

*A Pocket Guide  
to Writing in  
History*

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FIFTH EDITION

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# 1

## *Introduction: Why Study History?*

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As any Harry Potter fan knows, the most boring class at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is History of Magic, taught by the dead (and deadly dull) Professor Binns. The professor's droning lectures regularly send students into a stupefied trance, from which they emerge just long enough to scribble a few names or dates into their notes. Asked on one occasion about an unsolved mystery involving the school's past, Binns replies, "My subject is History of Magic. . . . I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends."<sup>1</sup> Students who take their first college history class with a sense of foreboding often think that real historians, like Professor Binns, are interested only in compiling lists of names, dates, places, and "important" events that happened sometime in the past. But history is much more than this. The historian's goal is not to collect "facts" about the past, but rather to acquire insight into the ideas and realities that shaped the lives of men and women of earlier societies. Some of the beliefs and institutions of the past may seem alien to us; others are all too familiar. But in either case, when we study the people of the past, what we are really learning about is the rich diversity of human experience. The study of history is the study of the beliefs and desires, practices and institutions, of human beings.

Why should people bother studying the past in our increasingly future-oriented society? There are as many answers to this question as there are historians. First of all, a thoughtful examination of the past can tell us a great deal about how we came to be who we are. When we

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 149.

study history, we are looking at the roots of modern institutions, ideas, values, and problems. Second, the effort we put into grappling with the assumptions and world views of earlier societies teaches us to see the world through different eyes. The ability to perceive and recognize the meaning of events from a perspective other than our own and to appreciate the diversity of human beliefs and cultures is of inestimable value in our increasingly complex and multicultural society. Moreover, an awareness of various perspectives encourages students of history to engage in a critical analysis of their own culture and society and to recognize and critique their own assumptions. Finally, while historians don't have crystal balls with which to predict the future, an understanding of the ways the events of the past have shaped the complex problems with which we are grappling in our own times can provide us with the kind of insight that will help us make the decisions that will shape our future.

History is a complex discipline, and historians are a diverse group. They take different approaches to their material; they interpret the events of the past in different ways; they even disagree on such basic issues as whether and to what extent historians can be objective. These debates and disagreements amongst professional historians demonstrate the passion with which they approach their subject and ensure that the study of history will always remain fresh and exciting. Regardless of their approaches, however, all historians see writing as an important tool of inquiry and communication.

In addition to introducing you to some of the basic elements of what historians do, this manual provides guidelines for writing papers in the field of history at all levels — from first year surveys to upper-division seminars. The vast majority of students enrolled in an undergraduate history course are not contemplating a career in history. Indeed, most history majors follow career paths that lead them away from the study of the past into fields like law, government, business, and international relations. Nevertheless, the techniques you will need to master to write an effective history paper — how to read critically, think analytically, argue persuasively, and write clearly — are skills that will be useful to you wherever your academic interests take you and that you will value in whatever career path you choose to follow.

## 1a. Historical questions

Historians come to their work with a deep curiosity about the past; to satisfy that curiosity, they ask questions. It has been suggested that historians are like detectives; it is certainly true that they ask some of the same questions: *Who? What? When? Where? and Why?* Some of these questions are designed to elicit "the facts" and are relatively easy to answer: *Who* was the emperor of Japan during World War II? *What* tools did eighteenth-century weavers use? *When* did the Vietnamese drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh? *Where* did the first Continental Congress meet? Other questions, however, are less easy to answer: *Who* was Jack the Ripper? *What* were the religious beliefs of the peasants of twelfth-century Languedoc? *When* did President Nixon learn about the Watergate break-in? *Where* did the inhabitants of the original settlement at Roanoke go, and *why* did they disappear? More complex questions such as these have formed the basis of absorbing historical studies.

Historians also ask questions that help them analyze relationships between historical facts. Many of the questions historians ask, for example, reflect their interest in understanding the *context* in which the events of the past occurred. For instance, a historian interested in nineteenth-century science would not simply describe great "advances," such as Charles Darwin's publication of his theory of evolution by means of natural selection. As we know from the heated debates of our own time, science takes place within a social and cultural context, and scientific ideas can have a deep impact on politics, religion, education, and a host of other social institutions. Therefore, the historian would also ask questions about historical context: What role did political issues play in the acceptance or rejection of Darwin's theory? What other theories were current at the time, and how did they influence Darwin's thinking? Why did some theologians find his ideas threatening to religion, while others did not? What impact did larger social, political, and intellectual movements and institutions have on the study of biology in this period? In other words, historians do not examine events in isolation; rather, they try to understand the people and events of the past in terms of the unique historical context that helped to shape them.

As they explore the relationships between and among events in the past, historians also ask about the causes of events. The historical events that you will be studying and writing about can almost never be traced to a single cause, and historians are careful to avoid simplistic cause-and-effect relationships as explanations for events. For example, although the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the event that precipitated World War I, no historian would argue that it *caused* the war. Rather, historians try to uncover the complex multiplicity of causes that grow out of the historical context in which events occurred.

Historians also ask questions about the relationship between *continuity* (events, conditions, ideas, and so on that remain the same over time) and *change*. Many of the questions historians ask reflect this interest. For example, a historian who asks, "What impact did the Black Death have on the economic and legal status of the peasants?" is interested in examining the changes brought about by the bubonic plague against the backdrop of the ongoing institution of serfdom.

