

What do historians do? How do they write history?

- Historians use *primary sources* to create the books and articles that we read as history, which are also called *secondary sources*.
 - “**Primary sources**” are items produced during a particular time period and used for historical analysis. They can also be items produced later, but are about a particular time/place/event and are by individuals who were there and participated (such as a memoir). Primary sources can be political documents, government records, personal journals and letters, photographs and films, commercials, clothing, and much more.
 - “**Secondary sources**” are the books and articles written by scholars about the past. When you read a book about history, you are reading a secondary source.
- Historians analyze **primary sources** in order to figure out what happened and, more importantly, why what happened was important. Historians want to know what caused something to happen, what motivated historical actors to behave in the way they did, and how a particular event or person changed what came after. They also often want to know something more about our contemporary world by asking questions about human lives, events, and decisions of the past. They use documents created at the time in order to figure these things out. Primary sources are part of the evidence that historians use to understand, interpret, and construct arguments about the past.
- Historians use **secondary sources** to find out what other historians have said already about a particular time period, event, topic, person, etc. On the one hand, before a historian can write about his/her primary sources, s/he needs to know as much as possible about the background and context of that time period/event/topic/person/etc that relates to those sources. Reading secondary sources helps them learn those things. On the other hand, historians also often disagree in their interpretations of the past. So a historian needs to know the interpretations of others before s/he can advance his or her own interpretation. Therefore, historians read secondary sources written by other historians before they write their own secondary sources.
- Just as historians use primary sources to understand, interpret, and construct arguments about the past, they also use material from secondary sources for those same tasks; but primary and secondary sources provide different kinds of evidence and information. It is important to know how to read, understand, and analyze both kinds of sources in order to think and write like a historian (and, thereby, do well in this course).

Reading Primary Sources

In order to write papers, books, and articles (i.e., secondary sources), historians must read primary sources carefully and critically. In this course, you will read a primary source almost every week, and you will write papers about them. It is therefore important that you know how to read and analyze them.

Historians usually ask themselves a series of questions as they seek to comprehend and then analyze a source. Asking and answering these questions will help you to think (and write)

historically. You should take notes on the assigned primary sources, and jot down your answers to these questions as you read and reflect on the source:

- Comprehension (i.e., understanding the source in historical context):
 - Who wrote or created this source? What was his/her background and relationship with the subject that the source discusses, describes, etc.?
 - When was this source produced? What were the major social/political/economic issues and changes of that time that might relate to this source and help me understand it?
 - Are there any words, references, people, symbols, or images that are included in this source and are specific to this time and place? If so, I should investigate those further in order to make sure I understand this source.
 - For what purpose or under what circumstances was this source produced? What did the author seek to accomplish with this document? What message did s/he seek to convey?
- Analysis (i.e., drawing conclusions about history from the source)
 - Now that I understand the source in context, does it support, challenge, or complicate other things I know about this time period, event, and/or topic? How? Why?
 - What does this source tell me about this time period, event, and/or topic that I did not know before? What surprises me about it and why?
 - How does this source change how I understand or interpret this time period, event, and/or topic?

Primary sources do not simply convey unbiased information; they were created at a particular point in time for a particular purpose. A source's content might seem straightforward on the surface, but the meaning of that content depends a great deal on when, where, under what circumstances, and for what purpose that source was produced. Consequently, a historian's analysis of that source requires s/he comprehends it in context, and analyzes it carefully in relation to everything else s/he knows about the time period(s), event(s), and other topics that relate to this source.

In addition, historians do not always agree as they analyze texts and develop interpretations of the past. One historian might find one aspect of the source more significant than another. One historian might believe that the author's intent was one thing, while another historian might disagree. But this does *not* mean all interpretations are equally valid to historians. Some interpretations are historically unconvincing. An interpretation is historically unconvincing if it violates what historians generally agree upon in terms of context or chronology. It is also unconvincing if it does not adequately accommodate the historian's evidence, or primary sources; for instance, an interpretation that does not square with the text or context of the primary source is historically unconvincing.

I have created the "Primary Source Reading Worksheet" to help you make sense of the primary sources assigned in this course. I urge you to use them to help you get the most out of the reading. These worksheets will help you to succeed on the clicker and test questions about the reading, as well as on the homework and writing assignments.

Reading Secondary Sources

Secondary sources provide a historian's interpretation of a historical subject, event,

person, etc. They are how historians speak to one another, their students, and the general public in order to explain their ideas about the past. You will read an excerpt from a secondary source almost every week in this course, so it is important that you know how to read and understand them.

Just like the papers that you will write in this class, a secondary source always has an overriding argument about the past; this is the main idea that the author wants you to understand after having read his/her text. The author will always state his or her argument somewhere in the text, and then uses evidence (which can be taken from either primary or secondary sources) to show you that his/her argument is indeed the best way to understand the topic at hand. In order to understand a secondary source, a reader must understand the author's main idea, how s/he supports it, and how it fits into the other things we know about this time period, topic, or event.

Asking and answering the following questions will help you understand and analyze the secondary sources we will read in this class. Be sure to take notes as you read, and to jot down the answers to these questions after you finish:

- What is the author's main point in this reading? What does s/he want you to understand about the topic? In other words, what is the author's argument?
- What kind of evidence does s/he use to illustrate that point? How does the author support his or her argument? Is s/he persuasive? Do I find this argument convincing, or did the author misuse evidence in advancing his/her argument?
- What was surprising or new in this reading? What did I learn from reading it? What did I find confusing?
- How does this reading complement or contradict other things we have read or talked about in class? Does it advance new and significant ideas? Does it elaborate on something we needed to know more about? Or does it offer an unconvincing analysis of its subject?

I have created the "Secondary Source Reading Worksheet" to help you make sense of the secondary sources assigned in this course. I urge you to use it to help you get the most out of the reading. These worksheets will help you to succeed on the clicker and test questions about the reading, as well as on the homework and writing assignments.

Whether you are reading a primary or secondary source, you must actively engage with the text in order to understand and retain its information. Here are some tips to help you stay alert while you read:

- Fill out the Primary Source Reading Worksheet and Secondary Source Reading Worksheet as you read.
 - Make sure you can answer all of the questions I have given you when you finish reading. In addition, if there are study questions in the text, you can answer them after you read in order to make sure you understand the material.
 - Stop every few paragraphs as you read to make sure you understand what the author is saying. Try to put the author's ideas into your own words. Doing so will help you pay attention and remember what you read.
 - When you are done reading, review again the important points.
- Highlight and take notes in the margins, flag pages with useful information
 - Develop your own shorthand so you can tell quickly what is most important and why you flagged that material

- More tips are available at: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html>