

American Veterinary



Medical History Society

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Contact me with questions before the due date.

Memo to Smithcors Student Essayists

Thanks for your interest in veterinary history and exercising initiative to write an essay and enter the 2013 contest. This is personally a rewarding effort where you choose the topic that most interests you and will lodge features in your mind that will persist for a lifetime. Ideally, you will uncover and absorb facts that eclipse those of your peers and may I dare say even your professors. There is a great deal of emphasis on self-learning, what with all the chatter about e-learning, continuing education, correspondence courses, and the like.

From my own personal experience in writing manuscripts throughout my veterinary career and as chairperson for conducting the Smithcors Essay Contest, I would like to note a few observations and make a few suggestions that will help to guide you in this process and improve your chances of securing a prize. In a sort of trite observation, I would offer that you will get out of this experience just about what you put into the effort. Accordingly I offer some bullet points on what you can do and how you should proceed to get the most out of this important effort.

- First off, start early in the process and read the rules and guidelines carefully. If you cobble together an effort two weeks before the deadline, it is all but impossible to be competitive or even gain valuable insights of your studies.
- Spend some time investigating one or more potential interests. There are so many topics to choose from and so much to understand about how veterinary medicine was practiced, has changed, and progressed over the years. This step may seem daunting, but it is effort well-spent. Take sufficient time to consider and think about even a couple of possible

topics, do a preliminary literature search to see what has already been published (i.e., add “historical article” to your subject keywords in PubMed MEDLINE), look in some books on veterinary history, talk with professors, study the list of past essays, and so on to gather ideas that you might be interested in researching and writing about. Be prepared to modify your topic to meet your time schedule and what you find during the discovery and research process. Consider, too, that you are potentially telling a ‘story’ about some aspect of veterinary medicine’s rich and varied heritage that others will find informative, enjoyable, and enlightening.

- Set a flexible schedule, such as have a goal by October to have decided on a topic and methodically start accumulating materials for study, dedicating only an hour or two each week to their review. Then, develop a rough outline of your narrative, realizing this can always be changed as you become more familiar with the topic. You may want to summarize your ‘anchoring idea’ or topical theme for the paper in one sentence.
- Another point is to really study the topic by learning as much as you can about the subject you’ve selected, its context, and various features in depth. This might involve a few hours during school holidays. It should not be an onerous effort but a positive, enriching on-going experience that you want to do. Sort of become an expert or ‘go to person’ for other interested parties even if they don’t presently exist.
- Find original source material. We all know the Internet, *Wikipedia*, and *Google* are readily at our service and these sources are helpful for sure, especially in identifying ‘leads’ and useful source material, but don’t rely on them 100 percent for content. Try to secure exposure to original or primary source material as much as possible even if in electronic versions by investigating the journal literature and other materials held or accessible from your school’s library or archives, and it will enhance your experience and quality of scholarship. The best entries will have a minimum number of original, non-electronic sources, such as original journal articles, original books, personal communications, and so on. Also, don’t hesitate to ask your school’s librarian or archivists who are delighted to help you in identifying and finding really old and often obscure materials on your topic.
- After a period of prolonged research and study, take a break of a week or two with the various facets digesting in your mind. Then, compose the first draft that will probably be the most taxing part of the project; it probably will require a whole weekend day. There is no short-cut here and all writers face this issue but if done early enough you will be able to polish it up in subsequent weeks and constantly improve its tightness and really tell a compelling story. It should be original and ‘copy and pasting’ material from the internet is very obvious to the judges and leads to quick elimination for consideration. Also a catchy title creates interest for judges and readers.
- Finally a few of you are especially gifted in writing and may have a baccalaureate degree in English or humanities and be confident in your writing. But for most of us it is wise to have a friend with ‘fresh’ eyes who is skilled at writing and/or editing, go over the manuscript for readability, grammar and punctuation, etc. The best story, poorly [and perhaps hastily] written, will not be competitive and will in fact annoy the judges precluding competitiveness. Even if your essay does not garner a prize, it may be so good

that with some additional work, it can be submitted to another publication [or next year?] for consideration.

- Along the lines of the last observation is the fact that the judges and publishers are always looking for exceptional or uncommon material to publish. So try to be creative in finding and presenting unique or unusual perspectives. All or a portion of your essay submission may be incorporated as part of a subtext for a future book chapter or paper for a periodical. For sure, publishing a paper while a veterinary student will 'turn a few heads' and may lead to speaking invitations or generating job opportunities. Learning to write for professional publications is a process that ensures recognition, adds substance to a CV, and can possibly be financially rewarding.

In summary, I wish you all well in this process and realize you are in a most taxing school environment with an intensive and demanding curriculum. With an early start on it all and an interesting theme that 'drives' your investigation to know more, it should nonetheless be a significantly rewarding experience and accomplishment making you an 'expert' in a special area. It just may open up possibilities for the future as well as provide a keen appreciation for the history of veterinary medicine.

Good luck!!!