

Secondary Sources: Evaluating and Analyzing Secondary Historical Scholarship

A list of questions to help you read works by other scholars.

Understanding the Author

Who wrote the work?

In what academic discipline was he or she trained?

For what academic discipline is the work intended?

Who is the intended audience? Ideal reader?

How does the intended discipline and/or audience affect the style, organization, or structure of the work?

Finding the Author's Goal

Good analytical writing usually contains an explicit statement of the author's purpose or goal. You should be able to locate the author's goal or statement of purpose in the Introduction or in the first few paragraphs (if it is an article). When all else fails, it may be better articulated in the Conclusion.

What is the stated goal or purpose of the work?

Does the author articulate why he/she undertook this research?

Is there a personal connection to the subject/topic?

Does this connection imply a bias in the work?

Understanding the Argument

Good analytical writing usually will include an explicit argument. You should be able to locate the argument in the Introduction or in the first few paragraphs (if it is an article). When all else fails, it may be better articulated in the Conclusion.

What is the author's stated thesis or argument?

Is the author explicitly drawing on other scholarly works through his/her argument?

- Is he/she looking to overturn another's work?
- Add to another's work?

What evidence will the write examine to prove his/her thesis?

Does the author break his or her larger argument down into smaller mini-arguments (usually organized by chapter or section if the piece is an article)?

- Does the author prove these mini arguments? If so, do they compel the larger argument?

Do you find the logic of the argument persuasive? If yes, why? If no, why?

Use of Evidence

What types of evidence does the author rely on to support his/her argument?

Can you identify evidence that the author neglects? Or does not use?

- Does the omission of evidence affect the author's argument?

Making Comparisons (Advanced historiography)

How does the author's argument, goals and use of evidence correlate with other works you've read on the topic?

- Do it corroborate or contradict other works?

If you are familiar with the underlying evidence, does the author's work make good use of that evidence?

If the author is in conversation with other works on the same topic, how does the author fit his or her work into that conversation?