

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Guide to reading secondary sources

Types of secondary source

Historians obtain their information from two different kinds of sources: primary and secondary.

- **What is a primary source?** Primary sources are sources that came into existence during the actual period being studied.
- **What is a secondary source?** A secondary source is an interpretation, written later by an historian looking back at the past. There are various types of secondary sources, although the main ones you will use are books and articles in journals.
- **How do they differ from each other?**
 - Text books are often based on other secondary sources in the relevant field; the other types of secondary sources are usually based on both primary and secondary sources.
 - Books fall into three main categories: text-books; monographs (book length studies of a particular theme or event by a single author); and edited collections of essays.
 - It is important that you learn how to locate these different types of secondary source in the library and also how to cite them properly in your written work.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Using text books

- **Why would I use a text-book?** Text books are a useful starting point for reading on a theme with which you might be completely unfamiliar, or for which you feel the need for more background reading.
- **How do I use it exactly?** Use the index and sub-heading in the table of contents of a text-book to help you pinpoint exactly which sections of the book to read, or the pieces of factual information you want to check.
- **What type of information will I find in a text-book?**
 - Some text-books also contain a chronological list of events of the period they cover. These are very useful if you are unsure of what happened when, although it can also be a useful exercise to construct your own chronology of an event (for example the Reformation) or period (for example, the reign of Louis XIV) that you are studying, particularly if you are writing an essay on this theme.
 - Textbooks also contain maps: use these (and atlases) to familiarise yourself with the geographical area you are studying. It is important to know where things happened as well as when they happened, and man-made boundaries between regions and countries have their own histories which need unpicking.

Reading secondary sources critically

- **So will these sources tell me all that I need to know?** No piece of historical writing - not even a text-book or your lecturer's notes - will give you the 'facts' about an historical event or theme. All historical writing is given a particular shape and put into a particular order by the author, based on his or her interpretation of the evidence (primary and/or secondary) on which he or she has chosen to focus.
- **How can they help me then?** Secondary sources will help you to understand how a particular historian has interpreted, or made sense of, a particular historical subject, and how he or she has decided to present that interpretation to readers.
- It is very important that you are able to identify and understand the author's interpretation of a particular theme or event when reading the secondary source.
- **Why is this so important?** Once you have identified and understood the interpretation you should then be able to arrive at an informed sense of whether you believe the interpretation to be weak or convincing. You should also then be in a position to evaluate it critically in relation to other historians' interpretations (the historiography) of the same event or theme. You should also be able to say why a particular historian has arrived at a particular interpretation of a theme or event.
- **Can you give me an example?** It might be in terms of their theoretical or political standpoint.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Identifying the historian's interpretation: articles and essays

- **Is this relatively straightforward?** An historian who can write well should make the interpretation of the event, theme or person they are writing about relatively easy for the reader to find. In a short piece of historical writing (a journal article or an essay) the author's interpretation should be made clear from the introduction (the first paragraph or section) and/or the conclusion (final paragraph/section).
- **How important is the introduction?** Historians usually use the introductory section of an essay/article to introduce the reader to a) the problem or subject they are addressing, and to b) the sources and c) the methods they will use in their analysis of it. They may also state the d) interpretation or line of argument as they go on to construct in the the rest of the essay or article.
- **And the conclusion?** The concluding section usually draws the different strands of the interpretation together and repeats the central idea or argument. You should therefore develop the habit of beginning your reading of an article or essay by reading the introductory and concluding sections and making brief notes on the four key points above (a - d). In the rest of the article or essay the historian constructs his or her argument by working through a series of points in order to demonstrate how he or she has arrived at his or her interpretation.

Identifying the historian's interpretation: books

- **Is this similar to reading the articles?** Yes. It is most helpful to read the introduction and conclusion of a book first (the first and last chapters), as these should give you a good idea of the author's sources, methods of source-analysis, theoretical standpoint and overall interpretation of the subject matter.
- **Should I make notes on these key issues?** Yes. You can approach individual chapters within a book in the same way that you approach articles and essays: it is usually possible to identify the author's interpretation of the sub-theme of the chapter by reading the first and last sections of the chapter. You may find that you only need to read and make notes on the first and last chapters of a book and the first and last sections of each chapter thoroughly in order to identify and understand the author's interpretation of his or her subject.
- **Can I 'skim read' parts of the book?** Often the first sentences or paragraphs give you a good idea of their content and also show how the author's line of argument is constructed. You can then use the index or chapter headings to identify particular sections of the book that you need to read in more detail.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Historians rarely agree with one another

- Although it must be based on source-material, and although it must observe a certain set of scholarly rules and conventions in order to be recognised as history (rather than, say, as fantasy or polemic), the interpretation at which an historian arrives is still ultimately a subjective one.
- **Why is this?** This is because the research process is a personal one: historians choose their research-field and the historical questions they wish to ask, and the sources and theories by means of which to answer these issues largely on their own initiative and according to their own preferences.

