

How to **read**

like a historian

Historians read books and articles the way that mechanics examine cars or coaches watch sports on TV. They're always trying to figure out how everything works.

Usually, by the way, this takes more than one "reading." Historians typically employ a quick **first read** to figure out the basic context 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 tacking back and forth to help gain an appreciation of the "argument." Historians call source interpretations "arguments." That suggests how much they love the battle of ideas. At its core, history is about arguing with facts. So the fundamental responsibility of any good student of history is to understand the main argument or interpretation of an author. But you cannot really appreciate the audacity 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 will understand how an author has intentionally omitted --or sometimes just forgotten-- something critical. These moments of clarity can prove thrilling and often help launch students on their own careers as historians.

So, reading like a historian is a time-consuming business. But it can become a powerful tool for understanding. Here is a checklist of some key questions that you should be able to answer over the course of your various stages of reading:

- Who is the author?
- What type of format is the material?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the author's main argument or interpretation?
- What are some alternatives to this argument?
- How does the author use evidence to support his or her arguments?
- What is missing?

Keep these questions in mind as you read, and re-read, and re-read again. Then, finally, you will truly be reading like a historian.