

Writing a Historical Argument: An Introduction

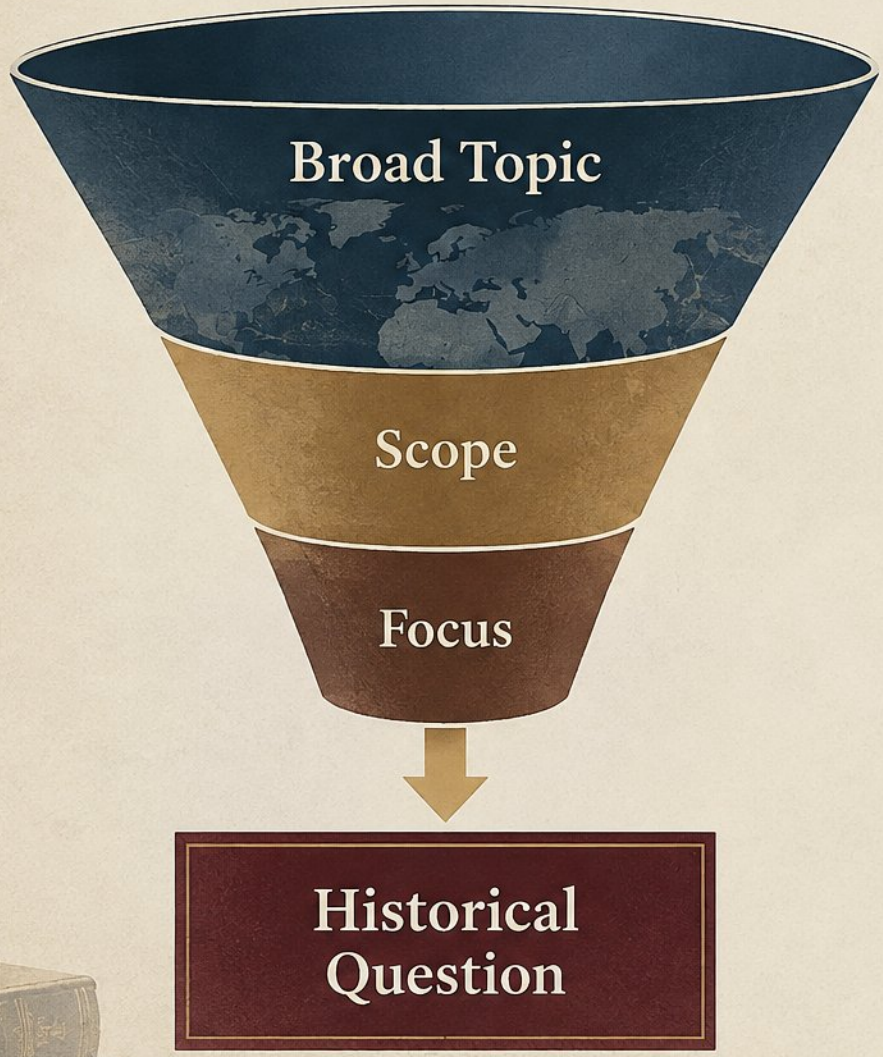
- A historical argument is a defensible claim about the past, backed by evidence and reasoning
- It explains why and how something happened—and why it matters
- Argument ≠ summary, narrative, or opinion: arguments interpret evidence and invite dispute
- Course arc: questions, thesis, line of reasoning, sources, historiography, structure, citation, revision, workshop
- Habits of mind: answerable questions, scholarly debate, testing evidence against alternatives
- For high school and university students, adult learners, and teachers adapting the framework

What Counts as an Argument in History

- A thesis makes a claim and says why it is true
- Not fact retrieval, strong opinion, or “anything goes”
- Every claim needs evidence, reasoning, and “so what?”
- A good thesis is falsifiable and debatable
- History is an ongoing conversation among scholars

A Bare Factual Statement	A Defensible Historical Thesis
“The revolution happened.”	“The revolution happened because widespread economic pressures undermined the government, leading people to demand change.”

