

12 / Two Student Papers Critically Examined

To make clear the many techniques and rules you must observe in writing historical prose, you are now asked to study two student papers with detailed corrective comments.

The papers chosen are book reviews submitted by students in a freshman Western civilization survey. The required exercise was a two-page critical review of two interpretive works on ancient history: Sabatino Moscati's *The Face of the Ancient Orient* and W. F. Albright's *From Stone Age to Christianity*. The students were told that their reviews must have an historiographical approach, that is, must deal with the author's assumptions and values, and that their paper had to have one main point developed in its 500-750 word length.

In the book reviews that follow, the instructor's markings and comments are also included (in handwriting) to give you an idea of how instructors react to certain kinds of writing. You may be surprised by the forthrightness of the instructor's remarks. Teachers cannot afford to be respecters of persons; frank criticism is the most effective kind. We have numbered only those sentences referred to in the detailed comment following the paper.

The papers chosen are representative of strong and weak efforts at historical writing. One paper is almost, but not quite, extremely good; the other is almost, but not quite, very bad. We

have intentionally avoided choosing an absolutely first class and an absolutely failing paper because the most extreme examples would not have been typical of students' work, nor illustrative of the surprisingly narrow margin of refinement that exists between a very good piece of work and a rather poor one.

Here is the good paper, which received a grade of B+:

Could be a very good beginning, but the second sentence is totally imprecise and vague - almost meaningless.

(1) A historical method is valid insofar as it is

effective; that is insofar as it successfully accomplishes

what it claimed or intended to accomplish.¹ (2) This

can will be illustrated through a discussion of what was done

in The Face of the Ancient Orient and in From Stone Age

to Christianity; why the respective authors, Moscatti and

W.F. Albright chose to do it, and how they did it. (3) In

Awk. vague The Face of the Ancient Orient Sabatino Moscati has

written "a comparative study of the essential and character-

istic features of the ancient Oriental civilization."²

(4) Motivating him is the belief that there is a "need for

a more direct and up-to-date acquaintance with this cultural

sphere . . . a complete, though summary, account of the

civilizations . . . having organic form without being in

the least exhaustive . . . which every member of the educated

public can read, but which embodies a number of personal

judgments . . . of interest to specialists."³ (5) Moscati's

keep tenses consistent

Vague. Be specific

Give adequate bibliographical information on both books in a footnote to this sentence.

A transition is needed here. Be precise in showing relationships.

According to my principle,

method will be valid only if it provides the means to this,

his desired end. The method ^{wordy} ~~that~~ he employs is one of outlines; skeletal structures, genres, types: a

This is a very good characterization, but illustrate it with examples.

formulalike simplicity. (6) It is a method of "schematic treatments" and "subjective interpretations."⁴

Unnecessary to say this. No one thinks you are a specialist.

(7) In making judgments ^{one} must admit the limitation of ignorance (8) As a ^{layman} ~~we~~ cannot determine the up-to-dateness nor the value to specialists of The Face of the Ancient Orient. (9) Nonetheless it can be said

Agreement: Make all 3 singular or all plural.

that the book is /direct,/ it is a /summary,/ and it is readable (10) This far then, the method accomplishes

what was intended and is therefore valid. (11) How successfully the entire ^{purpose} goal was realized must remain a matter of degree ^{ref?}

An awkward "nonsense" sentence. It says, "The degree of success... is a matter of degree." Recast— or omit.

(12) There is some doubt in ^{our} mind as to how "complete" a "summary" can be and whether the "organic form" is meaningless in its simplicity. (13) Our feeling toward

Moscatti is similar to that of Albright toward ^{sp} ~~Hegal~~:

... he was able without difficulty to classify

practically all phenomena ... which gives his

philosophy a strangely artificial appearance,

at the same time that it imposes itself by its

simplicity and harmony.⁵

You ask very good questions of your analysis, but you avoided asking the fundamental questions:

What are Moscatti's historiographical values? Are these values valid?

Indeed, is any form at all discernible in his descriptions of civilization?

(14) ~~W. H.~~ Albright's From Stone Age to Christianity

Vague

treats the development of monotheism in the Near East. The

subject is chosen to illustrate that "human life moves in

patterns and configurations whether we consider the life

of an individual or the life of a nation, whether we

describe the movement of a culture or the development of

a thought."⁶ His method of accomplishing this end is the

subject of nearly a third of the book. (15) ~~It is his~~

Albright believes

~~feeling~~ that in historiography "as in all other fields of

scholarship and science the two most important essentials

for success are precision and critical judgment."⁷ Through

the accumulation of "critically sifted data"⁸ and a "long

occupation with these facts," the historian will be able

to reach "certain conclusions to the pattern which they

form and the picture which they fit. . ."⁹ (16) Although

we agree that the devotion to data "may sometimes have

made it difficult for the reader to follow the unfolding

scroll of history,"¹⁰ we cannot deny the overall effectiveness

of Albright's method. (17) By this very devotion to

inductive reasoning, to analysis and synthesis of data, he

has successfully demonstrated the wavering but upward curve

of human evolution and the rising, climatic, and falling

Transition -
tell why you
suddenly
begin this
new subject.

wordy

SP

i.e. convincingly
(Be precise.)

