



# How to Read for History

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History courses usually have heavy reading loads. But you can make the load lighter if you develop effective strategies for reading. This page is designed to introduce history students to some of those strategies, but these tips are not the last word on reading effectively. Hone your own reading strategies. Practice different strategies over periods of time. And be sure to consult **the advice of others** about how to read.

[*Please note:* The advice on this page pertains mainly to “secondary” texts written by historians. Some of the tips may also be helpful when reading “primary” historical documents, but reading primary sources effectively often requires a unique set of skills. For example, this page recommends active skimming as an effective reading tool, but primary source documents often cannot and should not be skimmed as easily. So the tools described on this page are intended primarily to help you read scholarly works about history.]

## Reading as Conversation

It may seem like reading is a solitary art. But reading a history book is better thought of as a conversation. The author of the book wants to *tell* you, the reader, something that he or she thinks is important and true. The author is never just conveying information, but also trying to *convince* you of his or her interpretation of the past. If it seems to you like all an author is trying to do is pass along some facts, even then be aware that there is more going on: implicitly the author is still trying to *persuade* you that *these* facts are important and that they are related to each other in a particular way.

*Tell, convince, persuade:* these are words we tend to use when describing conversations, speeches, arguments. But these words are just as appropriate when we talk about history books or articles or essays. **All works of history contain arguments**—even the ones that appear to be nothing more than good yarns. So your ultimate task as a reader will be to identify what the argument of the book or article is.

In some works of scholarship, the main argument is easier to find than in others. For instance, sometimes an author’s main argument is that some other scholar has made a mistake in interpreting the past. And in the process of detailing their differences or agreements with other historians, authors often spell out their own argument or thesis explicitly. So whenever a scholar mentions another scholar or body of scholarship, your antennae as a reader should immediately go up: the main argument of the book may be nearby.

But whether or not an author is primarily addressing other authors, he or she is always addressing you as well. The author is trying to convince *you* that the book's central arguments are correct. Realizing that fact—that the author wants to engage you in argument and conversation—is the crucial first step you must make as a critical reader.

And a second fact is even more important to realize: *you do not have to be convinced by an author's arguments*. An author's reasons for reaching a given conclusion may be flawed or partial or incomplete. But if you are not convinced by an author's argument, as a thoughtful reader you will have to offer your own good reasons for disagreeing or withholding judgment. That's why, to emphasize the point again, critical reading is conversational: the author starts the conversation by trying to convince the reader of something, and the reader continues the conversation by formulating arguments with or posing questions to the author.

## The Three Stages of Reading

Of course, before you can decide whether you agree with an author's argument, you have to identify and analyze it. And in that process, you will be most successful if you break the act of reading into at least three parts.

First, whether you are reading a long book or a short essay, you should always *skim* your reading material to gather information about the structure and major points of a text. As we will see, skimming involves more than running your eyes across a page. It is a dynamic process in which you not only gather information from a text but also formulate questions that you will want to have answered when you move to the next stage of reading. Skimming is one of the most important stages in reading, yet it is probably the most misunderstood and least practiced. For that reason, I have dedicated the bulk of this guide to skimming.

Only after skimming will you give a text the *slow read*. But the second stage of reading entails more than just running your eyes over the words more slowly than you did while skimming. When you slow-read a book you will also be writing (taking notes), recalling (by constantly looking back to the information you learned by skimming), and reviewing (by pausing at the end of each section of a text to make sure you have grasped its main point).

The third stage of reading begins after the actual act of reading has ended. In the *post read* you will reflect back on what you have read and evaluate the arguments that the author has advanced.

### Stage 1: The Skim

The following tips on skimming are based upon a fundamental idea, adapted from the book *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph Williams. Williams argues that clear writing comes from thinking about how readers read. Conversely, clear-headed reading comes from thinking about how writers write. Your goal as a skimmer is to grasp as quickly as possible what a writer is trying to say, what he or she wants to convince you of. This means trying to sit in the writer's chair. Here are some ideas about how to do that.

**Tip #1: Always “pre-read” by skimming the titles, both for the whole work and for sections.** When authors choose titles, they are attempting to do your work as a skimmer for you.