From Topic to Historical Question



- Broad topic: the Industrial Revolution; sharper question: why urbanization accelerated in particular regions
- Strong questions are open-ended: how, why, or to what extent
- Target a thinking skill: cause, change, consequence, contestability, or significance
- Scope spatially, temporally, and thematically to fit assignment length and sources
- Self-test: multiple answers, testable, precise, feasible, and matters?
- Check embedded assumptions—“why did the Carter presidency fail?” presumes failure

Question Pitfalls: Presentism, Fiction, and Morality

- Deceptively simple: "When did women achieve equality?" demands a simple answer to a complex problem
- Fictional counterfactuals and stacked questions that smuggle in assumptions
- Semantic, inevitability, and purely ethical or opinion questions
- Anachronism: applying present-day categories like civil rights to ancient Athens
- Rewrite a moral verdict into a question about causes, meanings, or consequences

✗ ~~When did women achieve equality?~~

✗ ~~What if the Roman Empire had never fallen?~~

✗ ~~Was the conquest of new lands a good thing?~~

✗ ~~Were ancient Athenians committed to civil rights?~~

→ What factors contributed to changes in the status of women, and what were their consequences?

Building an Arguable Thesis

- **Bad:** "Anne Hutchinson posed a threat" — restates the question
- **Better:** add reasons, but no explanation of why they threatened
- **Strong:** her preaching challenged a hierarchy built on mediating between God and congregation
- **Because test:** state claim + reason in one sentence
- Choose a thesis type: causal, comparative, continuity/change, or interpretive
- Ensure the thesis evaluates significance, not just describes impact

Vague

"Anne Hutchinson posed a threat"

↓

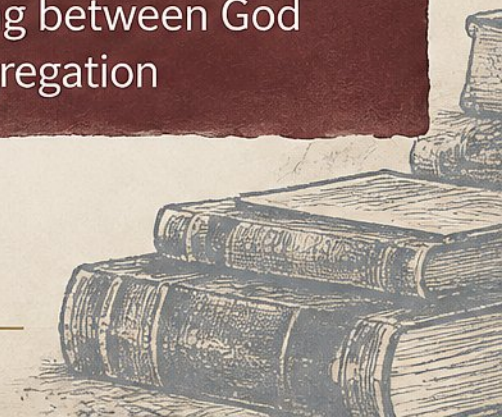
More Specific

add reasons, but no explanation of why they threatened

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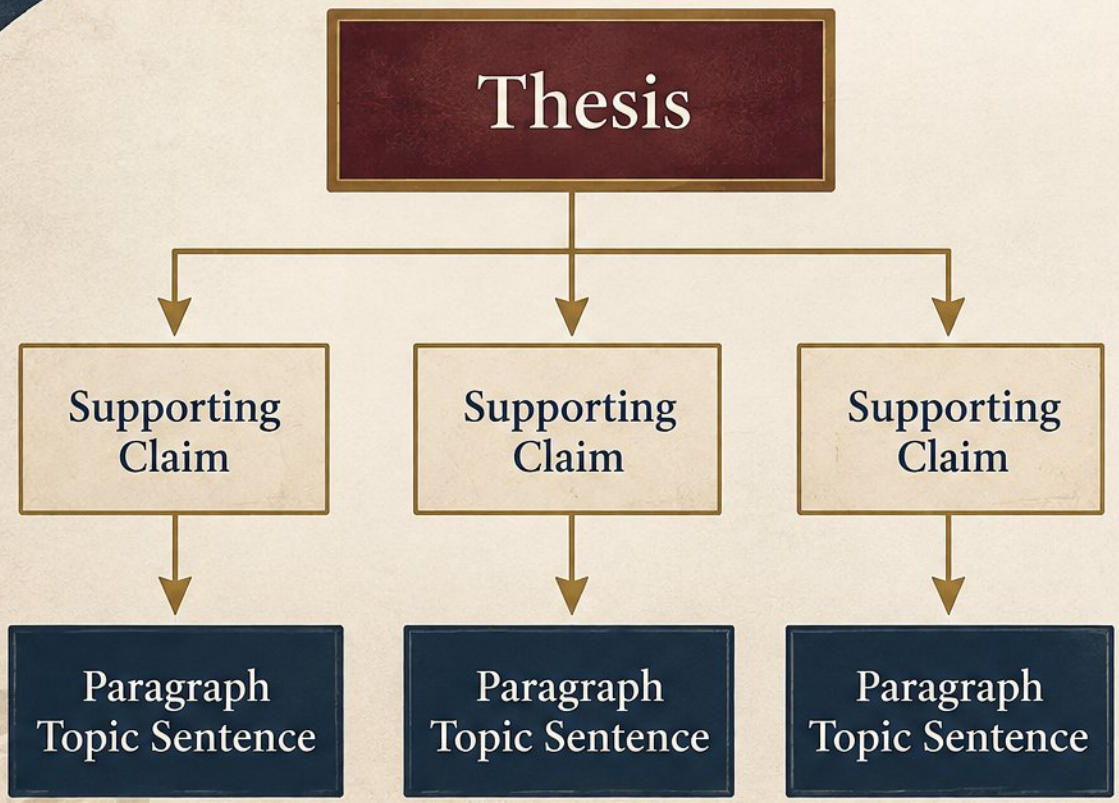
Stronger Thesis

