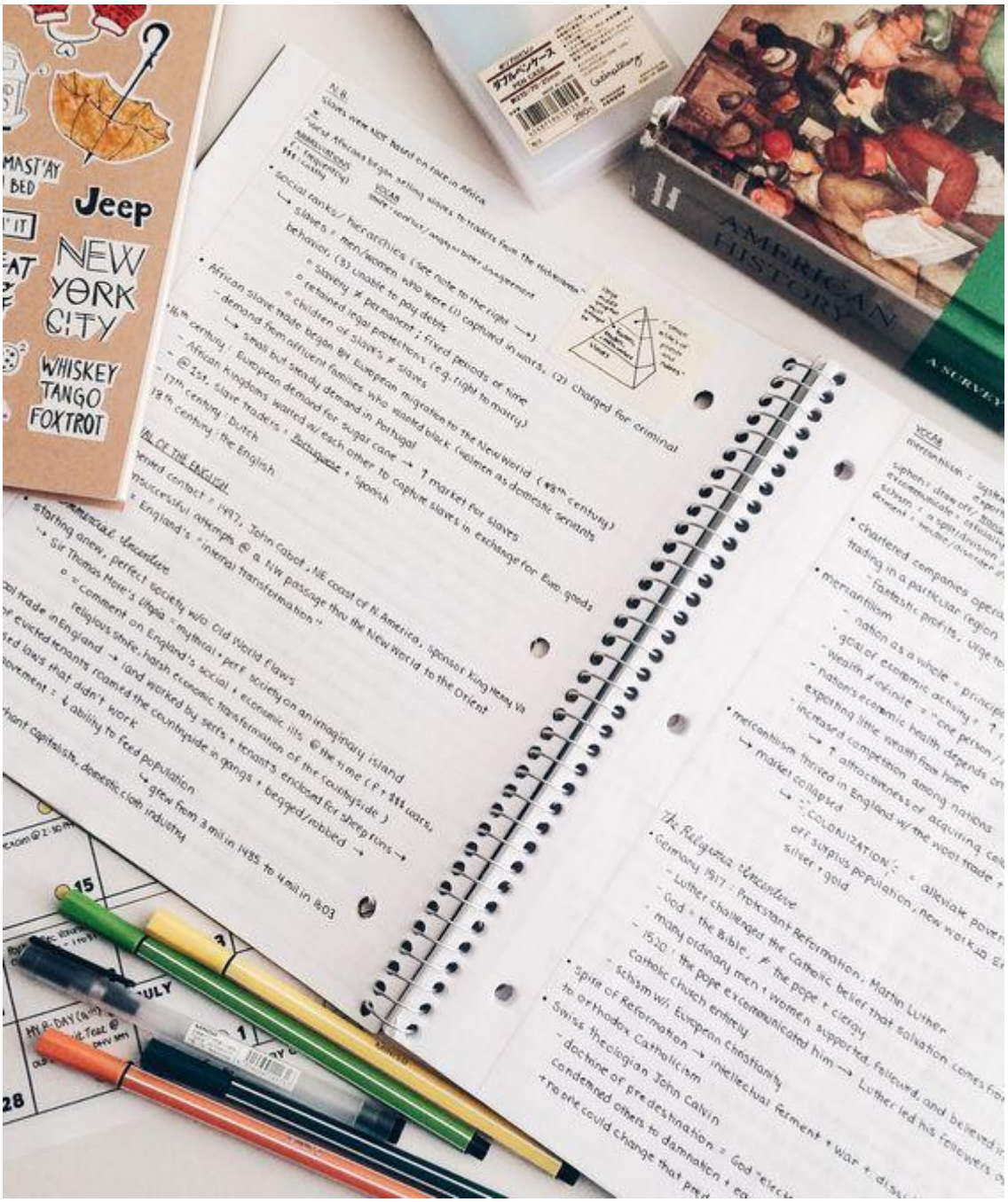
Understanding Voice and Style

We all know that writers use different styles depending on what they're writing and who they're writing for. For example, if you look at an online gossip site and textbook side-by-side, it's probably going to be pretty easy to tell the difference. But what sets apart diverse types of writing? Besides the content (which is obviously one of the big differences between a gossip site and your math book) writers also have to adopt their writing style to suit the many different uses we put words to every day. After all, even two websites covering

