

Strategies for Teaching Critical Reading in History

Reading primary and secondary sources is a fundamental component of “doing” history, yet we rarely discuss discipline-specific reading practices with our students. In fact, we often assume that students already know how to read and that we need not devote class time to cultivating this skill. However, as educational psychologist Sam Wineburg argues, historical thinking “goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think,” forcing us to confront the limitations of our presentist ways of knowing.¹ Instead of applying our contemporary “sense-making abilities” to our sources, we must cultivate skepticism and curiosity about what we do not or cannot know.² As we read, this requires rigorous attention to context and subtext.

Harvard History TFs report that their students often struggle to extract arguments and insights from large volumes of reading. They may gloss or skim texts without knowing what to focus on or how to get the most out of their time spent reading. We might tell students to read again, to annotate, or to write a reading response, yet they still struggle to move beyond the literal and make the disciplinary moves we expect. These issues with reading may also extend into student writing. Indeed, problems with writing history often originate as problems with reading history. The following strategies and activities are crowd-sourced from Harvard History TFs and designed to help you teach students to read like historians in your classrooms. They are divided into general strategies and strategies for primary and secondary sources. Please feel free to mix and match as you see fit!

General Strategies

Assess Prior Knowledge

At the start of the semester, [the Bok Center recommends](#) previewing the kinds of texts students will be reading in class and surveying students about their prior reading experience. Are they familiar with the kinds of primary and secondary sources they will encounter in your classroom? What preparation do they have to read these kinds of texts? What extra support might they need? This will give you important information about how to meet your students where they are. It can also be helpful to emphasize how the genres they will encounter in your class differ from the historical texts with which they may be most familiar (i.e. high school history textbooks). This will signal to students that they may need to seek extra help reading unfamiliar kinds of texts.

Reading Guide

Consider writing and distributing a general guide to reading on the first day of section. Potential topics might include:

- Strategies for active reading, annotation, and note taking
- Questions to ask of primary sources
- Questions to ask of secondary sources

¹ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 7.

² Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 24.

- Resources for reading help (office hours, looking up book reviews in Hollis, [Academic Resource Center](#), [Disability Accommodations Office](#))

[Here is an excellent example](#) designed for use in History sections at UC Berkeley.

How Do You Read?

Early in the semester, talk to your students about the material conditions of their reading practice. Where do they sit? What supplies do they use? Are they reading off a screen or a printed copy? Do they annotate? If so, how (highlighting, underlining, symbols, sticky notes)? Do they take notes? Where (on the computer, on the document, in a notebook)? Do they take breaks? How often? Crowd source strategies and encourage each student to pick a new one to try in the coming week. Check in the next class to see how it went, giving students the opportunity to share their annotations or notes with the class and receive feedback. These conversations will help students to feel like members of a community of practice, rather than individual readers toiling away in isolation.

Frame Readings in Advance

At the end of each section, give students a brief overview of the next week's texts so they know what they will be reading and why. Who wrote the texts? Why did the professor assign them? What conversations are students entering as readers of these texts? To motivate students, it can also be helpful to situate the readings in the broader trajectory of the course. How do they relate to readings the students have already completed? Will these particular readings be useful for an upcoming assignment or assessment? How so? You might also consider providing students with framing questions in a handout or on Canvas.

Responding to Discussion Questions

Have students write out discussion questions and turn them in. Then, offer written feedback that speaks to how they might modify their questions to promote deeper engagement with the texts. After section, give students the opportunity to revise their questions. You can do this for the first few weeks of class or throughout the semester depending on student needs.

Here is [an excellent handout](#) with tips for writing discussion questions about challenging texts.

Reading Cover Sheets

For each reading, have students turn in their annotated text with a cover sheet responding to the following questions:

For all texts:

- Who wrote this text?
- When was it published?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the argument? Summarize in 1-3 sentences

For primary sources:

- What is the genre of the text? (i.e. letter, diary entry, report, ledger, etc.)
- Why was it written?
- What does this source tell you about its author, time period, etc.?
- What is the tone of the source? (i.e. is it polite, angry, intimate, triumphant, satirical?)
- How does this source fit in with interpretations you have already encountered in lecture, discussion, or secondary readings? Does it substantiate them? Complicate them? Call them into question?

For secondary sources:

- What is the genre of the text? Is it an article, a chapter, an entire book?
- If the author is a professor, what is their academic field? What else have they written?
- What kinds of primary sources does the author employ in service of their argument?
- Does the text cite or respond to other scholars? If so, who?
- How does the work fit into existing scholarship? Is the author arguing against a particular historiographic interpretation? Putting forth a new one?

You might also consider assigning a student to present each reading to the class using the answers from their cover sheet. Alternatively, assign each student a text and have them make a handout for their peers answering these questions.

Modeling Expert Reading

As an expert reader in history, you are an excellent resource for your students! Close-read a passage together and expose the hidden moves your mind makes by “thinking aloud.”³ Attend not just to the text but to the subtext. What is the polemic of the text? The connotations of the words? How might they speak to the author’s motivation for writing? What questions come to mind? What additional context do you need to flesh out your interpretation? Model for students how you deduce the answers to these questions from the words on the page.

Reading Journals

After modeling expert reading for your students, have them write out their own stream-of-consciousness as they read. What new information are they learning? How does it fit in with the information they already have? What questions come to mind? What outside information or context would they need to answer these questions? What still doesn’t make sense? What would they like to return to for further consideration? You might encourage them to construct their reading journal as a conversation between a “mock reader” who is taken in by the text’s rhetorical devices and arguments and a critical reader who seeks to decode them.⁴

Reverse Outlining

³ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 79.

⁴ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 69-70.

Have students construct an outline of an existing primary or secondary source. What are the major topic headings? What are the subheadings? How does the author transition between different ideas?