her preaching challenged a hierarchy built on mediating between God and congregation



THINK
ANALYZE
WRITE
GROW

Line of Reasoning and Paragraph-Level Claims

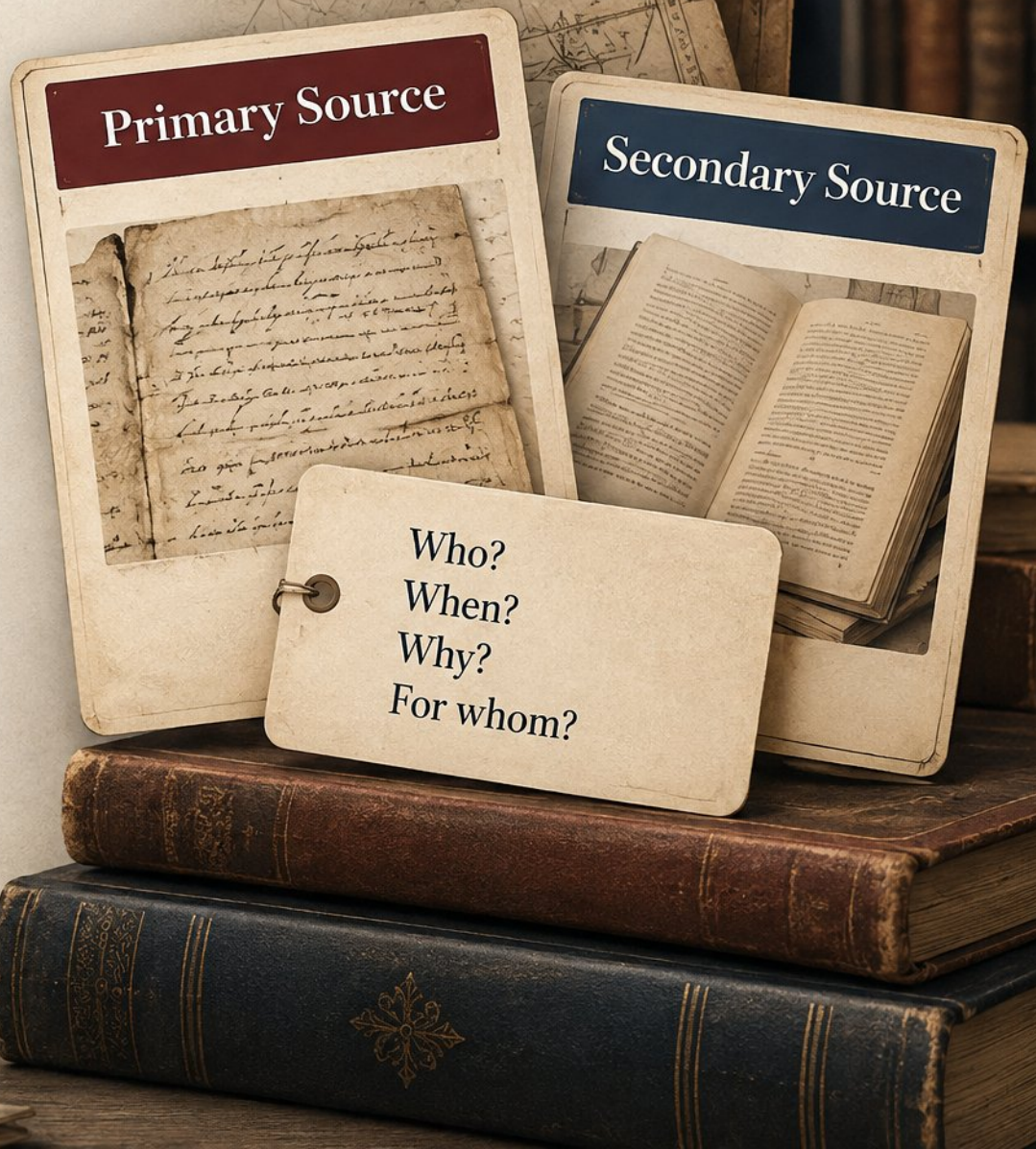


- Line of reasoning: thesis → supporting claims → evidence for each claim
- Plan two to four key points before drafting; they become your introduction's roadmap
- Topic sentences state a claim plus a reason, not just a topic label
- Weave the thesis through each body paragraph; return readers to the central claim