the same topic can publish articles that sounds pretty



Style, voice, and tone

Style is the particular personality that a writer brings to his or her work. This is often referred to as the writer's voice, and just like how everybody's voice sounds a little bit different, so too

does every writer's voice look a little bit different from everybody else's. Think of a writer's voice the same way you would a singers voice: two singers can take the same lyrics and instruments and make two completely different sounding songs. A writer's voice is the result of the choices he or she makes about issues like word choice, punctuation, and sentence construction (more on that later). Tone, which is a similar concept, often gets lumped in with voice and style, but it's actually its own separate category that describes the mood of the work. If we compare writing to singing again, voice would be the personal style the singer brings to a song, and tone would be the mood of the music itself.

What goes into creating a voice?

Every time you sit down to type, whether it's an academic paper or an email, you're making choices about what kind of words you use and how you use them. You might include a funny joke in an email to your friend or use technical jargon in a lab report for chemistry class. When you're making those decisions, you're actually creating a voice for yourself without even realizing it. Every little choice you make when you write adds up to a distinctive style, but there are a few key categories that help define a writer's voice.

Diction/word choice

One of the biggest distinctions between writing styles education questions financial aid is word choice. The English language is full of words that have closely related meanings and there are often dozens of ways you could choose to communicate your ideas, which means

that the words your choose are usually a reflection of your own style. For instance, in a persuasive piece aimed at teenagers you might choose to use slang or abbreviations, while for academic writing you might rely on more technical vocabulary. But even within the same genre, writers can create widely differing types of works just playing with word choice - think of the southern, simple dialect used by the characters in a William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying versus the eloquent and introspective narrator of The Great Gatsby. Of course, there are lots of other stylistic differences between those novels, but the languages used by the characters is one of the most important.

Sentence structure

A sentence needs to have a subject and a verb, but other than those two rules, a writer has a whole lot of leeway in how they choose to put sentences together. You can stick with a straightforward "subject-verb-object" style, or you can add flourishes like prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses. A lot of these choices will depend on who's reading your work. For example, material aimed at younger readers should have simpler sentences that texts produced for older or more sophisticated audiences, and scientific writing tends to favor simpler constructions as well. On the other hand, writing long, intricate sentences is a hallmark of many famous fiction writers, and choosing to use more complex syntax is a way to create a distinctive voice.

Punctuation

Much like sentence structure, as a writer you have a lot of leeway when it comes to deciding what type of punctuation you want to use. Now, it might not seem as dramatic or obvious as some of the other issues listed above, but it can make a difference when it comes to how your work is perceived by the reader. For example, punctuation such as dashes and exclamation marks are generally seen as more casual, so when you use them it will make your work more conversational than academic. Another example of how strongly punctuation can inform voice can be seen in the work of writer Cormac McCarthy, who creates a distinctive style by not using quotation marks in dialogue.

Literary devices

The use of literary devices such as metaphors, alliteration, and foreshadowing will also help build an author's signature voice. There are dozens of these literary tricks out there (way too many to get into here), and every writer is going to use them in his or her own way. But, no matter what kind of text you're working with, literary devices almost always part of the writing and reading experience.

How to develop your voice

Every time you start working on a writing project, you should have some idea what kind of voice you want to project. Keep in mind that, as a writer, your voice doesn't need to be identical in everything you write. While it's likely that many of your particular stylistic quirks will pop up no matter what you're working on, it's still possible, and often necessary, to tailor your voice to meet the needs of specific project.