Finally, while the past doesn't change, historians' interests — and the questions they ask — do. Historians, like the people they study, are part of a larger context. They are guided in their choice of subject and in their questions by their own interests and by the interests and concerns of their societies. As they ask new questions, historians look at sources in new ways. They may even discover "new" sources — sources that had always existed but had been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. History, therefore, is a vital and dynamic discipline. We will never know all there is to know about the past because we are constantly posing new questions, and our questions, in turn, help us to see the past in new ways.

The best way to enter the world of the historian is to ask as many questions as you can about the particular historical issues you are studying. As you seek the answers to your questions, be aware of the new and more complex questions that your answers raise, and let them guide your exploration further.

## 1b. How this manual can help you

When you do research and writing in a history course, you become a participant in historical debate. You devise

questions about historical topics, seek answers to those questions in historical sources, and come to conclusions about those topics. In the papers you write, you need to construct arguments about the conclusions you have reached and offer support for them. This manual will help you understand the process from start to finish.

Chapter 2 introduces you to working with historical sources. Chapter 3 examines the connection between critical reading and effective writing and walks you through some typical assignments given in history courses. Chapter 4 provides advice on writing history essays while Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to the research paper. Chapters 6 and 7 are designed to help you use sources effectively while avoiding plagiarism. In addition, Chapter 7 includes models for documenting the sources you are most likely to use in an undergraduate history paper. Finally, Appendix A lists additional guides to writing in history, while Appendix B provides a guide to resources students might wish to consult while doing research.

History, like the other arts and sciences, provides a window onto the ideas and beliefs, the actions and passions, of human beings. Reading and writing history entail above all an exploration of who and what we are. This manual is designed to aid you in such exploration and to help you discover the pleasures of studying history.

## 2

# Working with Sources

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As you begin to think about historical questions, you will find that your search for answers will require you to explore a wide variety of sources. You will examine written materials of all sorts. You will look at materials written in the period you are studying and read books and articles written by modern historians. You may examine maps and photographs, paintings, and pottery. Ultimately, you may discover that you need to broaden your knowledge in a wide variety of areas, for history often takes its practitioners into all manner of related fields: literary criticism, art history, and archaeology; political science, economics, and sociology. But in any case, you will need to learn how to work with the sources on which the study of history is based.

### 2a. Identifying historical sources

To answer their questions, historians evaluate, organize, and interpret a wide variety of sources. These sources fall into two broad categories: primary sources and secondary sources. To study history and write history papers, you will need to know how to work with both kinds of sources.

#### 2a-1. Primary sources

Primary sources are materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration, either as participants or as witnesses. They provide the evidence upon which historians rely in order to describe and interpret the past. Some primary sources are written documents, such as letters, diaries, newspaper and magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, treatises, census data, and marriage, birth, and death registers. In addition, historians often examine primary sources that are not written, like works of art, films, recordings, items of clothing, household objects, tools, and archaeological remains. For recent history, oral sources, such as interviews with Vietnam veterans or Holocaust survivors and other such eyewitness accounts can also be primary sources. By examining primary sources, historians gain insights into the thoughts, behaviors, and experiences of the people of the past.

When using a primary source, it is important to *examine the source itself*. Do not simply rely on another historian's analysis of the source. The purpose of writing history, after all, is to develop your *own* interpretation based on the evidence you have assembled.

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#### 2a-2. Secondary sources

Historians also use *secondary sources*: books and articles in scholarly journals that comment on and interpret primary sources. Secondary sources are extremely useful. Reading secondary sources is often the simplest and quickest way to become acquainted with what is already known about the subject you are studying. In addition, examining scholarly books and articles will inform you about the ways in which other historians have understood and interpreted events. Reading a variety of secondary sources is also the best way to become aware of the issues and interpretations that are the subject of controversy and debate among professional historians. As a student of history, you are invited to participate in these debates. Finally, secondary sources can be an important research tool. Reading them carefully can help guide you toward topics that have not yet been explored fully or about which there is controversy. Moreover, the bibliographies of secondary sources can direct you to primary sources.

As valuable as secondary sources are, you should never base a history paper on them alone, unless, of course, you are writing a historiography paper (see 3b-5). Whenever possible, you should study the events of the past in the words of people who experienced, witnessed, or participated in them.

### 2a-3. Primary or secondary?

The status of a source as primary or secondary depends on the focus of your research. If you are writing about the reign of the English king Richard III (1483–85) your primary sources might include edicts, chronicles composed by contemporary witnesses to the events of his reign, and letters written by foreign ambassadors to the English court. Strictly speaking, Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*, written in the early sixteenth century, would be a secondary source because More was not a witness to the events he describes, and he records only the evidence provided to him by others. If, however, you are writing about the depiction of Richard III in the early Tudor period, More would be a primary source.

The questions that historians pose of their sources depend in part on the nature of the sources with which they are working. Both primary and secondary sources can provide valuable information; however, they provide different kinds of information. Primary sources allow you to enter the lives and minds of the people you are studying. The documents that people wrote — sermons and wills, novels and poems — and the things that they made — music and movies, knife blades and buttons — bring you into direct contact with the world of the past. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are written by historians who can provide a broader perspective on the events of the past than the people who actually participated in them since they have more information about the context and outcome of those events, an awareness of multiple points of view, and access to more documents than any single participant. In studying nineteenth-century communes, for example, primary sources such as the diaries or letters of commune members, or the items they produced and used, can provide firsthand information about the thoughts, feelings, and daily lives of the people who lived in such communities. Primary sources would be less useful, however, in examining the larger, sociological effects of communal living. To get a better understanding of those effects, secondary sources in which historians examine several such communities over time, or study the ways in which contemporary outsiders viewed communes, might prove more useful. In your own work, you will need to use both primary and secondary sources, always keeping in mind what kinds of in-

formation each of those sources can tell you about a topic.

