

History 141

Reading a book, document or article for a history course:

There is a skill to reading a book, document or article for a history course. This set of questions and notes is designed to guide your reading.

I. Terms and categories historians use: Primary Source and Secondary Source.

Primary Sources: Materials containing firsthand evidence of historical events, usually recorded by someone who participated in, witnessed, or lived through the event. Physical objects such as arrowheads, furniture, or documentary films can be primary sources. Your college transcript is a primary source that describes the history of your academic experience.

For History 141, the Code of Hammurabi is a primary source.

Secondary Sources: Materials containing the research findings of someone who lived after the event being studied. A secondary source often relies on primary (as well as other secondary) sources.

For History 141, our texts are secondary sources.

II. Before you start reading carefully, take a look at the document, article or book and assess it as a whole. For books, read the table of contents, the blurbs on the back cover, and skim a few pages of the introduction and conclusion.

Formally, or informally, answer the following questions:

1. Is this a primary or a secondary source?
2. When was it written or produced?
3. Who authored the source?
4. Why did the author make/write the document?
5. When was it published?
6. Summarize the functions and ideas of the source in a sentence or two.

III. Read. Skim, Read, Skim some more, read....

IV. After you read, what have you learned? What is confusing to you? Look at the answers to the questions in Part II and see if they are still correct. Can you see how the author wrote or put the document together?