

How to Read a Historical Monograph Like a Historian

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1. Start with a **BOOK REVIEW**

Professional historians do all the time. If you want to know a book well-for a discussion or for a research project-the book review is of course no substitute for reading the book. But a good book review will help you to understand the significance of the book you are going to read, its argument, its place in a broader conversation that has been going on.

Book reviews have never been easier to find and access. Search JSTOR, filtering for reviews in history journals. Other useful sources: Academic Search Premier, Historical Abstracts, American History and Life, H-Net Reviews.

Of course, you have to read book reviews (as all else) with a critical eye. Reviewers, you will see, often disagree about the value of a book, an approach, or an argument.

2. Read the **INTRODUCTION**

The introduction of a monograph is the most important part of the work. It lays out the topic and research question, places the work into a historiography, sets out the approach of the work, and present the thesis.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the topic precisely?
- What historical problem does the author address?
- How does the author present the existing historiography?
- What is unique about this book and its approach to the topic?
- What evidence (what sources) will the author examine?
- What is the thesis of the book?

All of these questions should be answered in the introduction. If you work out these questions as you read the introduction, you will understand the point of the book.

3. Review the **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

How are the chapters arranged? Chronologically? Thematically?

The Table of Contents is an outline and a guide to the book. Use it, together with the Introduction, to take the broad view of the work.

4. Read the **CHAPTERS**

Pay close attention to the beginning and ending of each chapter: this is where the thesis of the chapter is worked out and where conclusions are drawn. You may skim

parts of the chapter in which the author is working out a particular example. Keep your eyes on the large question. Ask yourself:

- What is the subject of the chapter?
- What is the thesis of the chapter?
- How does the chapter help build the argument for the entire book?
- What are the most striking examples and what do they demonstrate?

5. Read the CONCLUSION

Typically this will recapitulate the argument that has been developed all through the book – and then put it into some wider context or contexts. Historians trying to quickly take the measure of a book will just read the introduction and conclusion. As you read the conclusion, ask yourself:

- How does the author sum up the argument of the work?
- What larger implications does the author draw?

THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU READ:

- Most importantly, what is the argument of the book?
- What is the author's approach to the topic?
- What kinds of sources are used?
- What are the author's assumptions? Biases?
- Are there leaps of logic? Important sources missing?
- How does this book compare to other works on the subject?

TIPS FOR BETTER READING:

- First, silence your phone while you read. The brain only has so much attention to give.
- Take notes as you read. Mark the most important statements of the argument, the most important examples. You might use sticky notes to mark essential passages.
- Try to read a section or a chapter at a time. Don't pick up and put down the book in random places.
- Don't get bogged down in details. Ask how they contribute to the story, or the argument.