Think about your audience. Knowing who's going to be reading what you write is the first key to developing a strong voice. Every text is written with a purpose, so know what you want to accomplish before you start writing. Will you work be for a specific teacher? For publication in a professional journal? For an online newspaper? Once you've identified your audience, ask yourself how you can tailor your work to their needs. Are there specific terms they already know or that will to have defined? What is the audience's reading level? Do you need to keep things simple or should you use more complex details?

Be clear about your message. Before you start to write you also need to be clear with yourself about what you're trying to tell the audience you identified. What message or information do you want readers to take away from your work? Whatever the point of your writing is will inform your voice. If you wanted to convey factual information, you would use

simple sentences and clear language, but if you wanted simply to entertain the reader, you might rely more on off-the-wall word choices or the clever use of literary devices.

Decide how you want to be perceived. Knowing how you want readers to perceive you as a writer will also affect what kind of voice you choose to use, so think about how you want readers to respond to your work. Do you want them to think that you're a reliable source of unbiased information? Just another fun, friendly guy? An authority on a particular topic? Issues like word choice, sentence structure, and the use of literary devices all shape how the reader thinks about you, which in turn will shape how they think about the content of your work.

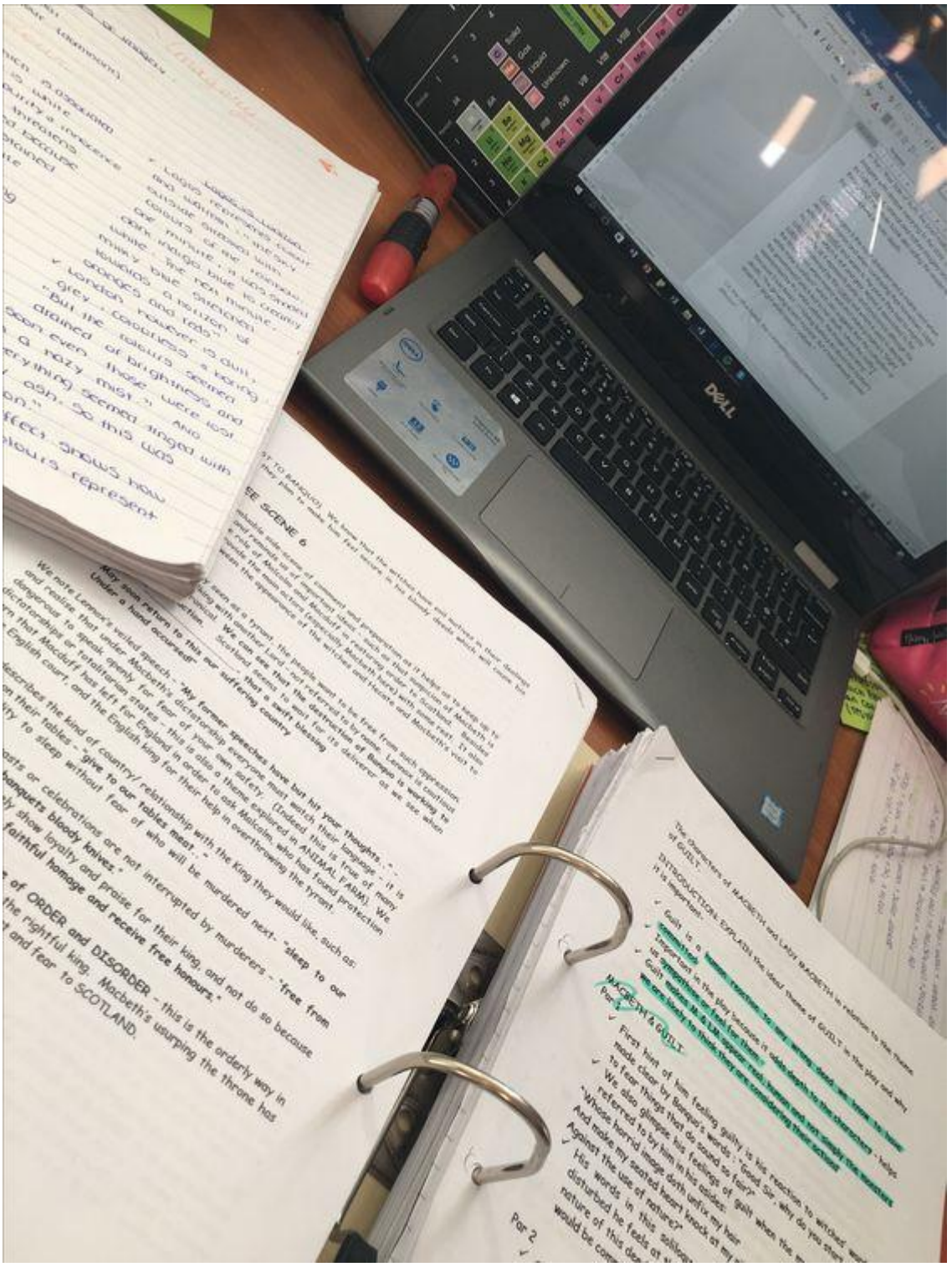
Once you've clarified these three ideas, it's time to think about what you can do the shape your writing voice to fit those needs. Clearly there are too many types of writing projects out there for this article to cover them all, but there are a few things you can do to help improve your control over your writing style. By far the best advice for learning how to build a voice is simply to read a whole bunch. Then, go read some more. It's the best way to figure out the options you have for changing up your style as well as choices you can make when it comes to how you present your work. As you're reading, take note of your reactions to the text and what aspects of the style created that feeling. Then, next time you want to write a piece that projects a certain voice, you can look back at similar works to see how other writers accomplished their style.

