

How to Read a Historical Monograph Like a Historian

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1. Start with a **BOOK REVIEW**

Professional historians do all the time. If you want to know a book well-for a discussion or for a research project-the book review is of course no substitute for reading the book. But a good book review will help you to understand the significance of the book you are going to read, its argument, its place in a broader conversation that has been going on.

Book reviews have never been so easy to find and access. For a simple search, you might use JSTOR, a vast archive of scholarly journals. It contains the full text of journals running from their first year of publication up to a five years ago. To use JSTOR (<http://www.jstor.org>, accessible on campus), enter the title you'd like to search for, scroll down and check the box that says history journals, scroll down further and check the box that says reviews, then click on search. Other useful sources: Academic Search Premier, Historical Abstracts, American History and Life, H-Net Reviews.

Of course, you have to read book reviews (as all else) with a critical eye. Reviewers, you will see, often disagree about the value of a book, an approach, or an argument.

2. Read the **INTRODUCTION** very carefully

Ask yourself the following questions:

- * What historical problem is the author addressing?
- * Are there other interpretations (the work of other historians) that the author finds lacking? Why?
- * What evidence (what sources) is the author going to examine?
- * What questions is the author asking about the subject?
- * What are the answers to these questions?
- * What is the thesis of the book?

All of these questions should be answered in the introduction. If you work out these questions as you read the introduction, you will understand how to read the rest of the book.

3. Review the **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

How are the chapters arranged? Does the book move forward in time? Or is it arranged thematically?

The Table of Contents is an outline and a guide to the book. Use it, together with the Introduction, to take the broad view of the work.

4. Read the INDIVIDUAL CHAPTERS

Pay close attention to the beginning and ending of each chapter: this is where the thesis of the chapter is worked out and where conclusions are drawn. You may skim parts of the chapter in which the author is working out a particular example. Keep your eyes on the large question. Ask yourself:

- * What is the subject of the chapter?
- * What is the thesis of the chapter?
- * How does the chapter help build the argument for the entire book?
- * What are the most striking examples and what do they demonstrate?

5. Read the CONCLUSION

Typically this will recapitulate the argument that has been developed all through the book. Ask yourself:

- * How does the author sum up the argument of his/her work?
- * What conclusions does he/she draw from it?

THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU READ:

- * Most importantly, what is the argument of the book?
- * What is the author's approach to the topic?
- * What kinds of sources are used?
- * What are the author's assumptions? Biases?
- * Leaps of logic?
- * How does this book compare to readings you have done whether primary sources or secondary?

TIPS FOR BETTER READING:

- * First, turn off your phone. The brain only has so much attention to give.
- * Take notes as you read. Mark the most important statements of the argument, the most important examples. You might use sticky notes to mark essential passages.
- * Try to read a chapter at a time. Don't pick up and put down the book in random places.
- * Don't get bogged down in details. Ask how they contribute to the story, or the argument.