Study Aids – Reading Secondary Works

The reading of secondary works is one of the most frequent and important tasks of the historian and the student. Secondary works often are the student’s first point of contact with historical interpretations and are a powerful means to get a historical perspective quickly. This aid (and its companion on primary sources) are designed to offer helpful suggestions and advice about how to read two different kinds of materials: primary sources and secondary works. Secondary works are usually interpretations that are written about a period in the past but do not come from the time under consideration. The most typical examples are historical monographs or the often diluted summary of them, the textbook. Each kind of materials presents its own challenges and requires a slightly different method of thinking and study. The information below will provide some practical steps to improving your reading of secondary works.

Regardless of what you are reading, the important thing to remember is to be actively engaged with the text. You can sit in front of a book for hours, even underline large amounts of the text, and still not absorb it or understand it. The best way to read is to also take notes at the same time. By writing down the information, you force yourself to think about it and organize it. This writing process will focus your attention and also help you retain information.

How to read a SECONDARY WORK: Areas to Consider

Preliminary: Read the title. Define every word in the title: look up any unknown words. Think about what the title promises for the book. Look at the table of contents. This is your "menu" for the book. What can you tell about the book’s organization and structure from its table of contents? Read the forward and introduction (if an article, read the first paragraph or two). Read the conclusion or epilogue if there is one (if article, read the last one or two paragraphs). After all this, ask yourself what the author's thesis might be: how has he organized his argument?

Actively read for themes: Quickly read the first and last paragraph of each chapter. After doing this and taking the step outlined above, you should have a good idea of the book's major themes and arguments. You are now finally ready to read in earnest. Don't read a history book as if you were reading a novel for light pleasure. Read through the chapters actively, taking cue as to which paragraphs are most important from their topic sentences. (Good topic sentences tell you what the paragraph is about.) Not every sentence and paragraph is as important as every other. It is up to you to judge, based on what you know so far about the book's themes and arguments. If you can, highlight passages that seem to be especially relevant.

Always take notes on what you read: You will forget important points. Record your thoughts about the reading rather than simply the details and contents of the work. What surprised you? What seemed particularly insightful? What seems suspect? What reinforces or counters points made in other readings? Notetaking, rather than underlining or highlighting, is more effective because it makes you an active reader.

After reading, go back over these notes, reformulating in your own words the author's argument. Ideally, you should end up with a good set of notes and a short summary (a “précis”) of about a
half page. Though it seems to take a long time, this method actually saves you time by causing you to read critically and selectively. With it, you can glean important points much more quickly than by reading simply from cover to cover. For articles, apply the same principles.

**Identify the thesis:** A thesis is the controlling argument of a work of history. Tocqueville argued, for instance, that American society in the first half of the nineteenth century believed itself to be radically oriented towards liberty and freedom while in fact its innate conservatism hid under a homogeneous culture and ideology. Often, the most difficult task when reading a secondary source is the beginning of the piece. In a long article or book, the thesis is usually diffuse. There may in fact be more than one. As you read, constantly ask yourself, "how could I sum up what this author is saying in one or two sentences? This is a difficult task; even if you never feel you have succeeded, simply constantly trying to answer this question will advance your understanding of the work.

**Identify themes:** Themes are issues which recur throughout a work of history, often in different contexts. Many historians claim, for instance, that a widespread belief in the values of the free yeoman farmer provided the basis for American political thinking in the early national period. They trace this theme through several different historical periods and contexts. Themes often seem similar to the theses, but theses are specific arguments, while themes usually provide models and ways of thinking that buttress arguments.

**Evaluate arguments:** A thesis is not just a statement of opinion, or a belief, or a thought. It is an argument. Because it is an argument, it is subject to evaluation and analysis. Is it a good argument? How is the big argument (the thesis) supported by smaller arguments? Are these secondary arguments well-constructed? Is the reasoning valid? Does the evidence support the conclusions? Has the author used invalid or incorrect logic? Is she relying on incorrect premises? What broad, unexamined assumptions seem to underlie the author's arguments? Are they correct?

**Evaluate use of sources:** Students of history often do not read footnotes. Granted, footnotes are not exactly entertaining, but they are the nuts and bolts of history writing. Glance occasionally at footnotes, especially when you come across a particularly interesting or controversial passage. What primary sources has the historian used to support her argument? Evaluating sources is a fundamental exercise of students of history.

**Identify the author's goals:** This is a difficult step and often requires outside information, such as information on how other historians who were writing about the topic. Even if you don’t have this information, you can still ask yourself: why would the author argue this way? Many times, arguments in older works of history seem ludicrous or silly to us today. When we learn more about the context in which those arguments were made, however, they start to make more sense. Things like political and cultural institutions often have an impact on the way history is written. On the other hand, the struggle to achieve complete objectivity also affects ways people have written history. It is only appropriate, then, that such considerations should inform your reading.

**Identify the author's tone:** Good historical writing often qualifies as literature; good history writers craft their work just as much as good novel writers do. The tone an author sets is often
integral to the message he wishes to convey. The ironic tone of American historian C. Vann Woodward, for instance, was integral to his understanding of southern history. Historian Bernard Bailyn eschews irony in favor of a detached objectivity. Authors choose the tone they wish to set depending on their personalities and objectives. Concentrating on factors like tone helps us understand historical writing as the product of human intellects and personalities, rather than as dry statement of “fact.”

*Remember:* Reading is an active process. One does not simply go over the words and expect to understand the material. Unfortunately, history is rarely as easy to read as a novel. Good history reading requires that you engage the material—that you think through it and connect it to other material you have covered.

This aid adapted from Prof. Betty Dessants, who formulated the initial version of its text.