

## Guidelines for Summer Reading – Reading Practices and Review Outline

Reading secondary sources is central to this course. In order to do this well, you must consciously take steps when reading. These guidelines are designed to offer you some suggestions for how to read secondary sources and to outline how to write a review of the readings for each class meeting.

### Reading Practices

Enjoying reading is a prerequisite for being a student of history, but the reading you will do will often not seem enjoyable. Part of this is the nature of some things you will be required to read: scholarly writing is sometimes dense. Often, the most important works are something of a slog. Love of the printed word is often not enough to get you through in these cases. To make your way through the scholarly works we'll be reading this semester, keep these suggestions in mind.

**1. History, even in narrative form, is an argument.** At the center of every work of history is a thesis that the author sets out in answer to a specific historical problem. Your job as a reader becomes easier when you identify this. In books, both the problem and the thesis come in the preface or introduction, smaller problems and sub-arguments will be found in each chapter, usually in the introductory paragraphs. In articles, these are also in the introductory paragraphs. As you read, focus on these sections to figure these out.

**2. Evidence is presented to support the arguments, not to tell a story.** The best histories fuse narrative and argument, but supporting the argument is always the key. As authors present evidence - the stories - they do so to bolster the claims they make. If you remember this, you are less likely to get buried in the detail of the evidence. (This, of course, is the nightmare of reading: 'How am I supposed to remember all this?') You should pay attention to the evidence - especially how it was collected, how it is presented, what is not presented, and how it might lead one to different conclusions - but do not worry about remembering it all. (Here's a little secret: even the authors can't remember every anecdote, statistic, or quote.) Instead, focus on what evidence is presented to defend a claim. This means you won't need to know the name of every person encountered, but you will need to know those that are clearly key persons.

**3. Arm yourself with a pen and notebook when you read.** We often dream of taking a good scholarly work to the beach and breezing through it as we dig our toes deeper into the sand. This approach might work for novels, but it will not do for reading scholarly work. Reading with just a pen is to be only half prepared, too. (How many times have you begun underlining only to realize you underlined everything and find yourself at a loss as to why? Or, more often, wondering why you didn't underline certain parts?) As you read, you should turn to your notebook often. Write down important quotes (like the thesis statement), sketch out the author's key points by breaking down the structure of the essay or book, and write down your ideas/questions about certain points. (Notice: I said "and." The notebook should be used for all these things (and more, depending on your style.) Notebooks can also be helpful places to jot down citations or simply note turns of phrase you find compelling.

4. **Don't read every word.** This is heresy of course. But heresies are sometimes (often?) true. I'm not suggesting you skim, but learn how to read quickly for the main ideas. Read the introduction/preface, introductory paragraphs, topic sentences, transitions, and conclusions carefully. Slow down if you find the book is not making sense (or too much sense; surely the arguments are more thought out than that!)

5. **Write down every word you don't know.** As you read, if you come across a word and you don't know what it means, define it. Have a section of your notebook devoted solely to new words. This is one of the most important steps towards becoming a self-directed learner.

### Writing Reviews

Armed with this knowledge of how to read like a scholar - as if there is one way - you are required to write a brief review of the secondary works we'll be reading in class and over the summer. These reviews are to be similar to book reviews, in that you'll be gauging the arguments, approaches, and success of the various works, but I am looking that you take the readings as a group and analyze them in light of each other and the field in general. Your reviews will vary, of course, but there should be some key elements in each.

1. **Introduction.** Introduce the readings in a compelling way. Explain the broader question or questions they are trying to get at without necessarily referring to each one specifically (yet). For example, if the readings focus on how Florida politics evolved in the late twentieth century, then give this context. In other words, a reader should be able to see how they fit together.

2. **Thesis statement.** While you are not establishing an argument from primary sources, you are nevertheless making an argument about how these secondary works fit together. You should assess what insights, approaches, ideas, or points of contention the works bring together. As in other essays, this is the heart of the review.

3. **Evidence drawn from the works.** As in any essay, you need evidence to support your argument. Your evidence should come from the works. The word limit (500 words, firm) will keep you from dealing with any of the works in too much depth (in other words: don't try to summarize the works), but you should be able to develop enough of a description of each one that it will make sense to the reader. Your job is to compare the works, but not necessarily contrast them (not every work we read will disagree with the others). How do they inform each other? How does reading them together shape our understanding? You do not have to give each piece equal weight, but consider them relative to the claims they make. (In other words, don't give an essay equal space as a book, unless it makes much more interesting claims.)

4. **Conclusion.** In a short essay, a conclusion does not need to be a full paragraph, but do your best to develop a pithy sentence or two to sum up your assessment. Think of what questions the works leave unanswered or what questions they might prompt. Think of what a reader should really walk away with when done with the essay.

5. **A Title.** Seems funny to list this last, but write your essay first, then come up with a pithy title that helps to encapsulate your argument.

**All reading reviews must be submitted in hard copy and stapled.**

**More information available here:**

**<http://clas.uiowa.edu/history/teaching-and-writing-center/guides/book-review>**