

Reading Actively (and Efficiently) for History Courses

In this course, you will be asked to read a variety of primary and secondary sources, both for our in-class discussions and for your research project. Some weeks, the assigned readings may seem overwhelming (in both length and content), but if you establish a systematic approach to reading at the beginning of the semester, you will be able to confidently manage these readings and effectively prepare for class.

Guidelines for Reading:

- Read **ACTIVELY!** Do not be a passive consumer of texts. Some tips for active reading include...
 - Always have pen and paper nearby (or computer, if that is your preference). Don't just record what the author says, though. Record your thoughts on the readings, provide summaries of key sections, write down questions that have not been addressed (or not answered satisfactorily), and so on.
 - Annotate, or otherwise mark the reading up. Do not come into class with a "clean" text. I should see some evidence that you worked through the readings!
 - Read the work from the outside in, and ask questions at every step. Reading a book from start to finish is rarely a useful approach in history classes. Instead, start with the title (why was that title chosen? what does it tell you about the argument that might be made?), then read the introduction, table of contents and conclusion (What are the main arguments of the book? How were these arguments supported? What is the structure of the book? So far, do you agree with what the author has written? Does the argument make sense to you?). Only after reading these sections should you approach the body chapters, and even then you should follow the same protocol (read first and last paragraphs/sections first).
 - The process might be slightly shorter for articles or single chapters, but the process should remain unchanged.
 - **TIP #1:** Unless you think the reading will be vital to your research (and typically you won't know this until you've read quite a few sources), you do **not** need to read a source in its entirety. Go in, get the main ideas,

formulate your own ideas, write them down, and get out.

- **TIP #2:** If you are having trouble with a book, particularly with understanding its “intellectual pedigree,” find a review of the book on JSTOR. Often, these reviews will provide some orientation as to where the book you are reading fits into scholarship and/or a particular intellectual debate.
- Read important sections more than once, especially if something is confusing. Determine why you are confused--is it because you don't know definitions? If so, look them up. Does the confusion stem from not understanding abstract concepts? Take each sentence on its own and try to put it in your own words. If, after several read-throughs, the passage is still impenetrable, bring it up in discussion.
- **WRITE:** Write, summarize, chart. You should come away from reading with something tangible to reference later. What form this takes depends on your own preferences and learning style.

More Specifically...

Though this is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the questions you can ask of your sources, if you can answer all of the questions listed below, you will be prepared to contribute to our class discussion.

Questions for Secondary Sources

1. Why did the author write this? What is their research question(s)?
2. What is their main argument(s)?
3. How do they support this argument? What types of evidence/source material do they utilize?
4. Does the author make a compelling argument? Why or why not?
5. How does this work fit into scholarship on similar topics? (i.e. Is the author arguing against a previously held belief? Is this a novel approach? etc)
6. How does this work fit into our class, or your research?

Questions for Primary Sources

1. Who wrote this? Look for some basic biographical information on this person(Wikipedia, for all its flaws, is generally a good source for this type of information. Do **not**--and I cannot state this strongly enough--rely on Wikipedia for summaries of readings or critical information).

2. When was it written? What background information do you need in order for the source to make sense?
3. Why was it written, and for whom was it written?
4. What is the argument(s)?
5. What does this source tell you about the author/time period/subject?
6. Does this source support the secondary literature that you have read? Why or why not?