value" or humanity of the slave resulted from differing religious and legal institutions; Latin America was less harsh due to a legacy of Roman law and Catholicism.**

Note that these are all new claims, which can only be made once the "thesis premises" have been established. Note that much of the paper must deal with simply establishing that the thesis question may be asked.

How to evaluate this argument:

- Are there any ill-defined terms in the thesis question or thesis? Are there any fuzzy concepts which may make analyzing the veracity of claims difficult or impossible? In this instance, I can find two:
- What is "harshness" and how is it measured?
- What does it mean to recognized the "moral value" of the slave?
- Is the logic of the "road map" valid? If the logic of any step in the road map is not valid, the argument may fail, regardless of the veracity of its individual claims.

- Is the veracity of each step of the "road map" demonstrated? If any step of the road map is not sufficiently demonstrated, every conclusion which succeeds it is suspect.

6.d.

The Scholarly Voice:

Hints on Crafting Historical Prose

Clarity of language demonstrates clarity of thought. Your prose should be precise. Never assume that the reader will know what you're talking about; she or he never will unless you avoid all possible ambiguity. The meanings of every word and phrase must be crystal clear; if they are not, you have not explained sufficiently.

Avoid referring to yourself explicitly ("in this paper I will examine") or implicitly ("it is interesting to examine").

Your paper is about the people in your sources, not the sources themselves. Do not bring attention *in your prose* to your sources or the problems they present (this is what notes are for). Avoid phrases like, "In the collection edited by Ira Berlin, there is the story of a slave man who escaped to freedom." Instead, just tell me the story of the man; if you've cited properly, I'll be able to find your source. Avoid also phrases like, "This document shows that planters abandoned their land with great reluctance." Just say "Some planters abandoned their land with great reluctance."

It is important to keep your "voice" distinct from the "voice" of your subjects. When working closely with the writings of a historical subject, it is easy to forget to identify the author of a thought. Often, *you* wind up looking like the author.

For instance, in explaining William Lloyd Garrison's views on African colonization, your sentence should not read "Those who favored colonization were really hostile to the interests of all black people." This looks like your

thought when it is really Garrison's. Identify it as such by adding, "According to Garrison," immediately before.

Here is another example of incorrect use of voice causing confusion about the author of an idea: "Black parents have complained about books containing the word 'n_____' being read aloud in class, therefore *Huck Finn* and other novels which use the pejorative term should be excluded from the classroom as racist." The implication here is that *black parents* think the book should be banned, but the sentence technically reads that the *author of the paper* thinks this. This re-write clarifies things: "Black parents have complained about books containing the word 'n_____' being read aloud in class, therefore **they think that** *Huck Finn* and other novels which use the pejorative term should be excluded from the classroom as racist."

History takes place in the past. Use the past tense and avoid the present tense. Keep tenses consistent.

A great scholar once told me that good writing is in the verbs. Use active verbs rather than the verb "to be" (and its conjugations), and minimize your use of adjectives.

Make sure you define important concepts. If you argue that Jefferson was neurotic, make sure you define that term.

When introducing a person, identify her or him completely. Only after first using "James Biddle, the president of the first national bank," should you refer to him simply as "Biddle."

Avoid using rhetorical questions to introduce your subject, or for any other reason. Instead, provide the answer to the rhetorical question you wish to pose.

Gendered language: Pay attention to gender-specific language. "The plague killed half of Europe's mankind"? Well, womankind suffered as well. On the other hand, there are times when it is not appropriate to use gender-neutral language. In this sentence - "Catholic law declared that the priest was required to keep his or her vow of celibacy, despite frequent lapses in

practice" - gender-neutral language makes no sense, as Catholic priests are by definition men. Thinking about gendered language invites more analysis: "All men are created equal." You might ask yourself if this meant all men and women, all men except slaves, etc. Avoid overuse of male-gender pronouns when their referents are not necessarily male. You may wish to alternate use of "he" and "she" in your paper. Avoid "s/he" or "he/she." It is often possible to make the noun to which a pronoun refers plural, thus obviating the need for a gender-specific pronoun ("their" is gender neutral; "his" is not).

Vague terms and over-generalizations: Terms like "now," "then," "later," "before," "in this period" should refer to clearly-defined dates. "The people," "the masses," and phrases like "white power structure" are vague and generalized, as are "blacks" and "industrialists." Rarely can one generalization capture the nuances of history. Work for specificity; it is more accurate, and much more convincing. Avoid the article "the" that many writers us, for example: "the whites" or "the blacks." This may seem to objectify your subjects and introduce a distasteful tone.

Strive for conciseness. In general, use as few words as possible, but as many as necessary. "His reasons for whipping her included such things as letting her husband enter the army." Why not: "He whipped her for letting her husband enter the army." Wordiness often results from overuse of adjectives, as in "Former slaves were happiest and most content when living with their fraternal and related families." This is redundant and wordy. "Former slaves were happiest when living with their families."

Avoid the passive voice, as in "The bill was passed by Congress." Make active by identifying the subject of the sentence and placing it before the verb, as in "Congress passed the bill."

Choose active verbs: Good writing springs from lively verbs rather than superfluous adjectives. Choose active verbs, and avoid whenever possible dull verbs, like "was." Ask yourself, what was the subject of the sentence *doing*?

When writing on topics in American History, avoid personalizing your analysis by using words such as "we," "our country," and "in our culture."

American history, like all others, varies enormously over time and place, and it is best to respect that variety in formal prose.

Avoid parentheses. Instead, set off parenthetical phrases in commas. If this does not work, rewrite the sentence.

There is almost no place for the verb "to feel" in a history paper. The phrase "I feel" is most often used when you are unsure of your evidence and argumentation. Any insight you believe worthy of inclusion in a paper should be stated with confidence.

Do not refer to people in the paper by using their first names alone. In the first reference to a person, use the full name and clearly identify, as in "Joe Smith, Senator from Wisconsin, argued the Republican position."

Avoid personal intrusions, such as "as stated earlier" or "as aforementioned" from your writing.

A final note:

It cannot be stressed enough that writing is the product of dialogues, both with yourself and between you, your professor, and your colleagues. Good writers constantly play with language and ideas, and constantly explore options and alternatives in their heads. Do not expect to write well without engaging in this process.
Writing is re-writing. Good writers have simply internalized many of the rules and idioms that young writers have yet to learn. Yet nobody in the world -- not even the best writers -- can write well without editing. The editing process in the best writers occurs before pen is even put to paper. Allow yourself the time to rewrite, and edit your own work.