HOW TO READ A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

In order to understand a historical document you need to ask and answer a series of questions about it. Let us start at the beginning with a number of questions that we might designate Level One questions.

Level One

These are the questions to which you should be able to find *concrete* answers. The answers to these questions will give you the basic information you need to begin the process of interpretation.

1) Who wrote this document?
2) Who is the intended audience?
3) What is the story line?

Why is it important to know the answers to these questions? What do they begin to tell us?

Level Two

Level Two questions allow you to probe behind the essential facts. Since your goal is to interpret what this document means, first in its historical context and then in your current context, you will want to study it from a more detached point of view, to be less accepting of "facts" and more critical in the questions you pose.

1) Why was this document written?

   In order to understand the purpose of a historical document it is critical to analyze the strategies that the author employs within it. For example, a document intended to convince might employ logic; a document intended to entertain might employ fancy; a document attempting to motivate might employ emotional appeals. In order to find these strategies you must first know what purpose the document was intended to serve.

2) What type of document is this?

   The form of a document is vital to its purpose. You would expect a telephone book to be alphabetized, a poem to be in meter, a work of philosophy to be in prose, a traveler's account and its style to create wonder and admiration in its readers.

3) What are the basic assumptions made in this document?

   All documents make assumptions that are bound up with their intended audience, with the form in which they are written, and their purpose.

Level Three

Level Three questions exercise your critical imagination, and permit you to probe the material and develop your own assessment of its value. These questions will not always have definite answers; in fact, they are the kinds of questions that arouse disagreements and debate and that make for lively classroom discussion.

1) Can I believe this discussion?
2) All documents unintentionally reveal things about their authors and about their age. Such information is embedded in the very language, structure, and assumptions of the document. Often it can tell us the most about the historical period or event that we are studying.
3) What does this document mean to me?

   You should demand the meaning of each document you read. Ask yourself what it meant in its historical context for the author, the audience, and the society of its time. Is this what it means to our own society?

HOW TO READ A VISUAL IMAGE

Your textbook includes a number of images to compliment the readings and eras covered. Many of them are paintings; a few are sculptures or photographs of pieces of architecture, the latter two are intended to illustrate important aspects of time, place, and custom rather than solely to be works of art.

Here are the main aspects of art to examine:

Line gives shape to the objects in a picture.
Color has a primary appeal to the senses and can be very effective at stimulating emotions.
Light and dark direct attention to particular aspects of an image and can also stimulate emotions.
Composition (the size and placement of objects) lends importance to them in an image.
Meaning is the message or mood the artist sought to convey.
Here are the questions you may ask yourself when reading an image:

1) Who was the artist? From what social class did he or she come? What does this tell you about the work of art?
2) From what social classes do the subjects of piece appear to come? What does this tell you about the society?
3) How do the clothing, hairstyle, and body shapes compare with those of today in Western society?
4) What activities are depicted in the work?
5) If the piece is a religious object, what would you infer about the nature of the religion?
6) With architecture, what might be the motivation of rules for creating such monuments?

GUIDELINES FOR HISTORY PAPERS

PURPOSE OF PAPERS

Honors history papers focus on two goals: learning to think and write about the past, and writing from sources. Thus they combine the skills taught in the History course with those taught in Honors Literature and Philosophy.

The papers should not be historical accounts. Instead, in your papers you should *analyze* the historical material of the course in terms of a particular question or subject.

They are not research papers, that is, you should not gather more material than has been assigned in the three courses in the Honors Freshmen sequence, History, Literature, and Philosophy. In part, your use of these materials will demonstrate your understanding of them.

WRITING ABOUT HISTORY

History papers generally employ two writing styles: narrative and interpretive. The focus of your papers in Honors History is interpretive, but you may wish to briefly describe a society, historic person or event to elucidate your analysis. If so, remember that history, by definition, occurred in the past. YOU MUST USE PAST TENSE WHEN TELLING YOUR STORY OR DESCRIBING A STATE OF AFFAIRS.

Interpretations are difficult to write when you do not fully understand what you want to say. Try to write a few phrases summarizing the point that you wish to make, and then flesh out your idea with supporting statements. The main thing is to keep writing and thinking about what you are writing.

In the process of interpreting or analyzing the past, you will discuss what a particular person or source has to say about the society, event or person you have chosen as your subject. When writing about a book, you generally use the present tense (because, the book is a physical object that still exists). For example, you might write: "Christopher Hill says that '[t]he years between 1603 and 1714 were perhaps the most decisive in English history'" (1).[1] However, when you cite a statement made in the past, for example, Robespierre's justification of the Reign of Terror, you must use past tense. For example: "Addressing the National Convention, Robespierre argued that 'the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue without which terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless'" ("*Speech*", 124).