Titles, ideally, boil down crucial concepts into brief phrases, and they can give important clues about a work's argument. You should therefore look for key words in the title. Then, while you are skimming, you can pay special attention to the parts of the work that bear directly on those key words.

For instance, consider the book [The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800](#), by David Bell. The title to this book contains several clues about the main points of the book. On the most basic level, it tells us that this is a book about nationalism in France. It repeats forms of the word "nation" twice, so we know that understanding the role of those words in the text is going to be one of our major tasks as readers.

But we can also tell more than that. Look at the dates, "1680-1800." We can infer from these that Bell believes that the invention of French nationalism took place during the eighteenth century. As it turns out, this is a major argument of the book, as we will discover once we begin to slow-read. Bell disagrees with histories or theories of nationalism that make it an ancient phenomenon; the dates alone tell us that he thinks nationalism is a relatively modern development. But he also disagrees with people who think that French nationalism burst on the scene only during the French Revolution in 1788 and 1789. The title asserts that nationalism was being invented long before the Revolution, which is again a major argument of the book. Even if we do not know anything about these dates, however, we can note them down in the form of a question to be answered when we slow-read the book: Why did the author put *these* dates in the title?

We can learn even more from the title. Notice the words "cult" and "inventing." These are clues that for Professor Bell, nationalism is primarily a "cultural" phenomenon (hence "cult"), not merely a political project. And because the nation is a cultural construction, Bell argues that it had to be "invented"; nationalism is not automatic or an inevitable product of people living together in the same space. These will also turn out to be major arguments of the book, but we are prepared for them just by looking at the title.

Before skimming a text, you should look not only at the title of the whole work, but also at the titles of subsections. Scan the table of contents. Find other key words. Make a note of whether some of the title's key words are repeated in the table of contents; if so, that means they will be doubly important. But also notice any new key words *not* contained in the title; those concepts will also be important in the book, but probably in a secondary way. When we look at Professor Bell's table of contents, this is what we get:

Introduction: Constructing the Nation

1. The National and the Sacred
2. The Politics of Patriotism and National Sentiment
3. English Barbarians, French Martyrs
4. National Memory and the Canon of Great Frenchmen
5. National Character and the Republican Imagination
6. National Language and the Revolutionary Crucible

Conclusion: Toward the Present Day and the End of Nationalism

"Constructing the Nation" reinforces our observations about "cult" and "inventing" from the title, and the repetition of the word "nation" in almost every chapter's title affirms that we will not understand this book unless we understand what Professor Bell wants to tell us about

“nations” and “nationalism.” The fact that “revolutionary crucible” does not come until the last chapter confirms our suspicion that nationalism was being built long before the 1780s. But there are also new words here—“sacred,” “memory,” “character,” “republican,” “language.” Now we have some questions we can ask ourselves while reading: How do these words and concepts relate to the primary concepts that we have already identified? You should follow the same procedure when you get into specific chapters. What are the subheadings for sections of the chapter? What key words do *they* contain?

**Tip #2: Look for main points “early” or “late.”** Williams’ book on *Style* encourages writers to place their main points either at the beginning of works or at the end, because this is where readers tend to look for them. He’s right, and this is where skimmers should go for quick ideas about the main point of a book or article. The main points of a book can usually be found in the introduction or conclusion. Likewise, the main points of a chapter are usually at the beginning or the end. In fact, the same is true even of smaller sections in a chapter. The same is even true of paragraphs. If a writer is doing his or her job well, you will not find the most important points of a paragraph buried in the middle. You will find them in the two or three sentences that come at the beginning or the end.

Slow-reading (as we will see below) is a linear practice. You start on the first page, and read through to the last page. But skimming requires a non-linear approach to reading. We’ve already seen this by discussing how skimmers jump ahead to the titles of chapters before they have read a single word. In the same way, skimmers try to think more like writers than readers. And since they know that writers tend to place their points “early” and “late,” they go straight to those places and look again for key words and lines.