- Keep a working thesis: revise it when evidence contradicts it, never alter evidence

CLEAR REASONING
STRONGER WRITING

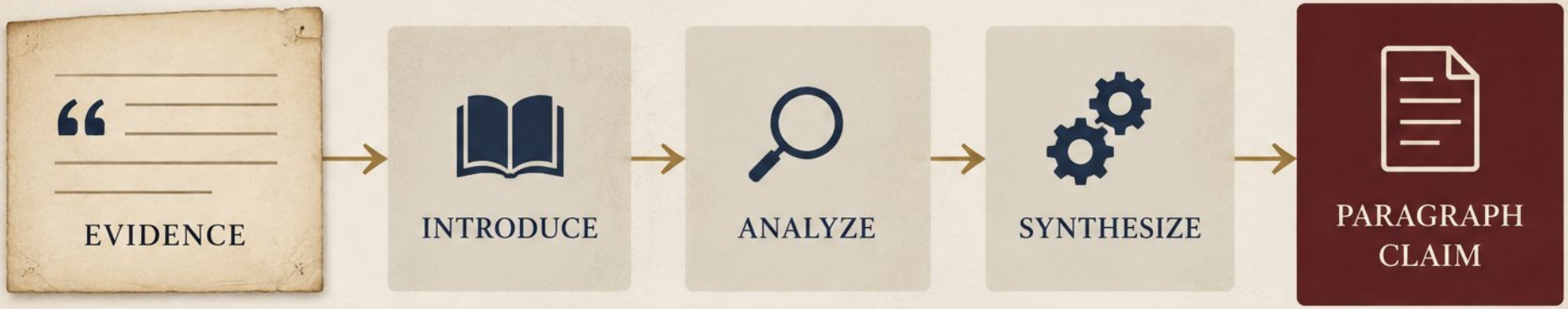
Sources *and* Historical Thinking Skills

- Primary sources: evidence of the past; secondary sources: interpretations to evaluate
- Source every document: who, when, why, for whom
- Contextualize in time and place; read closely for language and claims
- Corroborate across sources to establish what is probable
- Read the silences: ask whose voices are missing



