In a history class, you will read two main types of materials: primary sources and secondary sources. **Primary sources** form the “raw data” of history, and include things like government documents, speeches, memoirs, diary entries, newspaper and magazine articles, and eyewitness accounts of events. Most of the primary sources we will be looking at were created at the time of the event being described, and they provide historians with a window into the past. **Secondary sources** are books and articles written by historians based on the primary sources, and incorporate their own arguments and interpretations of the events. You should not approach these two types of readings in the same way, nor should you read them the same way you might read a textbook, where your goal is to read for information. Here are some pointers for reading secondary sources:

### Reading critical essays and monographs

In History 199 you will read critical essays or book-length monographs, secondary sources written by historians, often using some of the documents we’ve discussed in class. Reading critical essays requires a different technique than that used to read a textbook. While you read a textbook for content and information, when you read these critical essays you should read for the argument. What point is the author trying to make, and how does the historian use evidence to support that point? Many of these essays discuss in more depth a particularly important historical episode and try to encourage the reader to think about these events from a different perspective.

Most of the essays we’ll read in His 199 are written at a high academic level, which means there will probably be words and concepts that you are not familiar with. Please don’t let this keep you from reading the essay: make a note of the sections you don’t understand, or the words you are unfamiliar with, and bring them up in class or see your professor in office hours. Chances are, if you don’t understand them there will be other students in your class in the same situation! One of the most valuable skills you have the opportunity to develop in college is the ability to read and comprehend at a high level, but you can’t develop this skill if you don’t try to work through difficult texts. This is where you, as a student, can take the initiative to get the most out of your classes.

**Questions to ask for critical essays:**

1) *What is the author’s main argument?* This is usually given in the first few paragraphs of the article. If you have trouble finding it there, be sure to look at the conclusion. Once you understand the point the author is trying to make, it will be easier to determine what parts of the essay are most important. Try to highlight one-two sentences that you think best summarize the author’s argument and list their page numbers so that you can find them for class discussion.

2) *What supporting evidence does the author provide for their argument?* How does the author make the case for their argument? Are there specific historical examples that are used? Does the author respond to opposing arguments and perspectives? Be sure to include page numbers for any direct quotes you write down so that you can quickly locate these points if you are using this source for a paper.

3) *How does this essay fit into class discussions and course themes?* Does it provide a different interpretation from that in your textbook or class lectures?

4) *Are you convinced by the author’s argument? Why or why not?* After reading the author’s argument and evidence, think about where you stand on the issue. This question is a good way to
I’ve read these documents, now what do I do with them? Using primary and secondary sources when writing a history essay

In high school history classes, you probably did DBQs: document-based questions. You were given a series of short documents and asked to use them to construct an essay. Think of college-level essays as taking the DBQ to the next level. The documents will be much longer and more complex in their arguments. Whereas high school DBQs only provide a limited number of options for arguments and how they can be used, in a college essay you have much greater latitude in deciding which documents to include, which parts of them to discuss, and what kind of an argument you want to make. Professors will also expect a more sophisticated historical argument that goes beyond just listing facts. How then, will you take this wide array of primary and secondary sources and construct an essay?

Writing a history paper or essay is like arguing a case in court. In a court case, a store robbery for example, there is a lawyer for the defense and lawyer for the prosecution. Each makes an argument and then provides evidence to support it. Think for a minute of all the types of evidence lawyers might use in this type of case: they might call witnesses who personally saw or were involved in the events under dispute, they might provide surveillance photos from security cameras, bank account statements, material evidence collected from the scene of the crime—all of these things, in the historian’s terms, serve as primary sources for the lawyer’s arguments. You might think of your secondary sources as the “expert witnesses”: historians have already waded through the relevant primary sources and provide you their conclusions. But be careful: as we all know from watching tv crime shows, expert witnesses may have their own bias in evaluating the evidence. Historians, while striving for objectivity, are also influenced by their own background or experiences, so you should read both primary and secondary sources with a critical eye.

Who serves as the judge and jury for your history paper? Your professor! Your grade will be largely determined by how well you make your argument and use the available primary and secondary sources to support it. Like a lawyer you need to choose the most important and relevant pieces of evidence to support your point.

Learning to read for argument and evidence will help you to write stronger papers in all of your classes. When you write a paper for History 199 you might compare the final result to the secondary source grid. Do you present an argument in the introduction, and is it clear to the reader? Do you provide evidence to support your point throughout the paper? Would your paper be convincing to another reader? If you answer no to any of these questions, think about how you might revise the paper to strengthen the argument and evidence.

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