

How to Read Historical Writing

Reading history is **very different** from reading fiction. The purpose of reading a **textbook** is to develop a coherent overview of a particular topic. The purpose of reading a **historical monograph or an article** is to understand and remember key themes, supporting evidence offered, and the author's interpretation. You may read a textbook, article, or monograph for a class discussion, writing a paper, or taking an exam. You must understand *why* you are reading before you begin, so that you can read appropriately.

Reading history requires writing! Simply reading something over and over merely allows you to recognize it; you DO NOT really learn it. The only way to read history for content and understanding is to systematically take notes. You must be willing to make the time to take notes and study thoroughly, or you cannot expect to do well in history courses.

How to read a textbook: First, look at the title of the assigned chapter. This will give you a sense of what general information is covered. Next, look at the sub-headings. These will tell you the main theme of each section within the chapter. Once you have a rough idea of what to expect, make a written outline of the sub-headings, leaving plenty of room to fill in key ideas. Now you can read the chapter, looking for the main idea expressed in each paragraph. Write these main ideas into your outline. Highlight or underline sparingly. You should highlight only 10% of what you read, and highlighted material should consist only of brief key words - ones that help to trigger your memory about what you should put in your outline. Read review questions, if there are any, and write answers to them. Write a summary of the chapter in your own words, based on your outline. Make a note of maps, charts, or pictures, included in the chapter. Be certain to understand what ideas they express and why they are included.

How to read a monograph: First, read the title and table of contents. These will tell you how the book is organized, and what kinds of material to expect in the text. Next, read the preface or introduction. This will state the author's thesis, methodology, and general purpose in writing the book. Read the conclusion. This will re-state and expand on the information in the preface. If there is no clearly marked preface, introduction, and conclusion, read the first and last chapters. These often serve as introduction and summary. Next, make an outline based on what you have gleaned from the book. Make a note of whether the book's organization is chronological or thematic. NOW you are actually ready to read the book. As you read each chapter, plug the main ideas into your outline. Keep track of what kind of information is presented. Does the author stress people, events, ideas, theories, or some combination thereof? If people or events seem to be important, keep a separate list of them in your notes, particularly if certain names keep recurring throughout the book. When you finish reading, re-state the author's thesis in your own words. Make a note of any maps, charts, and illustrations. Be certain to understand how they relate to the content of the book, and what ideas they express. Look at the footnotes and bibliography. Make a note of what type of sources the author used. Finally, summarize your notes, following your outline. Be certain that you understand how each chapter contributes to the development of the author's thesis and overall purpose.

How to read an article: First, skim the article, looking for the topic sentence and concluding sentence of each paragraph. Make an outline based on the ideas expressed in these sentences. Read the article, looking for the main ideas expressed in each paragraph. Write these ideas into your outline. Re-state the author's thesis in your own words.

How to read a book or an article for class discussion: Follow the directions above, making certain that you write down the page numbers where relevant information is found. This way, you can direct your classmates to follow along with your commentary during the discussion. Be sure to review your notes before class. Create relevant questions and try to answer them yourself.

How to read lecture notes or books for a history test: After reading as directed above, pose sample questions to yourself and then write out the answers. This will help you to prepare for essay exams. Be certain to include appropriate specific details that support broad generalizations. If you must understand a particularly difficult concept or theory, break it into component parts and write a list of the

parts before trying to tackle the concept as a whole. If you are required to remember various details like names, dates, or specific vocabulary, make flash cards and quiz yourself until you can remember the information without looking it up. When you study specific details, look for the significance of how they relate to the general themes and contexts in the material. If you are required to take a map test, trace a blank map, then practice filling it in with locations mentioned in class or in your book. Study until you are able understand content from memory without looking at notes.

Always:

Make a note, including the page number, of anything that you do not understand, and ask your professor to explain it.

Write your outlines and summaries. Do not trust your memory and a highlighter alone.

Review the notes over what you read within 24 hours of reading it, or you will forget what you read.

Take a break every half hour or so. Do not try to ingest large amounts of information in a single sitting.

Remember that even professors get confused by difficult concepts and have to re-read material. Re-read difficult passages until you can understand them, or decide to ask for help.

Remember that reading history is often an abstract and intellectual endeavor. Do not expect that you will understand everything. You usually have to work to grasp ideas.

Why do college professors seem so smart? Because we take **organized notes** when we read to prepare for classes, we look up words that we don't know, we ask our colleagues for help when we need it, and **we review material constantly**. *Follow these steps and you can be as smart as a college professor!*