From Evidence to Inference

READ
ANALYZE
CONNECT
BUILD



- No quotation speaks for itself: introduce, explain, connect each piece of evidence
- TEEASC: topic sentence, explanation, evidence, analysis, synthesis, conclusion
- Analyze sources in-line: author, audience, purpose, perspective build trust
- Two or three well-analyzed sources per claim beat long quotation strings
- Synthesize: show how sources corroborate, complicate, or qualify one another



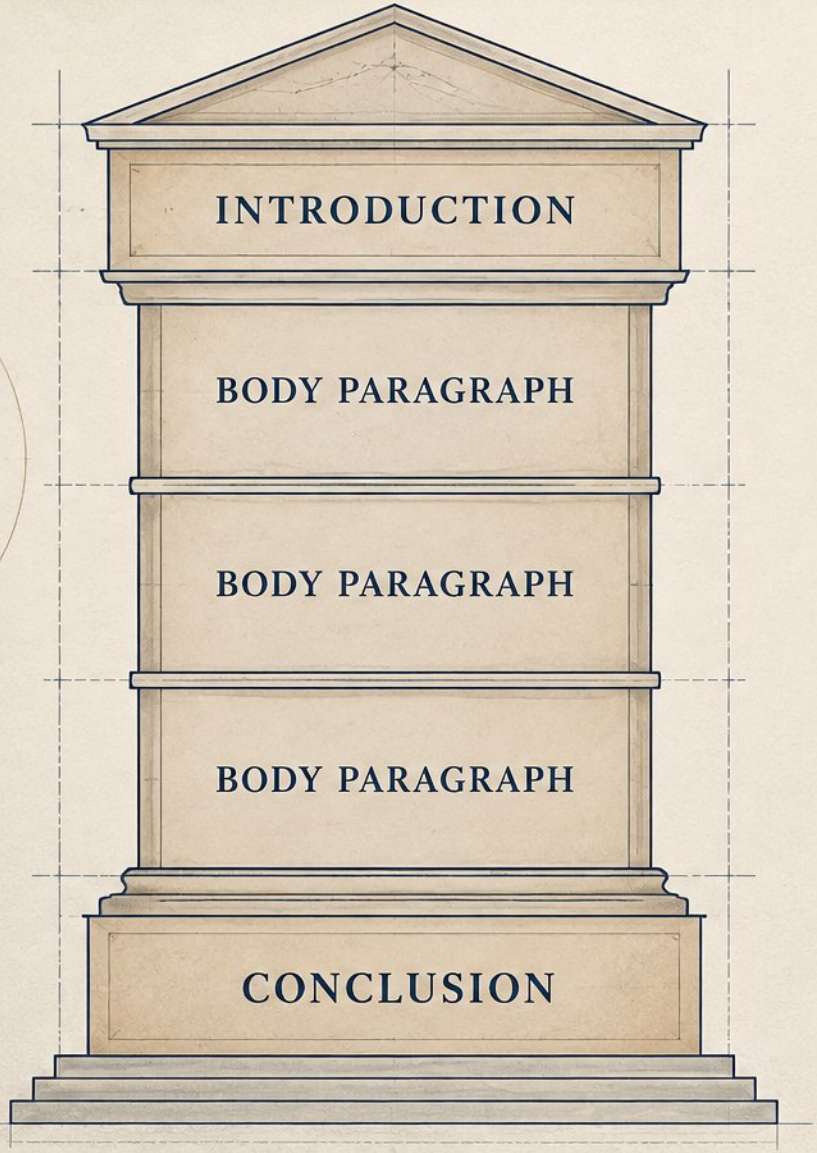
SOURCES LEAD TO STRONGER THINKING

Engaging Historiography and Counterarguments



- Historiography tracks how interpretations shift with new archives, methods, and contexts
- Read secondary sources for question, thesis, evidence base, and theoretical stance
- Historians disagree because they ask different questions or define concepts differently
- Concede and rebut: state the strongest opposing view fairly, then show its limits
- Reach a qualified conclusion — “persuasive on X, overstates Y” — not a mechanical winner

