HOW TO READ A HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH (OR ESSAY)
in 10 easy steps

There are three things that you want to take away from your reading:
  1. the author’s argument;
  2. a general sense of the evidence the author used, along with a few specific examples;
  3. your critical reaction to the book/essay—what it does well, what are its weaknesses.

[Note: It is good to have a ½ to 1 page summary covering these three elements for every monograph or article that you read in college. Keep this with your course notes, in a bibliographic database, etc. You never know when it will come in handy.]

Step One: Cover and Title Page
If you are reading a monograph, look at the full title page and its reverse. The publication data (author, title, place of publication, publisher, and date of publication) may or may not be important in interpreting the book. But you should consider when the book was written and who wrote it. If the book is not particularly recent, make a note of that and consider what you know about the period in which it was written. What do you know about the author’s background? Academic training? For instance, you might consider how an essay written by an ecologist might differ from one written by an environmental historian.

Step Two: Preface & Introduction
Carefully read the preface (if there is one) and the introduction. Sometimes the introduction will be the first chapter of a book. In these two places, the author should tell you the following: (1) why they wrote the book (including information on their own background and influences); (2) what questions the author hopes to answer and what issues they will address; and (3) how they will answer the questions or address the issues; and (4) what their argument (in general terms) will be.

Sometimes the introduction will also tell you what other books/authors have written about the topic. Often authors are responding in some way to work that was written before. Thus in their introduction they may sometimes survey the relevant historical literature, point out its defects (faults with other authors’ arguments, questions that others have not been adequately answered, aspects of the topic that have not been explored), and then state how this book will remedy some of those defects. (A good introduction will often summarize the arguments of several other important works in the field—this is handy if you need to write a historiographic essay covering several works.) Before moving on, try to understand why the author wrote this book and what the author’s argument is.

Step Three: Table of Contents
The table of contents and chapter titles will tell you something about how the author is organizing their argument. Are the chapters organized chronologically, topically
(thematically), or some combination of the two? If chronologically, into what periods does the author divide the subject? If thematically, into what topics does the author organize the material?

**Step Four [optional]: Conclusion**
Read the conclusion before the body of the book. Though this may seem odd, reading a work of history for an academic purpose is not the same as reading a mystery novel. (Generally speaking, you will not spoil the surprise ending by reading ahead.) Sometimes this can help you pinpoint the author’s argument (especially if the argument was not presented clearly in the introduction).

**Step Five: Perspective**
Before moving beyond the introductory matter, you should pause to consider the author's point of view. No work is objective and value-free, nor could it be. Every author has a point of view, as well as a unique background and training, and often a unique set of sources. The question is not whether a work is "biased" --all books are—the question is what particular perspectives does the author bring to the subject, how well does the author deal with contrary evidence and arguments, and how does that influence the story that s/he tells? Ask yourself not only what this author’s perspective is, but what other perspectives might exist on this topic. Are you familiar with any similar works that have a different perspective?

**Step Six: The Body & Sources**
Your reading and analysis of the introductory matter of the book or article should give you a strong sense of what the author wants to accomplish in the body of the work. You should then read the rest of the book to determine how well the author achieves his or her goals. Read one chapter at a time. Ideally each chapter will encapsulate its own sub-argument. Read the beginning of the chapter and ask yourself what the argument is for that chapter. Then read the rest of the chapter, more-or-less straight through; it is permissible, even encouraged, to skim (!) sections of the chapter if they seem particularly long or tangential to the argument. (Note, however, that effective skimming is an acquired skill; it takes practice to identify quickly the less-important parts of a book.) In any event, don’t get bogged down by details! Believe it or not, sometimes historians include far too many details in their work. Even if the balance between detail and generalization is good, you [the reader] don’t need to master every detail. The objective is to (1) understand the chapter’s argument or purpose; (2) get a general sense of the evidence used to support that argument; (3) jot down 2-3 examples of the evidence used. Sometimes in order to figure out the type of evidence, you will need to look at a few footnotes/endnotes. Don’t read them all! You just need to figure out what kinds of sources the author is using. Is s/he relying on books written by other scholars or is s/he using primary sources? If the sources are primary, what are they? Oral histories? Government reports? Archaeological evidence? Stop at the end of each chapter and make sure you have items 1-3 down in your notes.

**Step Seven: Read the conclusion (again).**
Make sure you understand the author’s argument, why the author is thinks it is a significant argument, and/or what the author believes the implications of his or her argument to be.

**Step Eight: Summarize the book (i.e., make sure that you understand it)**

Can you answer the following questions while looking at your notes?

1. What was the author’s main argument? Which parts of the argument did each of the chapters present?

2. What types of evidence did the author rely on, for the most part? Or, if different chapters use different types of evidence, make a note of that.

3. How did the book respond to other related work? How did it critique arguments made by other authors? Or, how did it do something new?

