

HOW TO READ A HISTORICAL TEXT

A Simple Guide to Understanding,
Questioning, and Annotating
Historical Sources

RESOURCE GUIDE

Before You Read

Step 1: Get the Context

Before reading, take a few minutes to figure out:

WHO?

- Who wrote or created this?
- What do I know about the author?
- What was the author's position, role, or perspective?

WHEN?

- When was it written?
- What was happening during this time period?

WHERE?

- Where was the author?
- Where was the text created or published?

WHY?

- Why was this written?
- Who was the intended audience?

WHAT?

- What type of historical text is this?
 - Speech
 - Letter
 - Diary
 - Newspaper article
 - Memoir
 - Political document
 - Photograph
 - Advertisement
 - Government document
 - Other

Before I begin, I predict this text will _____.

Read for the Big Picture

Step 2: Read Once Without Over-Analyzing

Your first job is to understand what the text is saying. Your second job is to analyze it.

After the first reading, answer:

What is this text mainly about?

What is the author trying to communicate?

What surprised me?

What questions do I have?

What do I need more context to understand?

Then:

In one sentence, what is the author saying?

How to Annotate a Historical Text

Don't highlight everything. Annotate with a purpose.

Mark	Look For
★	Important idea
?	Question/confusing information
!	Surprising or significant
C	Historical context
P	Author's perspective/bias
E	Evidence supporting the author's point

When you annotate, ask:

★ What seems important?

? What don't I understand?

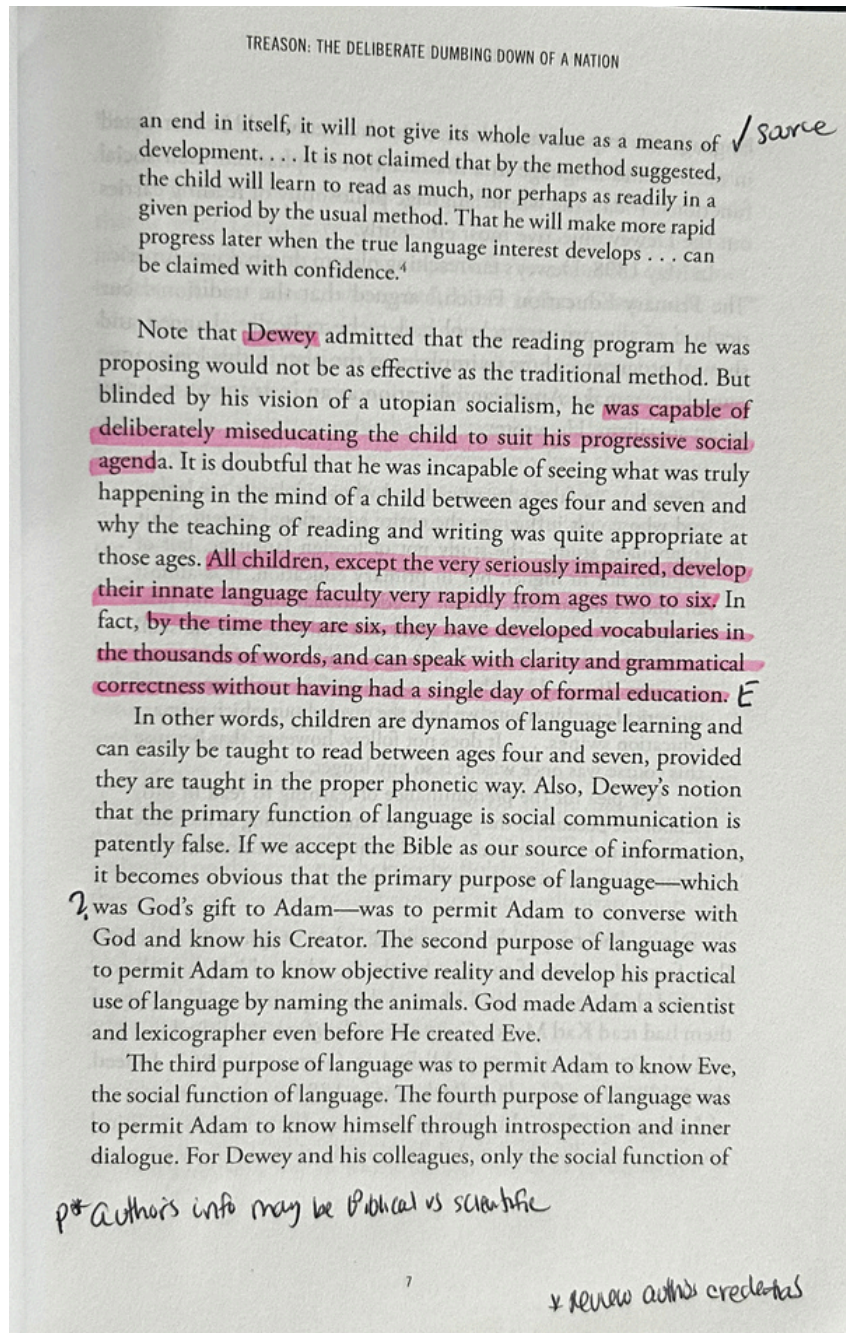
C What connects this text to the historical period?

P What does this reveal about the author's perspective?

E What evidence does the author use?

! What surprised me or challenged what I already knew?