Again
good,
and much
more
aware of
values
than above.

curve of individual historical patterns.¹¹

As can now be seen, the validity of a ^{SP} historical method

depends not on what the method is, but rather on how well

Good; but
Crude,
undeveloped.

it functions.

In relation to a given
problem. (Be precise, Notes
specific)

Why is this
a valid
source for
your
purpose?

¹ Definition of "valid" from Webster's New International

of the
English
Language

Dictionary (2nd ed., unabridged) (Springfield, Mass: G. & C.
Publishers
Merriam ^M Co., 1960), p. 2813.

² Moscati, Sabatino, The Face of the Ancient Orient

(Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company,
Inc., 1962), p. xv.

³ Ibid., ^P p. xv-xvii.

⁴ Ibid. ...

⁵ Albright, William Foxwell, From Stone Age to Christianity,

2nd ed. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday
& Company, Inc., 1957), p. 86

⁶ Ibid., p. 82

⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸ Ibid., p. 26

⁹ Ibid., p. 82

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 400

¹¹ Ibid., p. 401

A superior paper,
yet you can do better.
Try to be even more
concise and to the point.

B+

Far too many errors
in typing and usage.

From the outset of this paper (1) we gain the impression that this student has some organization and a specific goal in his writing: he gives what should be the start of a general main point, expressed as an argument. Unfortunately, the next sentence (2) does not follow up the lead; this sentence should have clarified the ideas of the first sentence and made a start at defining the critical terms. Instead, the student simply gives some meaningless generalizations, using extremely vague words ("what was done") and pronouns with ambiguous antecedents ("it"). Fortunately, such lapses are quite rare in this paper; there is only one other example of vague diction (14—"treats"). One unnecessary and jarring note in this introduction was that the student tried to support the truth of *his* definition of "valid" by reference to a dictionary; this was really misleading, because the exact meaning of a term central to the student's thesis will emerge from the student's own analysis of the problem, not from any a priori definition.

Once the introduction is completed, the student begins his body, or major discussion, by giving a profile of a book, and then evaluating that profile in terms of the values implied in the main point of the paper. He then presents a similar discussion of the second book. This procedure is very successful for a number of reasons. One very important result of the student's organization is that it permitted him to fulfill the requirements—giving a critique of two books—while still allowing his paper to be the development of only one main point. His paper was tied together into a whole by the way in which the judgments ultimately related back to the main point, and the student was careful to point out this relationship (5, 10). Indeed, the instructor suggested that by inserting a transitional phrase the student might have been even more explicit about this kind of relationship (5).

In giving the profile of the two books, the student has generally had an historiographical approach, i.e., he has not simply summarized the two books but has tried to identify the salient features of the methods and the value judgments of the books. In

almost all cases (cf. 6) the student has substantiated his claims by reference to precise facts, in this case, precise passages in the books (3, 4, 6, 15).

It is pleasing to the reader that, using the values he has established, the student is not afraid to make firm judgments and to reach conclusions, never, however, trying to go beyond his evidence and always trying to support his claims with references to his sources (9-12, 16-17). In general, it can be seen in this paper that description is used to lead up to conclusions, which is just as it should be.

The writing is by and large quite pleasing. Not only is the student refined and literary in his choice of words and well-organized in his construction of paragraphs, but his narrative has a smooth flow enhanced by his good use of transitions between sentences to show the course of his thought (9, 10, 16, 17). Occasionally, there is faulty transition or lack of transition when starting a new paragraph (14). Other serious faults, which mar the good impression of the writing, are critical misspellings, including the gross misspelling of the name of one of the authors studied (2, 3, and n. 2), some typographical errors, and errors of agreement and of reference (8). But in general, most readers would gain the impression that the author's discussion has been coherent and thorough enough, that he is justified in his conclusion, which is—properly—a restatement of his main thesis with new detail and preciseness of claim.

The second student paper, which received a grade of C—, offers a complete contrast to the first; yet the whole failure of the second paper is a matter of degree, of not following the various requirements involved in good writing with any precision or care.

In what terms? Speak in terms of values.

What specifically, is your one main point?

(1) In this paper, I hope to contrast Sabatino Moscati's

The Face of the Ancient Orient and W. F. Albright's From

Stone Age to Christianity. (2) These books seemed to me

to be very different, and I will show this in terms of

method, organization, and content.

Don't be vague; be precise.

(3) ~~As I have said, the methods with which these two~~

~~men write history are entirely different.~~ (4) While Moscati,

as he himself states, describes ancient Oriental history in

terms of "historical outlines" for all phases of life,

Albright puts stress on the evolution of religion:

"... Religion is an essential part of human cultural evolution--and much more important... than some phases which have been given factitious significance in our own day."²

(5) While Moscati believes in giving a general outline,

Albright contends that religion is the root of a culture.

(6) Moscati also organizes each group in terms of its

function in history (i.e., "Components" are Sumeria, Babylonia

and Assyria, and Egypt). Albright starts out with a discussion

of the evolution of religion and culture of the earliest

Poor transition Do not just repeat yourself.