## 2b. Evaluating sources

If primary sources always told the truth, the historian's job would be much easier — and also rather boring. But sources, like witnesses in a murder case, often lie. Sometimes they lie on purpose, telling untruths to further a specific ideological, philosophical, or political agenda. Sometimes they lie by omission, leaving out bits of information that are crucial to interpreting an event. Sometimes sources mislead unintentionally because the author was not aware of all the facts, misinterpreted the facts, or was misinformed. Many are biased, either consciously or unconsciously, and contain unstated assumptions; all reflect the interests and concerns of their authors. Moreover, primary sources often conflict. As a result, one of the challenges historians face in writing a history paper is evaluating the reliability and usefulness of their sources.

Like primary sources, secondary sources may contradict each other. Several historians can examine the same set of materials and interpret them in very different ways. Similarly, historians can try to answer the same questions by looking at different kinds of evidence or by using different methods to gather, evaluate, and interpret evidence. The study of the ways in which historians have interpreted the past is called *historiography*, and knowing how to read and evaluate the work of other historians is so important that some professors may ask you to write a historiographic essay (see 3b-5). In any case, to get the most out of your reading of secondary sources, you will need to study a variety of interpretations of historical events and issues and learn how to read carefully and critically.

### 2b-1. Evaluating primary sources

Primary sources comprise the basic material with which historians work. Nevertheless, historians do not take the evidence provided by such sources simply at face value. Like good detectives, they evaluate the evidence, approaching their sources analytically and critically.

Since primary sources originate in the actual period under discussion, we might be inclined to trust what they say implicitly. After all, if the author is an eyewitness, why

should anyone doubt his or her word? However, as any police investigator could tell you, eyewitnesses see different things and remember them in different ways. Ask two witnesses to describe what they saw, and you will readily understand why even eyewitness sources must be carefully assessed. One way in which historians evaluate primary sources is to compare them; a fact or description contained in one source is more likely to be accepted as trustworthy if other sources support or corroborate it. Another technique historians use to evaluate the reliability of a source is to identify the author's biases. We might be less inclined, for example, to believe Polydore Vergil's assertion that Richard III killed his nephews if we realize that Vergil was the official court historian for Henry VII, who killed Richard in battle and seized the English throne for himself. Historians also read their sources carefully for evidence of internal contradictions or logical inconsistencies, and they pay attention to their sources' use of language, since the adjectives and metaphors an author uses can point to hidden biases and unspoken assumptions.

In general, when you deal with written primary sources, you should always ask the following:

### *Tips for Writers*

#### Questions for Evaluating Written Primary Sources

- Who is the author?
- How does the author's gender and socioeconomic class compare to the people about whom he or she is writing?
- Why did he or she write the source?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?
- Are there detectable biases in the source?
- When was the source composed?
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- Are there other contemporary sources to compare against this one?

When dealing with nonwritten primary sources, the following questions will be useful:

### *Tips for Writers*

#### Questions for Evaluating Nonwritten Primary Sources

##### FOR ARTIFACTS

- When and where was the artifact made?
- Who might have used it, and what might it have been used for?
- What does the artifact tell us about the people who made and used it and the period in which it was made?

##### FOR ART WORKS (PAINTINGS, SCULPTURE, ETC.)

- Who is the artist and how does the work compare to his or her other works?
- When and why was the work made? Was it commissioned? If so, by whom?
- Where was the work first displayed? How did contemporaries respond to it and how do their responses compare to the ways in which it is understood now?

##### FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

- Who is the photographer? Why did he or she take this photograph?
- Where was the photograph first published or displayed? Did that publication or venue have a particular mission or point of view?

##### FOR CARTOONS

- What is the message of the cartoon? How do words and images combine to convey that message?
- In what kind of publication did it originally appear (newspaper, magazine, etc.)? Did that publication have a particular agenda or mission?
- When did the cartoon appear and how might its historical context be significant?

##### FOR MAPS

- What kind of map is this (topographical, political, military, etc.)?
- Where and when was the map made, and what was its intended purpose?
- Does the map contain any extraneous text or images? If so, what do they add to our understanding of the map itself?

##### FOR SOUND RECORDINGS

- Who made the recording and what kind of recording is it (music, speech, interview, etc.)?
- Where and when was the recording made?
- Was the recording originally intended for broadcast? If so, why was it broadcast and who was the intended audience?

**EVALUATING PRIMARY SOURCES: AN EXAMPLE.** In a letter written to Sheik El-Messiri in 1798, Napoleon expresses the hope that the sheik will soon establish a government in Egypt based on the principles of the Qu'ran, the sacred text of Islam. Those principles, according to Napoleon, "alone are true and capable of bringing happiness to men."<sup>1</sup> Should we assume, on the evidence of this letter, that Napoleon believed in the truth of Islam? A historian might ask, "Do we have any other evidence for Napoleon's attitude toward Islam? What do other primary sources tell us about Napoleon's attitude toward religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism? Do any other primary sources contradict the attitude toward Islam expressed in Napoleon's letter to the sheik?" In other words, "How accurately and to what extent can this source answer questions about Napoleon's religious beliefs?" In addition, historians try to understand or interpret their sources even if those sources do not offer the best or most accurate information on a certain topic. As it happens, Napoleon did not believe in Islam. This does not mean, however, that his letter to the sheik should be relegated to the dustbin. Instead, a good historian will ask, "Under what circumstances did Napoleon write this letter? Who was Sheik El-Messiri, and what was his relationship to Napoleon? What does this letter tell us about Napoleon's willingness to use religion to his political advantage?" Thus, to write about historical questions, you will need to know how to approach many different kinds of primary sources and ask appropriate questions of them.