If a book has them, start by reading the “introduction” and the “conclusion.” You should *always* read these sections carefully, even if you skim everything else. Don’t worry if you don’t understand everything yet. You’re trying to do the same sort of thing you did with the titles—identify key words, concepts that come up a lot, and major arguments. Notice which key words and arguments in the introduction are repeated in the conclusion. You can bet the house that those words and arguments are essential for you to understand, even if it means paying less attention while reading to other concepts and arguments. Also, keep an eye out for obvious landmarks like “This book is about . . .” or “I will argue that . . .” Again, these are the sentences in which the writer does the job of skimming for you by boiling down his or her argument into a concise statement.

Let’s take some example sentences from Professor Bell’s book:

“This book is about the way in which the French came to think of their nation as a political construction and, furthermore, came to see the process of construction itself as a central task of political life” (p. 6).

“Much of the book will be concerned with this pre-revolutionary change.” (p. 7)

“I will also argue that the dynamics that governed this story and made nationalism thinkable were principally cultural and religious in nature.” (p. 7)

“By ‘nationalism’ I mean a program to build a sovereign political community grouping together people who have enough in common—whether language, customs, beliefs,

traditions, or some combination of these—to allow them to act as a homogeneous, collective person.” (p. 20)

In each of these sentences, the author is waving flags at us, trying to get us to notice key points. Not surprisingly, they all come “early” or “late.” All of them are from the introduction to the book. The first three sentences are the first lines of paragraphs. The last sentence is the last line of a paragraph, and comes at the end of the introduction.

So if we followed the “early”-and-“late” principle of skimming, we would have noticed these sentences. And we also would be able to compare them against our mental lists of key words and topics. The first sentence reinforces the idea of “constructing” or “inventing” nationalism. The second sentence reinforces that this happened *before* the Revolution. The third sentence brings up “religion,” which we can connect with the word “sacred” in the title of Chapter 1. This tells us we should be on the look-out for connections between nationalism and religion in Chapter 1. And the last sentence gives us some new key words—like “sovereign political community,” “enough in common,” and “language,” which we can be looking for as the book progresses.

Once you have carefully read the “introduction” and the “conclusion,” you are ready to start skimming. But as you skim, you will follow the same practice. Instead of reading a chapter one page after another, read the first and last pages of the chapter first. Then proceed through the chapter. But don’t read every paragraph line by line. Read the first lines carefully, scan the middle, and then read the last lines carefully. If an author does occasionally put important points in the middle of a paragraph, and said author is also smart, he or she will usually give you more obvious landmarks like “My point here is . . .” or “This suggests that . . .”

As you see these landmarks, make a note of them, ideally by summarizing the main points of each section and/or chapter in your notes. By the time you have finished skimming the book, you should have a list or outline of the book’s major keywords or points. Once you move on to later stages of reading, these notes will help remind you of the information you collected while skimming.

**Tip #3: Do not get hung up on things you do not understand.** This is perhaps the most important part of skimming. Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren call it “superficial reading,” a term they mean to be “intentionally provocative.” I wouldn’t recommend their advice for every kind of reading you do, but it applies perfectly to skimming:

*In tackling a difficult book for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things that you do not understand right away. Pay attention to what you can understand and do not be stopped by what you cannot immediately grasp. Go right on reading past the point where you have difficulties in understanding, and you will soon come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Keep on in this way. Read the book through, undeterred and undismayed by the paragraphs, footnotes, comments, and references that escape you. If you let yourself get stalled, if you allow yourself to be tripped up by any one of these stumbling blocks, you are lost. In most cases, you will not be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. You will have a much better chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book *through* at least once. [From *How to Read a Book*, pp. 36-7.]*

Why should you plow ahead through difficult passages while skimming? Because otherwise you could get mired in arguments that are tangential to the main point of the work. Unless you survive these passages and get a view of the work as a whole, you won't be able to judge the *important* difficult passages from the relatively unimportant ones.

Fortunately, if you have been following Tips 1 and 2 above, you are already armed with ways to tell whether a difficult passage is important to muddle through or not. Do the difficult words and arguments contain any of the key words or ideas that you have gleaned from the titles? If not, leave them aside for now. Are the troublesome parts in the "middle" of the paragraph, chapter, or book, rather than "early" or "late"? If so, pass over them for now and focus on the beginnings and endings of the work.