Avoid overuse of phrase, "in terms of"

Vague. What kind of group?

You simply repeat yourself, very poor style.

Vague wording; be specific, precise.

Give specific page citations for all such references.

Sabatino

1. Moscati, The Face of the Ancient Orient (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1962), p. xv.

William Foxwell

2. W. F. Albright, From Stone Age to Christianity (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1957), p. 85.

times, then seems to class all further information (in terms

of its influence on Israel and the Hebrews. (7) Moscati's

SP

view is broad, and he relates the cultural aspects of

society to the "spirit of the age" ^{thus} he belongs to the

(history-of-ideas) school of historiography. Albright

considers history in the light of changes in, and influences

on, the religion of certain peoples. In this, he reflects

his training as a Biblical scholar.

(8) Some differences can be explained by the levels of

ref?

writing that each man used. Moscati, as he mentions, says

the interest in the book was generated by a series of

lectures he had given. (9) He wrote the book in the way

he gave the lectures, (in) more of an over-all picture of

the cultures and their contributions to the whole. Albright

writes more in defense of his position, maintaining the

SP

"primary" of archeology in the broad sense, ³ and ^{of} religion

in a narrower sense of archeology. (10) He seems to write

more for those familiar with the basics of ancient history,

than for readers who are just (starting). His scholarly

language and references are a basic part of his argument,

but they often disrupt the thought. Moscati's approach

is simpler and easier ^{for} of the layman to understand.

Don't just list; explain the contrasts you are making here.

Define

Poor usage; try a verbal form here.

usage

You are just taking up one point after another. Relate everything to one central theme.

Another reason for difference may be found in the dates of the books. Albright's book was the first published, and only minor changes have been made in the second edition. Moscati's book was first conceived fifteen years after, and published twenty years after Albright's. Since new discoveries are always being made (or so both authors implied), Moscati's might have more, or at least newer, material on which to base his judgments

Awkward writing.
Be precise and succinct

Then, too, there are the limitations set by the authors as to the scope of the books. Albright begins his study with the Early Paleolithic Age, about 100,000 B.C., whereas Moscati starts with the early Sumerians of the third millenium B.C. Albright ends with the era of Christ; Moscati ends with the era of the Persians. (11) And Moscati covers only ten peoples, while Albright converses on a large number of contemporary peoples.

Poor usage

(12) As a reader of these books, I found that Moscati was much clearer to me, but it's obvious that he doesn't go too deeply in his analysis. Albright was more scholarly,

But you fail to discuss values or judgments. Answer why — not just what.

but also more confusing. (13) I found both interesting

and I recognize that no two historians see history in the same way, as was brought out in lecture.

Irrelevant. Your conclusion should be expressed within the frame of reference of your paper.

C-

Your writing shows promise but lacks form.

Begin with one, specific main point; develop it paragraph by paragraph; and by recapitulating the main idea and considering its larger implications.

From the outset, we are confused about the subject and aims of this paper, because the author has given no precise point or thesis as the basis for argument. Instead he uses vague terms (2-“very different”) and never explains his own critical values (1-how will he “contrast” the books?). An examination of the rest of the paper shows that this vagueness is a consistent trait and that no precise ideas will emerge from this paper (6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13). Indeed, even when making reference to the terms used by the authors being studied, the writer fails to be precise in his identifications (4). This problem is not helped by the lack of specific reference to his sources, to support his observations about them (6, 7, 9).

For the most part, the student fails to make judgments of his own; his paper is mostly a list of observations about the sources, general rather than precise and critical, without any attempt to reach conclusions. Even when a conclusion is drawn, it is vague and is the result of assigning categories rather than analyzing values (7). The student has generally failed to carry out a serious historiographical assessment: he has not made clear the author’s assumptions and values.

Similarly, the organization of the paper suffers in a variety of ways. There is a distinct lack of transition, a failing that breaks the paper up into small unrelated units; indeed, when the student tries to make a transition, it usually appears as simply a crude repetition, which is a very immature way to organize thought (3, 5). This fragmentation is also created by the way in which the student simply takes up one topic after another, making no attempt to create a flow of ideas or to relate his topics to some central scheme of organization.

Finally, the style is quite poor. His choice of words is often awkward and inaccurate. And as is often the case with students who have not thought enough about what they are writing, he falls back on hackneyed expressions that say little and sound dull (10, 11, 12). One cannot find any drive toward a conclusion at

the end, and finally the reader is left with the helpless feeling that this paper has reflected a lot of "busy-ness" that had no direction and no outcome.

The detailed critiques of the two student papers clearly establish that in the successful paper there was attention to detail, to evidence in support of points, to clarity of style, and to organization—so that the paper became a proof of a point. In the poor paper all of these essential matters were lacking or insufficient. The lesson to be learned from studying these two papers and the critical evaluations of them is one you cannot afford to neglect or forget. *You must take great pains with your writing. Reading history is not enough. The historian's craft is a form of communication of knowledge and ideas.* If history is what an historian does, then in the most fundamental sense history is what an historian writes. Writing is the goal of all your work as a student of history, and only through your development of skill as a writer will you be able to manifest your talent as an historian.