**THINKING ABOUT EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS.** When professional historians work with primary sources, they travel to archives and libraries around the world to analyze original letters, manuscripts, photographs, and so on. When they turn to published editions of their sources, they work with these sources in their original languages. Undergraduates rarely have the opportunity or the linguistic skills to conduct this kind of research. Instead, students rely on published, translated editions of primary

1. Napoleon Bonaparte, "Letter to the Sheik El-Messiri," in *The Mind of Napoleon: A Selection from His Written and Spoken Words*, 4th ed., trans. and ed. J. Christopher Herold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 104.

sources or, increasingly, on documents posted on the Internet, which is an excellent source for a wide variety of documents, photographs, and other primary materials.

Using modern editions of sources in translation is an excellent way to enter into the worldview of the people you are studying. Nevertheless, you should be aware that any edited text reflects, to some extent, the interests and experiences of the editor or translator. In the process of choosing excerpts, the editor of a document is making a judgment about what aspects of the source are important. For example, when Elizabeth Agassiz compiled the letters of her husband, the nineteenth-century naturalist Louis Agassiz, for publication, she eliminated passages that reveal the strong antipathy he felt toward blacks. It was only when he examined the original letters themselves that Harvard University professor Stephen Jay Gould discovered that the published letters had been expurgated.<sup>2</sup> The process by which the editor of a document collection selects which documents to include and which to leave out also involves interpretation. The collection, as it appears in print, reflects how the editor interprets and organizes the material and what he or she sees as significant. You should read the whole source, if possible, rather than excerpts; when you are writing a history paper, you need to know the significance of the entire document and the context of any portions of the source that you wish to discuss or quote.

The following suggestions will help you to evaluate both print and online editions of primary sources:

- Always read the preface and introduction carefully to determine the principles underlying the editor's process of selection.
- Pay careful attention to the footnotes and endnotes, which will alert you to alternate readings or translations of the material in the text.
- When using an online source, follow the links that lead you to further sources or information.
- As a rule, use the most recent edition or translation, which reflects the current state of scholarship.

2. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981), 77.



## 2b-2. Evaluating secondary sources

Reading secondary sources helps us understand how other historians have interpreted the primary sources for the period being studied. Students sometimes hesitate to question the conclusions of established scholars; nevertheless, as with primary sources, it is important to read secondary sources critically and analytically, asking the same questions you ask of primary sources.

Evaluate a secondary source, as you would a primary source, by asking critical questions:

### Tips for Writers

#### Questions for Evaluating Secondary Sources

- Who is the author? What are his or her academic credentials? (You will often find information about the author in the preface of a book; journals sometimes include authors' biographies, either on the first page of the article or in a separate section.)
- Who is the publisher? (That is, is the text published by a scholarly press, or a popular one?)
- Who is the intended audience for the text (scholars, students, general reading public, etc.)?
- When was the text written?
- Do the footnotes/endnotes and bibliography reference other important works on the same topic?
- Does the author contradict or disagree with others who have written on the subject, and if so, does he or she acknowledge and effectively address opposing arguments or interpretations?
- Does the author use primary sources as evidence to support his or her thesis? Is his or her interpretation of the primary sources persuasive?
- Is there primary source evidence that you are aware of that the author does not consider?
- Does the author build his or her argument on any unsubstantiated assumptions?

In addition, when you use a secondary source, it is especially important to do the following:

**CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE PUBLICATION DATE.** If it is important that you know the most recent theories about a historical subject, pay special attention to the

publication dates of the sources you are considering. A 2000 article reviewing theories about the construction of Native American burial mounds may contain more recent ideas than a 1964 review. Do not assume, however, that newer interpretations are always better; some older works have contributed significantly to the field and may offer interpretations that are still influential. (As you become more experienced in historical research, you will be able to determine which older sources are still useful.) Moreover, older sources might offer a historical perspective on how interpretations of an issue or event have changed over time, which is particularly important if you are writing a historiographic essay.

**EVALUATE THE SUPPORT THE AUTHOR PROVIDES FOR HIS OR HER THESIS.** Any book or article makes an argument in support of a thesis. (For detailed information on what a thesis is and a discussion of how the thesis relates to the argument of a paper, see 4c and 4d). Once you have identified the author's thesis, you should evaluate the evidence he or she uses to support it. You may not be in a position to judge the accuracy of the evidence, although you will build expertise as you continue to read about the subject. You can, however, evaluate the way in which the author uses the evidence he or she presents. You might ask yourself whether the evidence logically supports the author's point. For example, Margaret Sanger, who founded the American Birth Control League in 1921, was also involved in the U.S. eugenics movement, which advocated, among other things, for the sterilization of individuals deemed "mentally incompetent." This, however, does not justify the conclusion that *all* early twentieth-century birth-control advocates favored eugenics. Such an assertion would be a logical fallacy known as a *hasty generalization*.

You should also ask whether the same facts could be interpreted in another way to support a different thesis. For example, G. Stanley Hall, an early twentieth-century American psychologist, amassed evidence that demonstrated a correlation between a woman's educational level and the number of children she had: Women who attended colleges and universities had fewer children than their less educated sisters. From these facts, he concluded that higher education caused sterility in women. A modern historian looking at the same evidence might conclude that education allowed women to become

economically independent, freed them from the necessity of forming early marriages, and allowed them to pursue careers other than raising children.

