How to Read (or View) a Secondary Source

Adapted from Patrick Rael, *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students* http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/

Here is a method of approaching secondary sources:

"PAST" it:

Primary sources
Argument
Scholarly conversation
Thesis

Primary sources: Primary sources are the basic building blocks of historical analysis. To evaluate any work (blog, article, essay, book, film) that tries to make sense of the past, you need to ask, "What are the primary sources?"
--Look at the footnotes (or endnotes) when they are included.
--Look at the bibliography.
--If you are reading an article, website, or blog post without notes or bibliography (or watching a film), see if you can identify the primary sources from the text itself.

Argument: Historical interpretation is *not* a statement of opinion or belief. It is an evidence-based argument. Unfortunately, the word "argument" usually conjures up either cable tv news shows (several talking heads shouting at each other) or Twitter wars (a series of insults and unsupported claims). *That is not what historians mean by "argument."*

Sometimes the historian making an argument is compared to a lawyer arguing a case in court. *That comparison is wrong!* A lawyer presents only one side of a case; a lawyer seeks to exclude evidence that does not support her case. Historians are not allowed to do that!

A far better comparison is to liken the historian to a detective. Like a detective, the historian examines clues to discover what happened, when, why, and how. The historian, like the detective, *looks at all the clues,* even those that mess up his or her initial hypothesis.

Because the historian's argument is based on evidence, it is subject to evaluation and analysis. So, as you read, you need to 1) identify the argument, and 2) evaluate it:

Identifying the argument:

- What is the author's main point?
- What are the supporting points?

Evaluating the augment:

- Is the reasoning valid? Does the evidence support the conclusions?

- Has the author “cherry-picked” the evidence? –in other words, has he or she ignored or eliminated evidence that does not support his or her thesis? Are there points where the evidence is thin?
- What broad, unexamined assumptions provide the foundations for the author's argument? Do these assumptions need to be examined?
- What other interpretations of this evidence is possible?

Note here that none of these questions ask if *you enjoyed* reading this work or if you found it interesting. Sometimes good arguments are boring. That’s life, people. This part of the evaluation process asks you not for your opinion, but for your thoughtful analysis and evidence-based evaluation.

Scholarly conversation: When they write, historians are engaging in a wider scholarly conversation. They’re arguing against, arguing for, adding to, questioning, or complicating the conclusions that other historians have drawn. Sometimes they are challenging “accepted wisdom” or “the usual explanation” or “what everyone knows.” Footnotes (or endnotes) and bibliography, if these are provided, will help give you a sense of this wider scholarly conversation. Even if you don't have the information you wish you had, you can still ask yourself, "Why would the author argue this point at this particular time?"

Thesis: Often, the most difficult task when reading a secondary source is to identify the author's central thesis. In a well-written essay or article, the thesis will be clearly stated at the end of the first paragraph or the beginning of the second. In a long article or a book, the thesis is usually (but not always!) outlined in the preface or introduction, and then repeated in the conclusion.

As you read, constantly ask yourself, "How can I sum up what this author is saying in one or two sentences?" This is a difficult task; even if you never feel you have succeeded, simply trying to answer this question will advance your understanding of the work.