Structuring the Argument



1. Introduction: question, thesis, roadmap in about 10% of word count
2. Choose organization fitting the thesis: chronological, thematic, comparative, or causal
3. Each body paragraph: one central idea, claim-bearing topic sentence, evidence, analysis
4. Use signposts and bridge sentences, not subheadings, in short essays
5. Conclusion: tie strands together, answer the question, avoid new material

Style, Citation, and Academic Integrity

IDEAS
SOURCES
ARGUMENTS
A BRIGHTER
TOMORROW

- Write analytical prose; avoid sweeping openings and unprovable value judgments.
- Chicago Notes-Bibliography is standard; 18th edition drops place of publication after 1900.
- Quote, paraphrase, and summarize—cite all three; quote only when wording matters.
- Footnotes and bibliography let readers verify claims and follow scholarly debate.
- AI: many departments allow brainstorming but ban submitted AI text; disclose and verify citations.

A SOURCE IN CONTEXT

The historian observes that "cities are not merely physical spaces, but social projects, shaped by the aspirations and conflicts of their inhabitants."[1]

Quotation
Use when wording matters.

In other words, cities reflect the hopes and tensions of the people who build them.

Paraphrase
Restate in your own words.

More broadly, the passage suggests that urban life is the product of human ambition and disagreement.

Summary
Capture the main point(s).

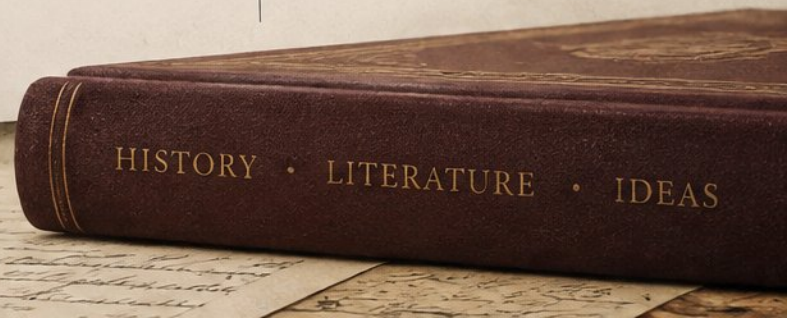
FOOTNOTE EXAMPLES

Full note (first citation)

1. Author Name, *Title of Book* (City: Publisher, Year), page number.

Shortened note (later citation)