For Historiographic Texts:

Most students come to college with considerable experience reading history textbooks and very little experience reading historiographic literature. This informs the way they approach not only texts, but historical thinking in general. As Wineburg explains, “the defining feature of historical discourse—its constant reference to the documentary record through footnotes—is the very aspect that drops out when historical texts become history textbooks. No wonder many students come to see history as a closed story when we suppress the evidence of how that story was assembled.”⁵ The following activities expose how history is constructed behind the scenes and help students to situate course texts and themselves in broader scholarly conversations.

Whose Voice is This?

Students may struggle to distinguish the perspective of an author from the perspective of their sources or scholarly interlocutors. This activity requires students to pay rigorous attention to questions of voice. Assign a different color to represent the author’s arguments, other scholar’s arguments, and information from primary sources. Have students highlight the text in pairs or small groups to “code” the different voices at play. Then come back together to compare the results. Are there any disagreements or ambiguities?

Keywords

This is especially useful for dense historiographic or theoretical texts that students may struggle to understand. In small groups, have students identify a main “keyword” or phrase in a text and find as many instances of that keyword as possible. Then, have them respond to the following prompts:

- Define the keyword in your own words
- Where does it come from? Is there a citation? Did the author coin it?
- How does the keyword relate to the central argument?
- Connect the keyword to a “real world” example

Reading By Committee

Break the class into groups and assign each group a component of a historiographic text (i.e. footnotes, narrative, keywords, argument). Have each group read the text for their assigned element and present it to the class. Then, discuss how the elements come together to constitute a persuasive piece of scholarly writing. What is the relationship between footnotes and keywords? Between narrative and argument? Did engaging with the text this way change how students experienced it? Did the activity give them more or less confidence in the author’s arguments?

⁵ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 64.

Benefits and Limitations of Sources

Working in pairs, have students highlight any mentions of primary sources in an excerpt of a historiographic book or article. In a second color, have them highlight any advantages of the source discussed by the author, then in a third color, any limitations. Discuss how scholars assess sources and integrate source criticism into their arguments. When and how do they use quotations? What uses of sources do you find most persuasive as a reader?

Footnote Scavenger Hunt

Assign students a footnote to investigate. Encourage them to find the original source using library resources. Then, have them select a footnote in that source to investigate and so on for as many iterations as you see fit. Where does each student end up? What does this reveal about the architecture of scholarly arguments?

Extreme Footnotes

Provide students with the footnotes to a historiographic text, but not the text itself. Ask them to deduce as much as they can about the text from the footnotes alone. What is the text's subject matter? When do you think it was published? Who is the author in conversation with? What arguments might they be making? What might the text be titled? This can also double as a way to introduce and frame an upcoming reading.

For Primary Sources:

Students may approach primary sources as “sources of inert information” rather than arguments with distinct historical purposes.⁶ This may lead them to position themselves as the source's audience rather than inquiring about its intended audience. Alternatively, students might seek to excavate a source's “bias” using their existing belief systems, forcing documents to conform to what they already know.⁷ These approaches obscure the source's genre, purpose, and function within its historical context. The following activities are intended to encourage students to rigorously attend to context, subtext, and motivation.

Group Annotation

Use platforms like Google Drive, [Perusall](#), and [AnnotationsX](#) to annotate primary sources collectively. These platforms also allow students to comment on each other's annotations. This can work as a synchronous in-class activity or an asynchronous assignment outside of class. You might consider providing sample annotations modeling “expert reading” to get your students started. Any of the activities below can also be carried out as group annotation projects.

Paraphrase Three Ways

⁶ John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 164.

⁷ John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 165-166. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 9.

Students often struggle with unfamiliar language and vocabulary in primary sources. To help them tune into historical language and better understand the content, identify a salient quote in a primary source and have students paraphrase it three different ways using different vocabulary in each iteration.

Who Wrote the Account?

Provide students with a primary source, but do not reveal its author. Walk through the text like a mystery. What do we know about the author's social position, viewpoints, or motivation for writing? What can we speculate about? What is it still impossible to know? Is there outside context that might help to identify the author? Who might they be?

Who is the Audience?

Students may position themselves as the audience of primary sources, which obscures the author's intended audience and motivation for writing. Have them read a primary source for questions of audience. Who is the author speaking to? What clues does the text offer? Is there room for speculation? To this end, it might also be helpful to have the students map out an author's social networks. Who are they in conversation with and why?

Translation

Discuss how students would translate a primary source into a different medium. How would you stage the source as a screenplay? A novel? A work of visual art? Could you make a diagram or a concept map? What might be gained or lost through these acts of translation?

Considerations for Syllabus Design

[The Bok Center recommends](#) introducing upcoming assignments at the start of each unit of the course, so students see their readings working in service of an assignment or assessment. You and your faculty supervisor might consider framing each unit on the syllabus with the assessment up front rather than chronologically, with the assessment at the end. This helps to motivate students to read towards a clearly defined skill or goal.

History TFs note that students often struggle to develop new critical reading skills when faced with large volumes of reading material. Students may worry more about "getting through" the reading assignment than meaningfully engaging the text. For the first few weeks of class, you and your faculty supervisor might consider assigning smaller amounts of reading, then scaling up slowly over the course of the semester as students hone their reading skills.

Resources

Wineburg, Sam. *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

[The Bok Center's online resource on Reading](#)

UC Berkeley has [a great website](#) on teaching critical reading in the humanities for graduate student instructors.

On reading and asking questions about theory:

Kyla Wazana Thompkins, "[We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know](#)," *LA Review of Books*, September 13, 2016.

For more on the cognitive process of reading:

Wolf, Maryanne. *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

—*Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2018.

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