Another consideration is whether the cause-and-effect relationships described in a source are legitimate. It may be true that event A happened before event B, but that does not necessarily mean that A caused B. For example, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon. The following winter was particularly harsh in the United States. We should not necessarily conclude, however, that the lunar landing caused a change in weather patterns. This would be a *post hoc* fallacy, from the Latin *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this).

Finally, consider how the author deals with any counterevidence. (See 4d-2 for a discussion of counterevidence.)

### 2b-3. Evaluating Internet sources

The Internet provides ready access to both primary and secondary sources. Editions of a wide variety of written primary sources (letters, treatises, government publications, even whole books) are available on the Web, as are cartoons, photographs, images of antique maps, and other nonwritten primary sources. If you are looking for secondary sources, historians may publish their research online in electronic journals like *The E-Journal of Portuguese History* ([http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese\\_Brazilian\\_Studies/ejph/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/)); in addition, scholarly articles are available on the Web through subscription servers such as *JSTOR: The Scholarly Journal Archive* (<http://www.jstor.org/>), which scans and archives a wide variety of scholarly print journals. (For a list of useful electronic sources, see Appendix B.)

Internet sites maintained by universities, museums, government agencies, and other institutions can be a gold mine for students whose access to large research libraries is limited. Making effective use of this research tool, however, requires you to anticipate and avoid the special problems that it presents. The most significant difficulty that students encounter when trying to evaluate a Web source is credibility. Although articles in scholarly journals and books from academic presses are carefully reviewed by other scholars in the field, anyone with the right software

can post information on the Internet. Students should therefore be especially careful to determine the reliability of their Internet sources.

First, determine whether the source you are using is primary or secondary and ask the same questions you would use to evaluate a similar source in print. In addition, you should ask the following questions of a Web source:

#### Tips for Writers

##### Questions for Evaluating Web Sources

- Is the author's identity clear, and, if so, what are his or her academic credentials? Does the author list an academic degree? Is he or she affiliated with a college or university? Are there other websites that provide additional information about the author?
- Does the author provide evidence for his or her assertions, such as citations, bibliographies, and so on? Are the sources up to date? Are the sources for statistics included?
- Is the site affiliated with an academic institution, press, or journal? The Web address — or URL — can provide some clues to such affiliations. If ".edu" or ".gov" appears in the address, it has been posted by an educational or governmental institution, which should give you a greater degree of confidence in the material it contains.
- Is the site sponsored by a particular organization? (Look for ".org" in the URL.) Do you know anything about the interests and concerns of the person or group that publishes the site? (Check the "About" or homepage for a "mission" statement.) Does the organization seem biased?
- What is the purpose of the site? Is it designed to inform? Persuade? Sell a product?
- Does the information on the site coincide with what you have learned about the subject from other sources?
- Has the site been updated recently?
- Does the site contain useful links to other sites? Are the linked sites affiliated with reputable institutions or persons?

If you are still unsure if an Internet source is reliable, it is best to consult your professor or a reference librarian.

### 2b-4. Looking at historical sources: An example

In the summer of 1925, a high school teacher named John Thomas Scopes was arrested in Dayton, Tennessee, for violating the Butler Act, a state law prohibiting the

teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools. Although the trial was contrived — the ACLU, which wanted to test the constitutionality of the Butler Act, had advertised that it was willing to defend anyone arrested for violating the statute, and the city fathers of Dayton, hoping to "put Dayton on the map," had asked a cooperative Scopes to play the part of defendant — it was nonetheless quickly dubbed "the trial of the century." More than three-quarters of a century later, the trial still fascinates students of history because it highlights many of the most important social issues and intellectual conflicts in American culture in the 1920s, issues that are still of vital interest today: the relationship of science and religion, the tensions between urban and rural American culture, the rights of the majority versus those of the minority, and academic freedom versus community values.

The following five primary sources (two written texts; an eyewitness account transcribed from a film; one photograph; and one cartoon) and one secondary source all illustrate the interaction between the lead attorneys in the trial: Clarence Darrow, the well-known champion of unpopular civil liberties causes, for the defense; and William Jennings Bryan, the "great commoner" and three-time Democratic presidential candidate, for the prosecution. Taken as a group, these sources illustrate some of the challenges — and pleasures — of working with historical sources.

On the seventh day of the proceedings, the defense, in an unexpected and unprecedented move, called Bryan to the stand as an "expert witness" on the Bible. Astonishingly, Bryan agreed to testify. The direct confrontation of these two larger-than-life figures provided one of the most dramatic and highly publicized moments in the trial. The following documents capture that moment.

Document 1 is a short excerpt from the trial transcripts. At this point in the proceedings, Darrow is questioning Bryan about the creation of the earth:

[DARROW:] Do you think the earth was made in six days?

[BRYAN:] Not six days of twenty-four hours.

[DARROW:] Doesn't it say so?

[BRYAN:] No, sir.

[PROSECUTING ATTORNEY A. THOMAS] STEWART: I want to interpose another objection. What is the purpose of this examination?

BRYAN: The purpose is to cast ridicule on everybody who believes in the Bible, and I am perfectly willing that the world shall know that these gentlemen have no other purpose than ridiculing every Christian who believes in the Bible.

DARROW: We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States and you know it, and that is all. . . .

