

How to Use the Historiography Worksheet

Bibliographical Information

Be sure to provide complete bibliographical information about your source. If you need to reference it in the future, you will want to know which edition you were referencing.

Keywords

Provide any keywords that you feel are appropriate for this publication. This will help you to cross-reference your notes in the future.

Synopsis/Thesis

All scholarly writing will include an argument. One of your primary responsibilities in this exercise is to understand this argument (and any relevant supporting arguments). You should summarize this argument (and supporting arguments) in this section, which might include restating the author's thesis statement. Remember to provide enough detail about the argument so that it will make sense to you six months after you've read this publication. Also, remember that a thesis/argument is not the same thing as a topic. A topic is what the publication is about. A thesis is the argument the author is trying to make.

Historiographical Context/Significance

With which arguments/authors was the writer trying to engage? Is the writer trying to provide any sort of critique? In academic writing, authors will often state explicitly the arguments with which they are engaging as well as offer a summary of these arguments in order to explain their own argument's significance. You should summarize this context and why their work is significant to the field.

Even if the author explains the context/significance of their argument, you should consider counterarguments and critiques. Search through works that cite the reading (if possible). What do other authors say about it?

When was this piece written and what was its historical context? To what extent might this historical context have shaped the argument?

Theoretical Context/Significance

In history, a theory is an abstract framework for interpreting or explaining our observations and ideas.

Historians might develop theories to explain historical processes. For example, classical Marxist scholars understand historical change through a theoretical lens known as "historical materialism" in which societal change over time is connected to changes in "modes of production." In this approach, a society's institutions reflect changing economic conditions.

Historians might also develop theories that allow them to critique how history is practiced, to ask counterintuitive questions, or to question their underlying assumptions.

In this section, identify any theoretical arguments with which the author is engaging, explicitly or implicitly and explain how this shapes the author's argument.

Method(s)

If theory is about how generalizable frameworks and concepts shape historical narrative and practice, method is about the techniques and reasoning that historians use in their research, writing, and applied scholarship. As you can probably imagine, method and theory are closely interrelated.

What kinds of sources is the author using? What are the strengths and limits of the sources?

Through what lens(es) is the writer examining their sources? (e.g. race, class, gender, economy, environment)

What techniques of interpretation is the author using? (e.g. distant reading, historical ethnography, oral history)

What can you learn from the interpretive techniques that the author is using?

General Notes

This is where you should keep any notes that you take while reading this publication.