

DOING HISTORY

The book cover features a composite background. The upper portion shows a classical temple with many columns, overlaid with a faint, circular architectural diagram or map. The lower portion shows a modern computer workstation on a desk, including a monitor displaying a website, a keyboard, a mouse, a stack of papers, and a mug. The entire image is tinted in a reddish-brown color.

Research and Writing in the Digital Age

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Secondary Sources

WHAT IS A SECONDARY SOURCE?

Often, a textbook, or a section of a textbook, piques the researcher's interest. This can lead to consulting a historical dictionary or encyclopedia to learn more about the topic. If the subject proves interesting enough, it may become a topic for research. Most historians proceed from this point, beginning with a careful collection of the secondary literature discovered on the research trail.

Secondary sources are interpretations of the past written by historians relying on **primary evidence**, which are contemporary accounts of an event. Unlike a novel, secondary historical works are nonfiction. Secondary works include **monographs**,¹ **biographies**, and **scholarly articles**, which offer scholarly interpretations of cause, effect, implication, and meaning. Researchers should also be familiar with scholarly reference materials and read them when necessary. They may include **textbooks**, **historical dictionaries**, **encyclopedias**, and **other printed online materials**.

¹A thesis-centered extended essay that nonhistorians simply call a book.

WHICH SECONDARY SOURCES ARE BEST?

Historians must be able to determine which of their secondary sources are most useful. The research trail, serves two purposes when considering secondary sources:

- To familiarize students with the most useful guides and bibliographies
- To enable researchers to locate and conduct a preliminary evaluation of specific sources

By reading guides, bibliographies, abstracts, and book reviews, researchers can save time in determining which secondary sources are best. In a perfect world where time is not a problem and where deadlines do not exist, researchers could take the time to review all of the extant secondary literature turned up by the research trail. However, such a world does not exist.

Beginning historians are well-advised to consult comprehensive abstracts. The best collections of abstracts are described in Chapter 2. For North American (U.S. and Canadian) history since 1492, researchers begin with *America: History and Life*. This database provides brief abstracts of scholarly journal articles and bibliographic entries for doctoral dissertations and book reviews. The non-North American equivalent is *Historical Abstracts*, which includes journal article and book review abstracts on world history subjects since 1453, as well as bibliographic information on monographs and doctoral dissertations. For earlier periods and more global areas, *WilsonWeb OmniFile* includes similar materials.

One of the most useful sources of information on scholarship is the **book review**. They differ from abstracts and book reports by going beyond a summary to offer analysis of a book's strengths, weaknesses, approach, use of sources, and appropriate audience. Scholars frequently make use of reviews to better understand a monograph's content and place in the literature.

Beginning scholars should avoid relying solely on abstracts and book reviews when making final selections about which journal articles, monographs, and dissertations to consult, but they can use these guides effectively to eliminate sources.

READING THE SECONDARY SOURCE

Historians review secondary sources on a variety of levels. They begin by trying to learn more about the specific topic they are studying, but they are also interested in understanding historical context, and are eager to discern historiographical nuance and scholarly approach. The reading that often begins a research process is basic and informational. In some cases, a researcher will discover that much has been written on a topic. For example, a student interested in writing a paper on the rise of Nazism in Germany would quickly discover that a mountain of information exists. However, the existing scholarship might provide suitable context for the exploration of a more limited topic, which might still address the larger question.

READING CRITICALLY

Historical reading must go beyond gaining a general understanding of a topic. One of the most important historical skills is reading critically. This is different from simply knowing how to read. Many beginning historians complain that

²There is a fuller discussion of historiography later in this chapter.

they cannot remember what they read. This is not surprising, as the investigation of a new topic often presents a profusion of new and unfamiliar information. One of the best approaches to reading is **not** to simply open to page 1 and begin reading. If the researcher wants to retain background and contextual material and understand the author's argument, other approaches must be employed. The initial examination of a topic might begin with some general reading about an event of interest. By doing so, the historian can begin to learn the who, what, and where of the event in question. The beginning researcher should also consider taking cursory notes about these questions. Early selective reading should also include a perusal of the index, table of contents, footnotes, and bibliography. But to understand the process more deeply, it is essential to go beyond an understanding of the basic events and to interpret what is significant about them. This requires a more critical read of the material.

Reading the **conclusion** can further enhance the understanding of a scholarly work. The conclusion does more than summarize the contents of a monograph or scholarly article.

CONCLUSION

Secondary sources do more than enhance our knowledge of a specific event and provide a sense of the time and place. Scholarly interpretations also offer the reader an introduction to the historiographical context. A careful reading of the important scholarship should provide the reader with a sense of the state of the scholarship, such as the perspective of those scholars working the field, what questions they consider important, the differing interpretations of an event, and the methodologies employed to make sense of the evidence. Since any history paper is also a secondary source, good papers will engage the lines of argument in a field, or test some of the theses offered on a topic.

⁸Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, Scribe <http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/scribe/>.