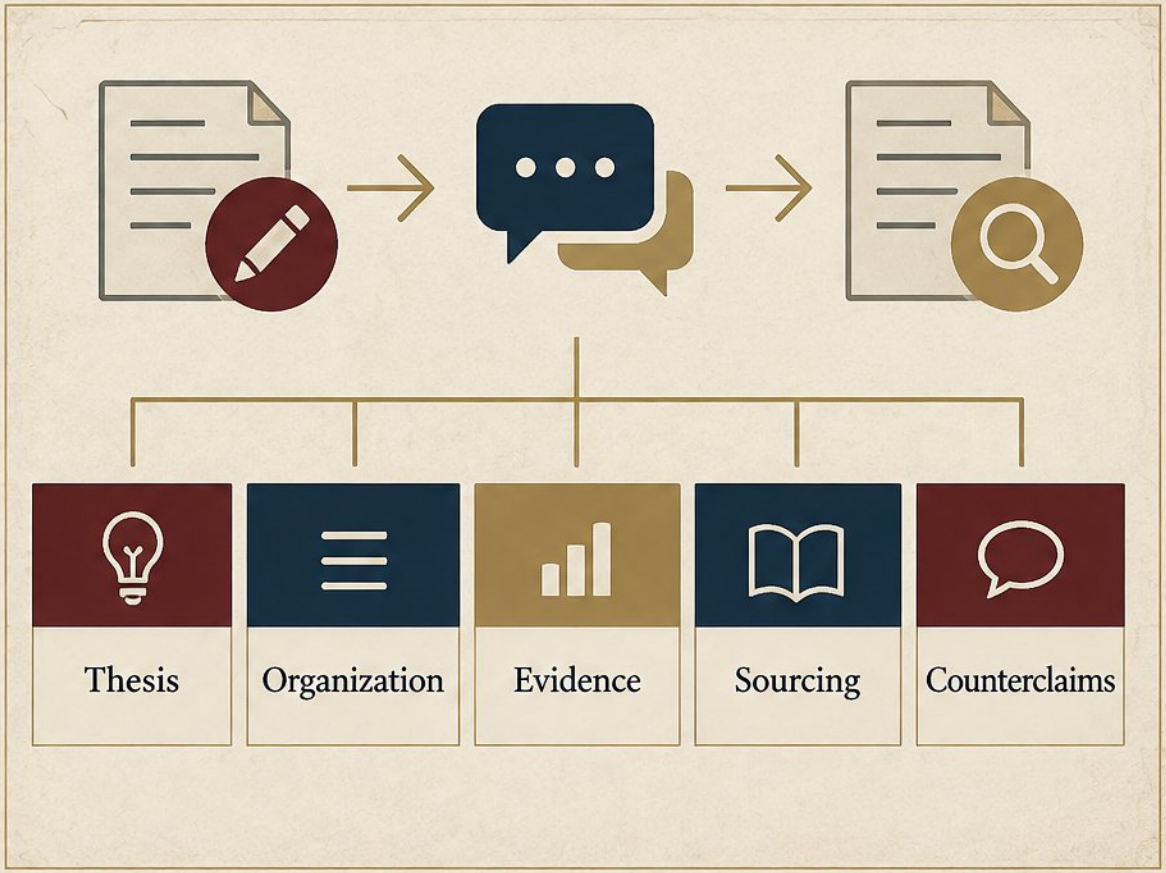
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SCHOLARSHIP BUILDS CONVERSATION

Revision, Feedback, and Assessment

- Revise argument before prose: thesis precision, evidence, reasoning, structure
- Peer feedback targets claim and evidence quality, not surface edits
- Self-assess rubric dimensions: thesis, organization, evidence, sourcing, counterclaims
- Teachers: reward argumentation and source use; score counterargument separately
- Differentiate scaffolding by level: high school, university seminar, adult learners



Workshop: Critique and Repair

- Convert a supplied topic into a question, then draft a because-thesis
- Critique a sample to spot thesis drift, evidence dumping, and anachronism
- Rewrite one weak paragraph using TEEASC and source analysis
- Practice a full Chicago note and a shortened note for two sources
- Adapt scaffolding for high school, seminar, and adult learners

A Weak Paragraph

The Industrial Revolution was a time of many important changes. It had a big impact on society and showed how people have always innovated throughout history. Factories grew, cities expanded, and life was different for everyone. This proves that technology always makes life better, which is true even today.

A Repaired Paragraph (TEEASC)

The Industrial Revolution reshaped urban life in Britain because it concentrated labor in factories, which transformed social relations and created new inequality. Archival factory reports show longer hours and harsher conditions for many workers, complicating celebratory narratives about universal progress.

- Topic sentence
- Explanation
- Evidence
- Analysis
- Source connection
- Concluding thought

Chicago Note (full)

1. Author Last Name, *Title of Work* (City: Publisher, Year), page number.

Shortened Note

2. Last Name, *Shortened Title*, page number.

Action Plan: Your Next Historical Argument

IDEAS
EVIDENCE
PERSPECTIVE
A STRONGER ARGUMENT



- Commit now: one question, one thesis draft, one evidence plan.
- Set three checkpoints: question refinement, thesis and outline, evidence-and-counterargument review.
- Keep an error log: thesis drift, unexamined assumptions, thin source analysis.
- Adopt one AI disclosure and citation habit that matches your institution's policy.
- Name one habit of mind you will transfer to your next piece.

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