Example



Blumenfeld, W. J., & Newman, R. C. The Crime of Educators, p. 7. Photo and annotations by Jade Weatherington.

Read Like a Historian

Step 3: Question the Source

Historical Context

What was happening when this was created?

Intended Audience

Who was supposed to read, hear, or see this?

Purpose

Why did the author create it?

Perspective

How might the author's experiences, beliefs, position, or circumstances influence the text?

Ask yourself: What does this source help me understand about the past?

What does this source NOT tell me?

Look for Perspective

Every Historical Text Has a Perspective

Perspective does not automatically mean the source is "right" or "wrong."

Ask:

What does this person believe?

What experiences shaped their perspective?

What might they know that others don't?

What might they not know?

What might they want the audience to believe?

Whose voice is represented?

Whose voice is missing?

Remember:

A historical source can be valuable even when it is biased.

A person's bias can actually tell us something important about the society, beliefs, and power structures of the time.

After You Read

Step 4: Think Beyond the Text

The author argues/believes that...

One piece of evidence is...

This reflects the historical context because...

The author's perspective may have been influenced by...

One question I still have is...

One thing this source helps me understand is...

One thing this source does NOT tell me is...

Reflection

What changed?

Before reading, I thought...

After reading, I think...

The evidence that changed or challenged my thinking was...

Historical Text Annotation Sheet

Title:

Author/Creator:

Date:

Type of Source:

Historical Context:

Intended Audience:

Purpose:

Author's Perspective:

Important Ideas

DON'T JUST HIGHLIGHT

Highlighting is not the same thing as analyzing. Instead of highlighting an entire paragraph, ask yourself:

How to Preview a Textbook

1. Read the title and chapter heading

Ask yourself:

What is this chapter about?

What do I already know about this topic?

What do I expect to learn?

2. Look at the subheadings

Subheadings give you a roadmap of the chapter. Read them before you begin so you know what topics are coming.

3. Look at the pictures and illustrations

Don't skip the visuals. Ask:

What does this image show?

Why did the author include it?

What can I learn from it?

4. Examine charts, graphs, maps, and diagrams

Look at the title, labels, dates, numbers, and captions. Try to figure out what information the visual is communicating before reading the surrounding text.

5. Preview the vocabulary

Look for bold, italicized, or highlighted words and any vocabulary list provided by the textbook.

Ask:

Which words do I already know?

Which words are unfamiliar?

What might these words have to do with the chapter?

6. Read the introduction or chapter summary

If the textbook provides an introduction, overview, summary, or learning objectives, read it before starting the chapter. This gives you a better idea of what to watch for.

7. Turn headings into questions

Example

See also: Life on the plantations 122–129 ■ The slave rebellion in Hispaniola 130–131 ■ Brazil's slave resistance camps 136–139 ■ The Jamaican maroons 146–147

ENSLAVEMENT AND REBELLION 133



Gaspar Yanga and his compatriots celebrate freedom in a painting from the Museo Regional de Palmillas in Yanga, formerly San Lorenzo de los Negros, the free town Gaspar Yanga established.

in 1519 to just over a million in 1605, as a result of overwork and diseases such as smallpox, introduced by their Spanish conquerors. Spain's ruler, Charles I, encouraged the use of Africans to replace Indigenous workers as New Spain, the country's largest colony, took shape from 1521. As well as present-day Mexico, it included much of North America and Central America, northern parts of South America, and Caribbean and Pacific islands.

Short-lived compassion
The arrival in 1519 of conquistador Hernán Cortés in Veracruz, the main port of entry on the Gulf Coast, marked the start of Spain's export of enslaved Africans to Mexico. After Cortés's conquest of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán in 1521, the demand increased sharply as mining and sugar plantations developed, and was at its peak from 1580 to 1650.

Charles I, strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, which sought conversions, initially advocated the humane treatment of the enslaved. Some were allowed to purchase their freedom, and manumission (freeing the enslaved by deed or in wills) was encouraged. Enslaved African men were also permitted to marry Indigenous women, which ensured liberty for their children. The Church was a strong proponent of Christian marriage and sought to ensure that relationships between

Spaniards and Black enslaved women were legitimized, too. Their offspring were free citizens but dubbed *mulattos*—a derogatory reference to mules, which are horse and donkey hybrids. Numbers of people of African descent—both free and enslaved—quickly grew.

Despite the Church's initiatives, the reality of forced labor in mines and on plantations was brutal, and death rates among the enslaved were especially high in both areas. Enslavers flouted rules concerning humane treatment. African women were raped, families were often broken up, and the enslaved were frequently punished more harshly for the “blasphemy” of uttering curses as they were whipped.

Revolt and escape
Mounting resentment, combined with the growing numbers of the enslaved, led to individual and organized insurrections across Mexico. In 1537, the first attempt at a large-scale revolt was thwarted when the colony's viceroy Antonio learned of it. An agent »

The Afro-Mexican population

Date	Event	People of African descent in Mexico
1580–1650	Mexico's import of enslaved Africans is at its peak.	c. 45,000 in 1580 c. 150,500 in 1650
1810	The Mexican War of Independence begins, and slavery is largely abandoned.	Approximately 500,000–600,000 (10% of the population)
2010	For the first time ever, the Mexican census includes a category for Afro-Mexican heritage.	2,576,200 Afro-Mexican or more Afro-Mexican (4.1% of the population)



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