Tip 3 does not mean you should blissfully skip over *any and all* difficult passages or words. Far from it. Rather, you need to be able to decide which parts to wrestle with, and which parts to come back to when you move on to the slow-read. If a passage contains key words from the titles, then you need to understand it, whether it is difficult or not. If the difficult passages come up in the introduction and conclusion, there's no easy way around them.

But you have to pick your battles when you are skimming. Don't get stuck on difficult parts that are incidental to the larger points of the book or article. Instead, note these passages with a question mark in the margin. If you discover as you read on that these passages were important to the overall work, you can always go back to them. But in many cases you'll see that what seemed difficult at first becomes clearer as you move along. Or you'll discover that it was not essential to understand the difficult passage in order to understand the work as a whole.

It should go without saying, however, that you should not dismiss a passage as "difficult" just because it has big words that you don't know. If the obstacle to understanding a passage is primarily definitional, [get a dictionary](#).

To sum up, skimming—the first stage of effective reading—does not just mean reading faster. It means pre-reading and collecting key information from titles. It means starting at the beginning and the end of sections, the places of the work that are most likely to contain the major points. And it means making intelligent decisions about when to dig deep into a difficult passage, and when to move on and come back later.

## **Stage 2: The Slow Read**

By skimming a book you have hopefully started to identify some of its main points. But now you will want to give the book a second, more careful look.

Ideally, in the second stage of reading you should read every word assigned. Realistically, that won't always be possible. That's why skimming well was important: it should have helped you decide which sections of the book are most important to read slowly and absorb.

The slow-read is probably the most straightforward and familiar stage of reading. Three words sum up the basic point: *Read the book*. But as you read, you should practice several good reading habits:

- **Be on the look-out for reasons and evidence.** In the skimming stage you began to identify the main points of the book. Now you will want to identify the reasons, arguments, and evidence the author gives for why you should accept those main points as true.
- **Ask yourself questions about the author’s reasons and evidence.** Are there arguments you find suspect? Evidence you expected to be shown that the author is not including? Questions you have about whether a particular piece of evidence is representative or anomalous? Mistakes you see in an author’s logical leaps?
- **Selectively annotate the book with marginal notes or high-lights.** The main thing you will want to note are points where you think the author’s arguments are particularly strong or particularly weak. These are the parts of the book you will be most interested in returning to once you begin to evaluate the work as a whole. *Do not high-light excessively.* If you do, you will have undermined the point of high-lighting in the first place: you want to emphasize only those lines or paragraphs that struck you as most crucial to the author’s argument.
- **Pause at the end of each section to review and jot notes.** Instead of taking exhaustive notes as you read, pause after each chapter or main section to write down a few reactions and record the questions you have been asking.

### Stage 3: The Post-Read

By the time you have completed Stages 1 and 2, you should know the main *points* of the book, and you should also know the main reasons the author gives to support those points. Now that you have “finished” the book, your final task is to evaluate those reasons.

In evaluating the author’s reasons, you will also be formulating your own “points” about the book. In a history course, you will probably be asked to share these “points” with your instructor or classmates, either in class discussions or through written assignments. If you do not leave the book with something to say in such forums, then the post-read is not yet complete. Remember that reading well is an art of conversation, not primarily an art of memorization. “Total recall” of all the details in a book is not the most desired outcome when you are reading for history, so don’t spend the post-read period trying to memorize. It is better to come to class with questions of your own about the book than with answers to all an instructor’s potential questions.

The post-read, then, is just the end of the beginning of reading. In evaluating the book, you are preparing to continue the conversation that the author has tried to start. By contributing to a class discussion or writing a book review, you will become a kind of “author” yourself, who will try to convince your own audience that your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the book are valid. You will keep the conversation going.

### Further Reading on Reading

- [Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students](#), by Professor Patrick Rael, Bowdoin College

- [How to Read in College](#), by Professor Timothy Burke, Swarthmore College
- [How to Read a Book \[PDF\]](#), by Professor Paul N. Edwards, University of Michigan
- [Reading Your Textbooks Effectively and Efficiently](#), from the Academic Skills Center at Dartmouth College
- [How to Read an Academic Article](#), by Becky Rosenberg