Address your history papers to fellow students, and assume that your reader knows as much as you did before you read the assigned materials. Explain terms and phrases and identify people and events with which you were unfamiliar before you began work on this paper. Your tone should be serious without being pedantic and dull. Avoid clichés and slangs.

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[1] Note: a) "[t]he" shows that the word was capitalized in the original; b) Hill used past tense in the cited sentence because he was discussing the year 1603-1714; c) in this particular example, the parenthetical citation form is used – because Hill's name was given in the text, you need only give the page number, and in this case the page number is from History Anthology. When using this format, footnotes such as this one, should be reserved for commentary.

WRITING FROM SOURCES

Your Honors History papers should be based on your readings for History and, when appropriate, from the Literature and Philosophy components in the Freshman Sequence. You should rely heavily on primary sources, that is on writing contemporary (or nearly contemporary) with the events, societies or people whom you are discussing in your papers. Textbooks such as *Connections* should usually be used for background and not for analysis or interpretation.

In *preparing* to write your paper, first identify the specific sources relevant to your topic. Then identify the main points that these sources make, your reactions, and your criticisms or questions regarding these points. You might tentatively decide what points you intend to make concerning your material.

All papers must have an introductory and concluding paragraph; these often are written after the body of the paper has been completed. If you find that you can write neither a title nor these paragraphs, your paper needs rethinking and rewriting, since it lacks focus.

TECHNICAL MATTERS

All papers, including drafts, should be double spaced, with a minimum of one inch margins on all sides.

Number your pages.

All papers must have a title.

Proofread and make corrections before you submit your work.

Before handing in *any* paper, make and keep a hard copy in case someone misplaces the original.

Usage:

- Paragraphs represent a development of an idea; thus one sentence paragraphs make no sense. Either your idea is incomplete or your sentence is too complex. Try to include a sentence explaining where you are going when you shift ideas or subjects. These are called transitions.
- Normal English sentence structure consist of actor (noun) first, then action (verb) and thing acted upon (object) with suitable embellishments in the same order. Papers in which this order frequently is reversed are tedious and difficult to read.
- Avoid dangling participles. For example, “stop when swinging”, although used at railroad crossing, is grammatically incorrect. The subject of the sentence is the implied you, but hopefully you are not swinging, the signal arm is swinging.
- When revising your paper, do not simply incorporate your instructor’s editorial comments. If your instructor did not understand your point, try to figure out why. If your writing is unclear, think through the point that you wish to make, rephrasing it so that your reader can follow your thought process. Try reading the sentence aloud or to a friend to see if it makes sense.
- Humans are referred to as whos not thats.
- Plurals are formed by adding s not’s (‘s forms the possessive).

- There is a difference between *its* (of it—possessive form) and *it's* (contraction of it is).
- There is a difference between *there* (referring to place) and *their* (possessive).
- Do not use a contraction in a formal paper (e.g., "are not" but "not aren't").
- When referring to a single deity, capitalize—God—but plural deities are gods (a usage arising from our predominately monotheistic culture).
- Do not use quotes to make your points. All points should be made in your own words. Use quotations only to support points that you've already made; your paper should not consist of a string of quotations.
- Do not quote secondary sources.
- Do not quote factual information; put such information in your *own words* and cite the source.
- Indent and single space quotations that are more than one sentence long. In this case, do not use quotation marks.
- Do not use quotation marks unless you are actually are citing a source. They should not be used to provide emphasis; use underlining instead.
- Do not use quotation marks for your title unless it is a quote, in which case you must cite your source.
- Use ' ' for quotes within quotes.
- Be careful to copy your quotes precisely.

Format: All papers must be typed, double-spaced, and use a standard typeface and font size (no larger than 12 point, which this is). There should be one inch margins on all sides, and staple the final product once in the upper left hand corner (or use a paper clip). Papers should be between 4 and 6 pages.

Your paper should include a properly organized bibliography of work used or referenced. It should include name of author, title, edition, volume, place of publication, and date of publication. For example, your citation of the text should appear as follows:

Judge, Edward H. and John W. Langdon. *Connections: A World History*, 2nd ed. New York: Vango Books, 2011.

Your essay should address the issues raised in the assigned readings, class discussions, and group sessions. You may, of course, include examples from readings assigned in Philosophy or Literature. When you use quotations, identify the source in parentheses immediately after, such as (Newton, *Optics*, in Johnson, p. 111). A text book is not an original source, but does provide valuable background information. In general, do not quote from the text.

Some of your instructors may want you to identify your reference in footnotes or endnotes. Others may prefer the abbreviated – within paper, between parentheses – style of attributions. If you are allowed to use the short form, remember that the important point is to identify clearly where you got your information.

Also, the purpose of these essays is for you to explain and interpret the readings, discovering connections between them and pointing out differences and contradictions. However, do not substitute your personal opinions or comments about parallels in the present for a critical interpretation of the readings.

For more information concerning the proper presentation of History Papers, please refer to Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*, particularly to the "CMS" section.