As was noted above, the way in which they present their ideas and conclusions to their readers is also personal, as it is based on a set of personal decisions about what to include and exclude, and presented in a format (written narrative) which is necessarily personal to the individual. The way in which historians treat and present their research is shaped by their personality, upbringing, education, politics, and beliefs.

- **But what does this mean?** This of course means that historians often arrive at widely different interpretations of the same historical event or process. You, therefore need to be able to evaluate historians' interpretations critically, particularly in relation to other, different interpretations of the same historical event or process.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Critical evaluation of historical interpretations

- Use the following checklist of tasks and questions in order to help you to evaluate the historical interpretation critically and systematically. Don't worry if you can't answer all the questions for every piece of reading that you do, or if you are able to answer some more fully than others.

Step 1: Identify the historian's main argument and the means by which he or she has constructed it.

To do this, ask:

- What historical problem or question is the historian addressing? What is the historian's main idea or argument in relation to this problem or question? How does the historian arrive at this idea or argument?

To help you here try asking yourself:

- What types of primary sources have been used, and how have they been used? Think for example, about the records of witch-trials: has the author done a statistical analysis of hundreds of witch-trials, or has he or she analysed a few trials in detail?
- From which theoretical perspective or perspectives has the historian approached his or her question and source material? Can you identify a particular school of historical interpretation to which the historian belongs, such as Marxist, feminist etc? Look in particular at any discussion of other interpretations of the problem or question the author is addressing to see how he or she positions him or herself - critically or supportively - in relation to the work of other historians.
- What style of writing has the historian adopted? Does he or she aspire to impersonal objectivity using the first-person narrative? Does he or she tell a story of events within which criticisms of other historians is implicit, or does he or she engage in explicit criticism of the work of other historians?

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Critical evaluation of historical interpretations

Step 2: Evaluate the main idea or argument presented by the historian you are reading

To do this, ask: *Is the argument convincing?*

- To help you here try asking yourself: Was the source material used appropriate for the problem or question the author chose to address? Is the argument arrived at adequately supported by relevant source-material? Does the source material prove what the author claims it to prove? Was the method by means of which the author used the source-material made clear? Was this method appropriate for the problem under discussion or was it inappropriate?
- Does the author have a polemical purpose? If so, does he or she make this clear to the reader, or is it hidden? Does it weaken his or her argument?
- Does the author leave any relevant questions unanswered? If so why? Possible reasons might be: a lack of appropriate source-material, or a particular theoretical approach which defines some questions as relevant and others as irrelevant. To what extent does this weaken the overall argument?
- Has the argument been presented to the reader in a logical and systematic way? Do the points made in later paragraphs build logically on those made in earlier paragraphs, or are there gaps in the line of argument which render it suspect?

Step 3: Evaluate the differences between the interpretations presented in relation to the same historical theme by two or more historians.

To do this, ask: *In what ways and to what degree do the arguments of the historians differ from each other?*

- To help you here try asking yourself: Why do you think that they differ? Have the historians used the same or different types of source-materials? Have they used their source-material in the same way or in different ways? Do they approach the problem under discussion and the source material from differing theoretical perspectives? Have they constructed their argument in different ways?
- Are the works directed at the same or at different types of readers? What difference would this make to the way in which they have been written?
- Do the authors have similar or different backgrounds? Do they have different political, ethical, religious or cultural assumptions, and how might you be able to establish this? When did they write the works in question, and what difference might this make to their approach to their subject?

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Grade-criteria for secondary source criticism questions

- **What is needed for a first class?** A first class piece of secondary-source criticism will accurately identify the author's interpretation and the process by means of which s/he has arrived at this interpretation. It will provide a perceptive and detailed critical evaluation of the interpretation, and will not be afraid to point out weaknesses in the author's interpretation. Where the work of two historians is being compared, the source criticism will demonstrate clearly where the historians' interpretations differ from each other, and will prove a critical and convincing explanation of these differences.
- **What is needed for an upper second class?** An upper second class piece of secondary-source criticism will accurately identify the author's interpretation and offer some relevant comments about the means by which s/he has arrived at this interpretation. It will provide some critical evaluation of the interpretation. Where the work of two historians is being compared, the source-criticism will demonstrate where the historians' interpretations differ from each other, and will at least attempt to explain these differences.
- **What is needed for a lower second class?** A lower second class piece of secondary-source criticism of the work of either one or two historians will adequately identify their interpretations. It should offer some relevant comment about the means by which these interpretations have been arrived at. Some attempt at critical evaluation and/or comparison of the work/s must be demonstrated, but this may be irrelevant, inaccurate or unfocussed
- **What is needed for a third class?** A third class piece of secondary-source criticism of the work of either one or two historians will adequately identify their interpretations, but will fail to offer any relevant comment on the means by which these interpretations have been arrived at. Critical evaluation and/or comparison of the work/s will be largely absent.
- **What will constitute a fail?** A failed piece of secondary-source criticism of the work of either one or two historians will simply paraphrase the text/s, without accurately identify their interpretations or providing any critical evaluation of these interpretations