BRYAN: . . . I am simply trying to protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States! (Prolonged applause.) I want the papers to know I am not afraid to get on the stand in front of him and let him do his worst! I want the world to know! (Prolonged applause.)<sup>3</sup>

Document 2 is an excerpt from the *New York Times'* coverage of the seventh day of the trial, as it appeared in the paper on July 21, 1925:

So-called Fundamentalists of Tennessee sat under the trees of the Rhea County Court House lawn today listening to William J. Bryan defend his faith in the "literal inerrancy" of the Bible, and laughed. . . . The greatest crowd of the trial had come in anticipation of hearing Messrs. Bryan and Darrow speak, and it got more than it expected. It saw Darrow and Bryan in actual conflict — Mr. Darrow's rationalism in combat with Mr. Bryan's faith — and forgot for the moment that Bryan's faith was its own. . . . There was no pity for the helplessness of the believer come so suddenly and unexpectedly upon a moment when he could not reconcile statements of the bible with generally accepted facts. There was no pity for his admissions of ignorance of things boys and girls learn in high school. . . . These Tennesseans were enjoying a fight. That an ideal of a great man, a biblical scholar, an authority on religion, was being dispelled seemed to make no difference. They grinned with amusement and expectation. . . . And finally, when Mr. Bryan, pressed harder and harder by Mr. Darrow, confessed he did not believe everything in the Bible should be taken literally, the crowd howled.<sup>4</sup>

3. Jeffrey P. Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 156.

4. *New York Times*, July 21, 1925, 1, in Moran, 161.

Document 3 is an account of the same event as it was remembered by an elderly Dayton native named Eloise Reed, who recalled her impressions of the famous confrontation between Darrow and Bryan in a recent documentary film.<sup>5</sup> Her brother had been a member of the high school football team that Scopes coached, and she had attended the trial as a twelve-year-old girl:

The courtyard was packed. There were not enough seats to hold all of the people and they were standing around. The benches had been set up all in front of the stand so we had a seat right in front of Darrow and Bryan. And I was all set to hear the great trial going on. . . . William Jennings Bryan was sitting there with a big palm fan and a handkerchief in his hand. Darrow is in his shirtsleeves with red suspenders, which he wore. He jumped up right in front of him, took hold of his red suspenders and flipped them, and said, "Do you really believe that that whale swallowed Jonah?" . . . He just kept pushing him and pushing him. You know I wanted to get up off of that bench and go up there and kick him. It was just, I imagine people out there in the audience felt the same way to make him hush. The thing was, he was attacking the Bible. Finally the judge said to him, "Well, what do you mean. You are harassing your own witness. What you are asking him has nothing to do with the issue of this trial. We want you to put a stop to it."

Document 4 is a photograph (Figure 2.1) taken during the trial; Darrow (standing) is examining Bryan (at the left of the photograph, holding a fan).<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2.1** Overhead view of the Scopes Trial

5. *The Monkey Trial*, prod. and dir. Christine Lesiak, 50 minutes, A & E Entertainment, 2000, videocassette. A transcript of the film can be found online at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/filmmore/pt.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/filmmore/pt.html).

6. The photograph can be found on the Web at [www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/scopes/darrowcross.jpg](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/scopes/darrowcross.jpg).

Finally, Document 5 is a political cartoon (Figure 2.2) that appeared in the August 1, 1925, issue of *Judge*, a periodical published in New York from 1881 to 1939.<sup>7</sup> It depicts a stern Darrow (right) confronting a crying Bryan (left); the caption reads "There Ain't No Santy Claus!"

An observant reader would notice immediately that, while the five primary sources are all contemporary records of the Scopes trial, they represent distinctive points of view regarding Bryan's personality and the impression he made on the stand at the trial. In working with these documents, then, the historian would need to determine the perspectives that each source represents. How does each of these sources depict the demeanor and behavior of Bryan and Darrow? How are Bryan and Darrow depicted in the cartoon, and what does this imply



"THERE AIN'T NO SANTY CLAUS!"

**Figure 2.2** Cartoon of Bryan and Darrow

7. The cartoon first appeared in *Judge*, August 1, 1925 (vol. 89, no. 2283), 14. It can also be found on the Web at [www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/Ftrials/scopes/sco\\_cal.htm](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/Ftrials/scopes/sco_cal.htm).

about their attitudes and personalities? How do the sources portray their confrontation at the trial? How do Documents 1 through 4 depict the observers' response to Bryan's testimony? Do the sources agree on any details that would enable us to determine "what happened"? Where do the sources disagree? What is the significance of these contradictions, and what might account for them? Which of the two eyewitness accounts (Documents 2 and 3) better accords with the actual transcripts of the trial? To what extent does the *Times* reporter's status as an "outsider" give him a different perspective on events than that of Eloise Reed, a local? Does the photograph tend to support any particular version of the event? Was the photograph published, and, if so, where?

We might also ask questions that require not just an analysis of the *content* of the sources, but some research into their *background*. Why, and under what circumstances, did each of these accounts come to be recorded? Do these circumstances affect the degree to which we should be willing to trust them? For example, Documents 2 and 5 appeared in the *New York Times* and *Judge*, respectively. What do we know about these publications? Were they conservative or liberal? Who comprised their general readership, and what political, social, or economic groups did they represent? Where did they stand on the issues at the heart of the Scopes trial?

In general, then, the student should ask: What points of view are revealed in the sources? How should my awareness of these viewpoints affect the way I read the texts and look at the cartoons and photographs? And, finally, are there any additional related sources to which these should be compared?

