

# How to **read**

## like a historian

Historians like to read. They need to read closely to do their job well. Most historians thus end up reading the way that mechanics tinker with cars or coaches watch videotape of games. They're always trying to figure out how everything works.

By definition, this takes more than one "reading." Historians typically employ a quick **first read** to figure out the basic format of a source, asking questions such as who wrote it? For which audience? Using what structure? Then good historians engage in a much deeper, **second read** that navigates the text, not necessarily in linear fashion, but rather by tacking back and forth to help gain an appreciation of the "argument." But you cannot really appreciate the nature of a good historical argument unless you stop to consider the alternatives. That is why for any effective close reading of a source, there is almost always a **third read** devoted to answering the question: *What is missing?* All sources hide more than they reveal. If you are working at the highest level, then you have to learn how to conduct targeted research outside of the source in order to fully understand it. You can never really know a single source without comparing it to others, or without learning more about the time period when it was created.

So, reading like a historian is a time-consuming business. But it can become a powerful tool for understanding. When you are done with any type of source, whether primary or secondary, you should have fundamental grasp of at least three important categories of analysis:

- **TEXT** --Basic knowledge concerning format and content
- **CONTEXT** --General appreciation about the time period for primary sources or the history of interpretive arguments for secondary sources
- **SUBTEXT** --Deeper understanding about what has been left out and why

Of course, this approach is not really so special to historians. Anyone who engages in close reading of any text uses methods much like the ones outlined above. The process is challenging, for sure, but the results can be inspiring and full of insight.