Deep Reading in History

The essence of historical thinking is interpretation—making sense of past events. It is a highly creative act, grounded in the evidence of the time and place under study. Like every other higher-level thinking skill, it requires practice for mastery. Because historians make evidence-based arguments, historical thinking requires critical thinking and deep reading of complex, often contradictory materials.

Defining deep reading

As Richard Nordquist explains, "deep reading is the active process of thoughtful and deliberate reading carried out to enhance one's comprehension and enjoyment of a text. Contrast with skimming or superficial reading. The term deep reading was coined by Sven Birkerts in The Gutenberg Elegies (1994)." Source: [https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-deep-reading-1690373](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-deep-reading-1690373)

Another definition by Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai (Educational Leadership, 2009): "By deep reading, we mean the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight."

The components of deep historical reading

1. "Reading between the lines" of documents instead of taking things at face value. We are skeptics.
2. Probing beyond surfaces meanings and uncover nuances, subtleties, contradictions, and possible deceptions in the documents.
3. Considering all elements of a source, including the emotional responses evoked by the image, object, or document.
4. Engaging in a dialogue with the past by interrogating a wide variety of materials created in times past. Reading multiple sources, critically and comparatively, constructing an understanding based on the preponderance of evidence.
5. Not accepting pre-packaged answers--constructing historical interpretations of your own.

The table to the left summarizes the stages in the growth of human reading sophistication from childhood through adulthood. We focus on levels 4 and 5. Your assignments require you to consider and analyze multiple (often conflicting) sources (item 4). You then build an interpretation by bringing together (synthesizing) the most credible and compelling elements of the sources you've read (item 5). Work on your deep reading skills as they are vital to any discipline and any career path. Rarely is anything of significance simply black and white.

For more discussion see: [https://www.mbaea.org/documents/resources/Educational_Leadership_Article_The__D87FE2BC4E7AD.pdf](https://www.mbaea.org/documents/resources/Educational_Leadership_Article_The__D87FE2BC4E7AD.pdf)