When we turn from primary sources to a secondary source, we can see how the work of other historians can add to our understanding of the past. In *Summer for the Gods*, historian Edward J. Larson offers this description and analysis of the seventh day of the trial:

As the inquiry departed ever further from any apparent connection to the Tennessee law against teaching evolution supposedly at issue in the trial, the prosecutor objected, "What is the purpose of this examination?" Darrow answered honestly. "We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States," he declared, "and that is all." That was more than enough, for it justified his efforts

to publicly debunk fundamentalist reliance on scripture as a source of knowledge about nature suitable for setting education standards. Darrow had gone to tiny Dayton, Tennessee, for precisely this purpose, with Bryan as his target. Bryan had come to defend the power of local majorities to enact a law — his law — to ban teaching about human evolution in public schools. Two hundred reporters had followed to record the epic encounter. They billed it as "the trial of the century" before it even began. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Later in the book, Larson returns to the same scene:

Then, with the jury still excused, [defense attorney] Hayes called Bryan as the defense's final expert on the Bible, and the Commoner again proved cooperative. Up to this point [prosecuting attorney] Stewart had masterfully confined the proceedings and, with help from a friendly judge, controlled his wily opponents. . . . Yet Stewart could not control his impetuous co-counsel and the judge seemed eager to hear the Peerless Leader defend the faith. . . . Stewart tried to end the two-hour interrogation at least a dozen times, but Bryan refused to step down. "I am simply trying to protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States," he shouted, pounding his fist in rage. "I want the papers to know I am not afraid to get on the stand in front of him and let him do his worst." The crowd cheered this outburst and every counterthrust attempted by the Commoner. Darrow received little applause but inflicted the most jabs.<sup>9</sup>

While primary documents are essential to the historian's work, Larson's analysis illustrates some of the ways in which secondary sources can be useful to students in their attempts to engage in historical studies. First of all, it provides a model of how historians analyze documents (in this case, the trial transcript) and use them to reconstruct a historical event. Larson's analysis also puts the primary documents into the broader context of ongoing media interest in the trial. Moreover, he provides the reader with important information about the historical background to the events of the seventh day of the trial. He tells us, for example, that a fundamentalist interpretation of the biblical story of creation was not the sole issue of concern to the trial participants: Bryan wanted to defend

8. Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 6.

9. Larson, 187, 190.

the rights of local majorities to enact laws pertaining to education, while Darrow was concerned with intellectual and academic freedom. Similarly, we learn that the rest of the prosecution team did not want Bryan to take the stand and actively tried to stop the proceedings. Armed with this knowledge, the student could return to the primary sources with new questions: How did other newspapers report the events of the trial in general and the seventh day in particular? Why didn't Stewart want Bryan to testify, and why, in the face of this opposition, did Bryan insist on taking the stand? To what extent were Bryan and Darrow involved in the issues at the heart of the Scopes trial prior to the trial itself?

Reading good secondary sources, then, is not just a way to gather information. Rather, secondary sources can provide you with models for conducting your own historical research and send you back to the primary sources with fresh perspectives and new questions of your own.

These primary and secondary documents illustrate some of the complexity — and excitement — of the historian's craft. As you read and analyze primary sources, critique the interpretations of secondary sources, and develop historical interpretations of your own, you will gain essential critical skills. Moreover, you will be able to engage as an informed participant in the historical debates that still challenge and excite professional historians.

## 3

## Reading and Writing in History: Some Typical Assignments

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  - 3c. Taking history exams 38
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Most scholars would agree that reading and writing are interactive processes. Reading and thinking about a text or group of texts helps you generate new ideas for a paper. As you read, you begin to see new connections between the ideas, people, and events you are studying. You might jot down these ideas in a notebook or in the margins of the text. Reading over these notes helps you clarify the question that you want to answer in your paper and draft a preliminary outline. As you begin to write the paper, new questions arise — and this takes you back to reading, prompting you to look at the texts you have already read in new ways and find new materials that might help you answer your questions. This chapter introduces you to the process of reading actively and discusses some typical writing assignments that measure your ability to read accurately, critically, and analytically.

### 3a. Reading critically in history

History courses typically require a great deal of reading from a wide variety of sources, so reading is the assignment you will encounter most frequently. If your professor has assigned a textbook, you will probably be expected to read a chapter or two each week. In addition, you may be asked to read a variety of *secondary sources*, including articles from scholarly journals or books about a particular aspect of your topic. Many professors also assign *primary sources*, documents ranging from medieval chronicles to legal documents to newspaper accounts. (For a fuller discussion of primary and secondary sources, see Chapter 2.) If you are writing a research paper, you

will need to find, read, and analyze a variety of sources pertaining to your topic that are not part of the reading assigned to the whole class. Since reading is such an important assignment, it is essential to give serious consideration to *how* you read.

Reading for a history course is not like reading a best-selling novel for personal enjoyment; it is not enough to skim each page once and get the gist of the story. Similarly, you should avoid the common, but not very useful, habit of reading passively, plodding through a text line by line in hopes of absorbing some of the material it contains. To do your best work in history, you will need to become an *active* reader. In contrast to passive readers, active readers are engaged in a dialogue with the text. They ask questions, make comments, and connect what they are reading to information they already know and texts they have already read. This kind of careful and critical reading is crucial both for active and intelligent participation in class discussion and for writing effective papers.

As you complete your reading assignments, you must accomplish several tasks: You need not only to *understand* the content of what you are reading but also to *evaluate* its usefulness, *analyze* its significance, and *synthesize* all of your reading into one coherent picture of the topic you are studying. The following strategies will help you do these things.

