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Zachary Schrag's Guidelines for History Students

How to Read a History Book

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Get the main points

Books are made of words, but not all words have equal weight. Understanding the hierarchy of words may allow you to extract 75 percent of a book"s content while reading only 25 percent of the text.

The most important words can be the title. A well chosen title will suggest not only the subject matter of the book, but also its central argument. Take, for example, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution.* Gordon Wood tells you right up front that he thinks the Revolution was radical. If, by the end of the book, you do not understand why he thinks so, he has failed in his task. *Nature"s Metropolis* has a paradox for a title. A metropolis is a human creation, so how can it belong to nature? The text of the book answers that question. Not every title is so eloquent, but it is always worth asking why the author chose the title he did.

Once you have actually opened the book, you will find a hierarchy of chapters. The introduction and conclusion are often the most important, for here the author can explain the question that animated her research and the answers she found. It may be helpful to read not only the introduction, but also the conclusion before reading the body chapters. If there is anything in the conclusion that you find improbable, you can then read the body chapters looking for proof. Some books employ a similar hierarchy within each chapter, providing an introduction and conclusion of a few paragraphs, often set off from the rest of the text by a boldface heading or a blank line.

On the lowest fractal level, individual paragraphs have hierarchies, for some sentences, generally the first sentence of each paragraph, serve to make the author"s point, while the following sentences provide nuance and evidence. In a very structured book, reading only the first sentence of every paragraph will give you a summary of the entire text. And maps, photographs, illustrations, and captions are always worth your attention; they are too expensive to the publisher to be included lightly.

Does this mean that it is sufficient to read only the topic sentences, and to finish a 300 page book in 40 minutes? Not exactly. Because a good book (and your instructors wouldn"t assign a book they didn"t think worthwhile) will contain dozens of topic sentences that will provoke you to read the whole paragraph. The topic sentences have the same function as headlines in a newspaper. They give you a brief glimpse of the paper"s con-

tents, so you can decide which areas demand more detailed exploration. In other words, read quickly through the parts you believe; read slowly through the arguments of which you are not convinced.

Ask questions

Reading in the manner described above will give you an idea of what the author thinks. That is a good start, but you haven”t really read a book until you decide what you think.

As you read, you should constantly ask questions. Here are some examples.

- What is the author”s argument, and am I persuaded? If so, what evidence is particularly persuasive? If not, what evidence does not fit? Or what would it take for me to believe the author”s point?
- What does the author care about? What are some of the key terms she uses again and again? What terms does she use for controversial ideas and events?
- How did the author write this book? What sources did she use? Only primary sources, only secondary, or a mixture? Is there one source that provided most of her material? Who are the people in the book–is it only about rich white men, or are other groups” stories told as well?
- Why did my professor assign this book? How does it fit into the course? Does it agree with other books and the professor”s lectures, or is there a debate? How does this book square with things I”ve learned outside of class? (It may help to read with your class notes at hand.)
- What do I think of this book? What is missing from the book–what would I like to know more about? What is surprising? What is funny? What made me angry?

Take notes

To get your best ideas–both your insights about the author”s intended arguments and your own thoughts on the subject–to the section, essay, or exam where they can be evaluated and rewarded, you must take notes while you read. Fortunately, academic press books generally provide ample margins for your thoughts on specific pages, as well as for lines, stars, question marks, and other symbols to mark key passages (a tidier alternative to highlighting or underlining). Imagine that you are talking to the author. When he says something interesting, talk back or ask a question–and write your response in the margin.

For notes on more general themes that recur throughout the book, I suggest the fly pages in the back. For library books and books you plan to sell, you will naturally have to take your notes elsewhere–on paper or computer. But whether you take your initial notes in the book or separately, it is very helpful to type them up as a summary with questions. If you prepare such a summary for each text in the course, you will be very well prepared for your exams.