The best thing to remember about voice is that it's personal. Your style should be a reflection of who you are as a writer; it should showcase what you think is important, entertaining, or effective. There are as many styles of writing as there are writers, which means you shouldn't be scared to strike out on your own and create a unique, authentic style that's special to you. Be careful, though, that you use that style wisely. While it' great to experiment with diction, sentence structure, and everything else that goes into writing, you want to make sure that the finished product meets the needs of whatever project you're working on.

How to Read a Primary Source

When writing for history classes history, students are often called on to read and analyze primary sources. Unfortunately, this is a task that many students just aren't prepared for. We're all used to reading textbooks and taking notes in a lecture, but what do you do when

you're looking at a first-hand



What is a primary source?

A primary source is a contemporary item that presents a first-hand account of the time period you're studying. These can include books, letters, newspapers, video, census data, and a wide range of other materials. Interpretations of those materials, for example in textbooks or journal articles, are what's known as secondary sources. To help you remember the difference, think of a movie and a published review of that movie: the primary source would be the movie, and the review would be a secondary source because it's providing commentary on a primary source.

Note: The term primary source can apply to a wide variety of media. This article will focus on textual documents, but the ideas can easily be applied to items like videos, posters, and advertisements.

Finding objectivity

When looking for primary source material, you might think that you need to find a source that is completely objective - that is, a source that tells the real truth without any bias or interference from cultural values or personal feelings. In the real world, however, you're never going to find such a perfect source. People are complex and are always a product of the time and place that produced them; no one who sits down to write is going to be able to produce a truly objective record of historical events. Instead, you're likely to find documents full of the messy stuff of everyday life. But all those personal vendettas and that political posturing doesn't mean the source isn't useful - it just means that you have to do a little extra work to determine the true value of a primary source document.

P.A.P.E.R.

Obviously, you should never take a historical document at face value, which means you need to dive beneath the surface to look at where that document came from. When

analyzing primary sources, you can use the acronym PAPER to help you remember the steps you need to take in order to successfully analyze both the content and context of a document.

P for Purpose

The first step in placing a document in context is to ask why the author wrote this particular text. Who is the author, and what was he or she trying to accomplish by writing this document? Is it a letter bringing news of a death to a family member? A newspaper column written by a campaigning politician? A ledger designed to keep track of military enrollment? The purpose behind a piece of writing matters, and you can't evaluate a primary source until you understand something about the motives of the author.

