



## Critical Reading

*Tara Nummedal – Department of History*

Since most college writing assignments ask you to discuss a text of some sort, the first step to writing a good paper is careful reading. Have you ever read an entire book but couldn't remember what it was about afterwards? Do you find the author's main point or argument difficult to pick out of the details of the book? Have you ever found yourself thinking, "I don't know enough to respond to this book -- I'm no expert and the author seems to have dismissed all the counter-arguments anyway"? These are some of the most common difficulties students have with reading; you can address them through more critical and reflective reading. Some of the suggestions below should help you to learn to take more away from a text and generate ideas for paper. Reading a text closely can also be a way to examine the way other authors have put together their own writing, however. Hopefully, as you explore historical texts, you will encounter tricks of style, persuasion, argument or tone that you may not otherwise have thought of.

### **A. Questions to ask of any text while reading:**

1. What is the author writing about? (the subject)
2. Why is the author writing about it? (the purpose)
3. Who is the author? (authorial voice)
4. Who is the author writing to? (the audience)
5. Who is the author writing against? (the debate)
6. What is the main point? (the thesis)
7. So what? (the conclusion)
8. How does the author prove it? (the evidence)
9. How does the author try to convince the reader? (persuasive technique)
10. What's behind it all? (underlying assumptions)

These are just a starting point. What are some other questions we might ask of a text?

### **B. Primary and secondary sources:**

Historians generally use two different types of sources:

A primary source is a text written in the past, e.g. Columbus' diary or the record book of a 16th-century Florentine merchant.

A secondary source is one written by an historian about the past, e.g. Keith Michael Baker's *Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution*.

### **C. Be thorough, but efficient.**

History texts (both primary and secondary) can have a lot of detail in them. The trick is to wade through the fine points always with an eye to the author's argument. Thoroughness doesn't mean reading every word, but rather is achieved by perceptive analysis. As you are reading, always ask how this relates to the main point.

### **D. Use the author's clues and textual apparatus.**

Introductions and conclusions are the key to any text. This is where an author usually spells out his or her argument and how it will proceed (this is particularly true in secondary sources). Spend a few minutes with the table of contents as well -- this will give you an idea about the structure of the book and how the author has organized the material. And don't underestimate the back cover -- while it is never enough, it can often point toward the main ideas in the book.