**"PRE-READ" THE TEXT.** Before you even begin to read, you should try to get a sense of the scope of the book or article and what it might tell you. If you are reading a book, note its subtitle, if any; examine the table of contents; check for appendices and lists of maps and/or illustrations. If you are reading an article, look for an abstract at the beginning of the text and check for section headings. For both books and articles, look at the bibliography and determine how extensive any footnotes or endnotes are. Spending a few minutes on such pre-reading tasks will help you determine how to approach your reading and consequently make it more productive. (For more on evaluating sources, see 2b.)

**DETERMINE THE AUTHOR'S THESIS.** Passive readers read as if everything a book or article contains is equally important; following the advice of the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, they "begin at the beginning, go on . . . to the

end, then stop," picking up bits of information somewhat haphazardly as they go. Active readers begin by identifying the author's main idea, or thesis, which enables them to read the text more effectively.

The quickest way to identify an author's thesis is to read the preface, introduction, and conclusion of a book, or the first few paragraphs of an article. It is usually in these sections that an author states his or her main points. (Looking at the last chapter of a history book is not "cheating," by the way, nor will it "spoil" the ending, unless you have been assigned a historical mystery novel, like Josephine Tey's excellent *The Daughter of Time*.)

**READ WITH THE AUTHOR'S THESIS IN MIND.** If you are reading a book or article about a subject that is new to you, it is tempting to get caught up in the details and try to remember all of the "facts" the author cites. However, because the historian's goal is not simply to *collect* "facts" but to *organize* and *interpret* them in a way that allows us to better understand the people and societies of the past, it is much more useful to read a book or article with an eye to understanding how an author builds an argument in support of his or her interpretation, or thesis. In order to do this, you should identify the main pieces of evidence the author cites in support of his or her conclusions. Often, the first sentence (or topic sentence) of the body paragraphs in an article or the introductory paragraphs of each chapter of a book will indicate the most important elements of an author's argument.

**ASK QUESTIONS OF THE TEXT.** As you read with the author's thesis in mind, you should constantly interrogate the text: What is the author's point here? Why has he or she chosen this example? Do you disagree with any points that the author makes, and if so, why?

**WRITE AS YOU READ.** Active readers are *physically* active, writing as they read. Writing while reading serves several functions. Taking notes helps you to remember what you have read and to find places in the text that you wanted to return to because they were important or confusing. Writing comments in the margins of the text or in a response journal will also help you remember ideas that occurred to you as you read. (Obviously, you will only want to write directly on a text if you own or have photocopied

the texts you are working with. Neither the library staff nor your fellow students will appreciate written comments on library materials.) Finally, writing will help you clarify your thoughts about what you are reading and provide direction for further reading and research.

The writing that you do while reading can take many different forms; some useful suggestions include the following:

### Tips for Writers

#### Writing as You Read

- Underline or highlight important points, including the thesis and topic sentences.
- Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary and write their definitions in the margins of the text.
- "Talk back" to the text by writing notations in the margins. Make a note of questions you want to answer, places where you disagree with the author's argument, and cross-references to other materials you have read on the subject.
- Write summaries of your reading to ensure that you have understood the material. (See 3b-1 for advice on summaries.)
- Copy out, in quotation marks, any particularly striking phrases or statements that you might want to quote directly in your work, and note complete bibliographic information. (See 5d for further advice on effective note taking.)
- Keep a journal in which you can record any ideas, insights, or questions that occur to you as you read.

**REVIEW WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN.** While writing itself helps many people remember what they have read, it is particularly useful to review your notes periodically. Make sure you have answered the questions that the reading raised for you and compared the arguments of each text you are reading with the other readings for the class.

## 3b. Writing about reading

When students imagine the writing assignments they might receive in a history class, they usually think about short essays and research papers, which will be discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. However, history students are frequently asked to write a number of types of assignments with which you may be less familiar: sum-

maries, annotated bibliographies, reviews and critiques, and historiographic essays. Each is based on a close, critical reading of one or more texts, but each requires a slightly different approach.

### 3b-1. Summaries

History students are often required to read complex and difficult texts. As a result, many professors find it useful for students to write a summary, or *précis*, of a particularly challenging or complicated document, article, or section of a book.

Writing a summary requires you to condense what you have read and describe the author's ideas *in your own words*; it helps ensure that you have understood and digested the material. A summary should *not* include your reaction to or critical analysis of the text. Rather, a summary should recount the author's main point, or thesis, and the key evidence (examples, illustrations, statistics, etc.) used to support it. You should note that you will not be able to include *all* of the author's evidence; identifying the *most important* evidence is part of the challenge of writing a summary.

In writing your summary, it is *essential* that the wording and turns of phrase be entirely your own and not those of the author of the text you are summarizing. To do otherwise is plagiarism, which is no more acceptable in a summary than in any other kind of writing. (For a detailed discussion of plagiarism and how to avoid it, see Chapter 6.)

### 3b-2. Annotated bibliographies

When you start to study an unfamiliar topic or begin to work on a research paper, you will need to identify and evaluate the materials that will enable you to develop an understanding of the general topic and what other scholars have said about it, and form your own interpretations of the sources. In other words, you will need to generate a bibliography.

A *bibliography* is a listing of books and articles on a specific topic; it may include both primary and secondary sources. An *annotated bibliography* begins with the information included in a bibliography and then expands on it by including a brief summary of each book or article