A for Argument

Next you should take a closer look at the content of the work and try to figure out what argument or point the author is trying to make. Can you define a clear thesis? If it's a personal document, what is the main idea the author is trying to communicate. Also pay attention to the rhetorical style of text. How does this particular work address its target audience in order to accomplish its goal?

P for Presuppositions

After you've spent time with the text, it's time to step back and have a hard look at what you bring to the table. What preconceptions and suppositions do you have about the author, the time period, or the topic of the work? How are your perceptions affecting your interpretation of the writing? Make sure you also look at how your thoughts and values might be different

from those held by the people from the time period in which the primary source was written. How might these differences cause you to misinterpret the text?

E for Epistemology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that deals with how we acquire knowledge and that questions what, exactly, it's possible to know in the first place. When we look at a primary source, we need to ask ourselves similar questions. Now that you've looked at the context and author's motives, try to determine what factual information you can gain from the text and what parts of the work are the author's own interpretations. In other words, what do we "know" after reading this document and how do we know it? Also look at how this work could be used to support arguments from secondary sources.

R for Relate

The last step in your analysis should be to look at the primary source in relation to other documents. How is it similar or different from other works from this time period? If you find contradictions among primary sources, where do you think those discrepancies came from? Does having read this document change your opinion of other primary and secondary source material you've read?

Evaluating a primary source

The PAPER method is good for getting an overall picture of the value of a primary source, but here are a few more tips if you still need help evaluating the context, bias, or usefulness of a document.

Start with the basics

As with most things, it's good to start your analysis of a primary source with the most basic questions. Try to identify when the document was produced and by whom, as well as how it was distributed (e.g., was it a pamphlet? published in a book?). At first glance this might seem simple, but when it comes to historical documents, these questions can be harder to answer than you think. You're likely to encounter materials that are incomplete or have been partially destroyed,; for example, an old newspaper article may not list the author's name or a diary entry might not have a date. When that's the case, it's your responsibility to gather as much information as is possible and to note any important unanswered questions in your paper.

Question the author

All writing is done with a purpose. From diaries to books to letters, every time an author puts pen to paper or types out his thought, he's doing it for a reason, and understanding that reason is a vital part of analyzing primary texts. After all, just because someone once wrote it down doesn't make it true, so you have to be able to judge for yourself what was in the author's heart. Ask yourself how credible the writer is: is there something about him or her that makes you believe or disbelieve their work? Did they clearly write in an attempt to persuade or justify, or is their work designed to be strictly informative? Also ask how the author came to know about the event they're describing. Is it a first-hand account, or is the author basing his work on the word of others?

Place the document in context

Writing is never done in a vacuum. The author of any historical text that you're studying was a product of the particular time and place he or she lived in, and you need to take that fact into account in your analysis. Because we are all also products of our time, it's difficult not to bring our own biases and preconceptions to a historical document. But while it may be impossible to erase these prejudices completely, it is your responsibility to be aware of them and to gauge how they affect your own interpretation of a text.

Compare with other contemporary sources

Part of the fun of history is sorting through the wide variety of voices and opinions that shape our view of historical https://essaywriter.nyc/history/ events. Two people can easily see the same event in completely different ways, and it's up to you as the historian to evaluate their claims and form your own interpretation. These clashing viewpoints mean that historical research can't be done by just looking at one source. In order to understand a primary document, you also need to look at other accounts from the time period. How are they similar or different? What accounts for the differences in the way the authors view a particular event? Which source do you think is more credible?

What can you learn from a primary text?

Once you've done all the work of analyzing a primary source, you can decide whether the source will be useful and whether or not you can include it in your research paper. If the source is credible, what information can you learn from it? Does it tell you something about a particular event or about the time period that produced the document? Remember, the goal of a doing research in history is to build a complete, nuanced picture of historical events, so when working with primary sources, you should always be asking yourself how the document can help shed light on that story.

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