

# How to **read**

## like a historian

Historians read books and articles the way that mechanics examine cars or coaches watch sports on TV. They're always trying to figure out how everything works. In the case of history, the key lies in the relationships between evidence and argument. Next time you face a reading assignment in a history class, try to do more than just follow along with the story or outline the bare facts, but act like a historian and consider the following essential questions:

- Who is the author?
- What type of format is the material?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the author's main argument or interpretation?
- What are some alternatives to this argument?
- How does the author use evidence to support his or her arguments?
- What is missing?

It's important to know authors –who they were, when they wrote, how they trained. Character isn't always interpretive destiny but it helps readers understand material when they know something about the person who wrote the stuff. The type of format is instructive as well. You need to understand the expectations (and limits) inherent in various types of genres. Textbooks have different rules than scholarly articles. Both differ from general trade books. In many cases, these differences result from disparities in audience, especially when distinguished by age or level of expertise. But it always helps to evaluate an author's accomplishment once the reader knows and appreciates all of these background elements in combination.

Historians call their interpretations "arguments." That suggests how much they love the battle of ideas. At its core, history is about arguing with facts. So the fundamental responsibility of any good student of history is to understand the main argument or interpretation of an author. But you cannot really appreciate the audacity of a good historical argument unless you stop to consider the alternatives. Some authors outline them for you, but most don't and it will take some thinking for you to piece together a small alternate universe of interpretive possibilities. Once you do this, however, then it is much easier to evaluate whether or not the author was successful in using evidence to support his or her various arguments.

Yet the key insight from close reading almost always comes with that last question. *What is missing?* All sources hide more than they reveal. If you are working at the highest level, then you will see how an author has omitted or forgotten something critical. These moments of clarity can prove thrilling and often help launch students on their own careers as historians.