If you’ve answered these questions, proceed to Step 8. If not, repeat Steps 2 and 4.

**Step Nine: Evaluate the book**

Reflect critically on the author’s accomplishments. What was impressive about the book, and/or what was lacking?

(1) **Use of evidence:** Are the author's conclusions well-supported by the material they have presented in the chapters?
   
   Questions to consider:
   
   - Do any of the author’s conclusions go beyond the material presented?
   - Does the author draw any conclusions that don’t seem that well supported by the evidence presented?
   - Can you think of alternative ways that the same evidence might be interpreted? -
   - What about the types of evidence used? Who produced it and what limitations might it have? What are these types of sources likely to leave out? Does the author use the evidence carefully and critically, given its limitations?
   - Can you think of other kinds of evidence that might change the story/conclusions in some way?

(2) **Argument and Importance:** What do you think of the argument itself? Is it interesting, compelling, or ho-hum? If it is compelling, why? How and why did it engage your attention? Does it change the way you understand something? If the argument is not compelling, why not? Are there other ways of thinking about the same material/issues that you think might be more interesting or useful? Are there other frameworks that we could apply that might give us a deeper/better/different understanding of the subject?
Step Ten: Organizing Your Thoughts
Think about the work as a whole. Review your notes and make sure you have a pretty good grasp of the book in its entirety. Return to sections that remain unclear. Then review your assignment. This may be to discuss the book in class—in which case you should come to class with notes, as described above, along with questions and opinions. (Remember: Discussion section is your chance to clear up any holes remaining after Step Eight, as well as an opportunity to offer your reactions and hear the reactions of colleagues. So, if you’re still not sure what the author’s argument was, or what kinds of evidence s/he used, ask appropriate questions!) The assignment may be a book review or précis, in which case you should formulate your ideas into a thesis about the book, and then use examples and evidence from the book (and possibly other works) to support your argument.

This step-by-step approach may strike you as overkill, but it essentially describes what professional historians do when they read a monograph or article. Following this approach should enable you to read successfully for history classes and also help you form your own critical reactions to the scholarly literature in other social science and humanistic fields. Give it a try.

[This guide was developed by drawing on a similar guide posted on the web by Steven M. Fountain, Dept. of History, Washington State University, Vancouver, who, in turn, credits previous guides prepared by Jim Williams and Nancy Rupprecht at Middle Tennessee State University, who, in turn, credit, a handout from Maureen Miller, Hamilton College. If you wish to reproduce it, please acknowledge these sources. The section on footnotes was taken directly from Tim Burke’s essay “How to Read in College,” cited in n.1]

1 Okay, so you are reading the footnotes/endnotes. Good, but here are some things you should know, compliments of Professor Tim Burke of Swarthmore College (“How to Read in College” at http://weblogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/).

Footnotes are hugely overused in academia, but learning to read them is still an important skill, (particularly in history!). There are five different basic kinds of footnotes:

1) Logrolling. When scholars are complimenting or acknowledging each other’s work. You cite my work, I’ll cite yours. Not too important unless you’re trying to reconstruct the intellectual biography of the scholar you’re presently reading, or trying to find work that might be comparable to the book you’re looking at. Sometimes amusing when you get “Anti-Logrolling”, e.g., footnotes which are there strictly to diss some other scholar.

2) Weird little stuff that distracts from the main point but which is still kind of interesting. This is the material that didn’t fit, but that the scholar couldn’t bear to give up on. If you’re skimming, you don’t have the time to spare to look at these kinds of footnotes. If you’re doing research, it may be a different matter.

3) Oh, by the way, there’s one teeny tiny little exception. This could be important, even if you’re skimming. Sometimes scholars stick big, hairy problems with their argument down in the footnotes somewhere.

4) Look, Ma, I did the reading. Scholars, especially junior scholars, need to prove to their colleagues that they know the scholarship in the field that they are working on. So many footnotes
are laundry lists of relevant books, or recap bodies of theory on a particular subject. Relevant if you’re researching or preparing for graduate Ph.D. exams, but not relevant if you’re skimming.

5) **You want proof? I’ll give you proof.** Even if you are skimming, you may want to know, when you’re faced with a substantive factual claim by an author, just how that person came by their facts. You’ll probably have to look in the footnotes to find out. If you come across a factual assertion and you feel the need to know the source of that fact, then read the footnote—even if you’re skimming.

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2 A “primary” source usually refers to a source produced at the time of the event being studied. In historical work, “primary sources” are contrasted with “secondary sources.” Secondary sources refer to books and essays written by other scholars on the topic. So if you are studying the North American fur trade, primary sources could include journals written by traders, records of fur-trading companies, accounts of Indian-European relations from the 16th-19th centuries, Native oral histories, archaeological evidence, ecological studies. A secondary source would be James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).