

How to Read a Secondary Source

Reading secondary historical sources is a skill which may be acquired and must be practiced. Reading academic material well is an active process that can be far removed from the kind of pleasure reading most of us are used to. Sure, history may sometimes be dry, but you'll find success reading even the most difficult material if you can master these skills. The key here is taking the time and energy to engage the material -- to think through it and to connect it to other material you have covered.

How to Read a Book

- **Read the title.** Define every word in the title; look up any unknown words. Think about what the title promises for the book.
- **Look at the table of contents.** This is your "menu" for the book. What can you tell about its contents and structure from the TOC?
- **Read the book from the outside in.** Read the foreword and introduction (if an article, read the first paragraph or two). Read the conclusion or epilogue if there is one (if an article, read the last one or two paragraphs). After all this, ask yourself what the author's thesis might be. How has the argument been structured? This will be a key to your understanding of the rest of the argument.
- **Read chapters from the outside in.** Quickly read the first and last paragraph of each chapter. After doing this and taking the step outlined above, you should have a good idea of the book's major themes and arguments.

You are now finally ready to read in earnest.

Don't read a history book as if you were reading a novel for light pleasure reading. Read through the chapters actively, taking cues as to which paragraphs are most important from their topic sentences. (Good topic sentences tell you what the paragraph is about.) Not every sentence and paragraph is as important as every other. It is up to you to judge, based on what you know so far about the book's themes and arguments. If you can, underline (don't highlight), passages that seem to be especially relevant. Feel free to make notes in the margins.

Take notes. Record your thoughts about the reading rather than simply the details and contents of the text. What surprised you? What seemed particularly insightful? What seems suspect? What reinforces or counters points made in other readings? This kind of note taking will keep your reading active, and actually will help you remember the contents of the text.

"S.T.A.M.P." it!

A technique for reading a book which complements the steps above is to answer a series of questions about your reading.

Structure :

- How has the author structured her work?
- How would you briefly outline it?
- Why might she have employed this structure?
- What historical argument does the structure employ?
- After identifying the thesis, ask yourself in what ways the structure of the work enhances or detracts from the thesis.
- How does the author set about to make her or his case?
- What about the structure of the work makes it convincing?

Thesis: A thesis is the controlling argument of a work of history.

Often, the most difficult task when reading a secondary source is to identify the author's thesis. In a well-written essay, the thesis is usually clearly stated near the beginning of the piece. In a long article or book, the thesis is usually diffuse. There may in fact be more than one. As you read, constantly ask yourself, "**how could I sum up what this author is saying in one or two sentences?**" This is a difficult task; even if you never feel you have succeeded, simply constantly trying to answer this question will advance your understanding of the work.

Argument: A thesis is not just a statement of opinion, or a belief, or a thought. It is an argument. Because it is an argument, it is subject to evaluation and analysis.

- Is it a good argument?
- How is the big argument (the thesis) structured into little arguments?
- Are these little arguments constructed well?
- Is the reasoning valid?
- Does the evidence support the conclusions?
- Has the author used invalid or incorrect logic?
- Is she relying on incorrect premises?
- What broad, unexamined assumptions seem to underlay the author's argument?
- Are these correct?

Note here that none of these questions ask if *you like* the argument or its conclusion. This part of the evaluation process asks you only to evaluate the logic of the argument. There are two kinds of logic you must consider:

- **Internal Logic** is the way authors make their cases, *given the initial assumptions, concerns, and definitions* set forth in the essay or book. In other words, assuming that their concern is a sound one, does the argument make sense?
- **Holistic logic** regards the piece as a whole. *Are the initial assumptions correct? Is the author asking the proper questions? Has the author framed the problem correctly?*

Motives: Why might the author have written this work?

This is a difficult question, and often requires outside information, such as information on how other historians were writing about the topic. *Don't let the absence of that information keep you from using your historical imagination.* Even if you don't have the information you wish you had, you can still ask yourself, "Why would the author argue this?" Many times, arguments in older works of history seem ludicrous or silly to us today. When we learn more about the context in which those arguments were made, however, they start to make more sense. Things like political events and movements, an author's ideological bents or biases, or an author's relationship to existing political and cultural institutions often have an impact on the way history is written. On the other hand, the struggle to achieve complete objectivity also affects the ways people have written history. It is only appropriate, then, that such considerations should inform your reading.

Primaries: Read the footnotes, especially when you come across a particularly interesting or controversial passage. Make sure you can answer the following questions:

- What primary sources has the historian used to support her argument?
- Has she used them well?
- What pitfalls may befall the historians who uses these sources?
- How does her use of these kinds of sources influence the kinds of arguments she can make?
- What other sources might she have employed?

Adapted from Patrick Rael's [Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students](#)