

READING TIPS FOR HISTORY STUDENTS

These suggestions were written by Dr. Shannon Risk, Assistant Professor of History, for students in her upper-level history courses. They may also be helpful for students in other heavy-reading courses.

For some students, the increased reading in an upper-level history course can prove challenging. You might find yourself not remembering what you've just read. In order to help you remember more of what you read, I'm sharing these reading tips that I learned during my many years as a student. One of them might work for you!

1) **"Three Sweeps Method."** This works well with history books, book chapters, and history articles.

* In the first sweep of the book, read the first and last chapter (or the first and last paragraph when dealing with book chapters and articles). The historian will tell you exactly what his/her main arguments are and how she/he will prove those arguments.

* In the second sweep of the book, read the first and last paragraph of each book chapter (or the first and last sentence of each paragraph when dealing with book chapters and articles).

* In the third sweep of the book, go into the text of the chapters to see what kinds of evidence the author uses to support his/her points.

** If a student reads a book straight through and reads every word, she or he may be bogged down in the details and find it difficult to isolate the main points of the book. The three sweeps method helps the student understand the main arguments first, and then go back to see the evidence.

2) **Table of Contents/Subheadings.** Another way to get at what's most important in the readings is to see if the book, chapter, or article has a detailed table of contents or uses subtitles/subheadings to separate different sections of the reading. If so, then you have very obvious clues as to what the author thinks is most important. Authors will guide the reader by putting in subtitles or by providing a detailed table of contents. Take a look at the table of contents or subtitles (or both if they're both offered) before you read so you know what the most important things are about the reading, then do the reading, and then re-read the table of contents/subtitles and try to remember some details about each.

3) **Short Paragraph/Outline.** This works best with book chapters and articles. As you are reading the material, or immediately after you've read the material, create a brief outline or short paragraph that discusses the most important information about that reading. For example, if you read an article about the Dawes Act of 1887, write a brief paragraph about what the act itself was and what its significance was to Native Americans.

4) **Five Words on a Page.** This method is probably my least favorite, but if you are in a bind, you can use your highlighter to highlight the five most important words or concepts on each page of your reading. It forces you to consider what you've just read and prioritize what's most important on that particular page. This method is helpful if you want to quickly return to the reading before class to remind yourself what's most important. The words literally jump off the page!