Sample chapter for Patrick Rael, *Making History: A Practical Guide for Reading, Writing and Researching.*

CHAPTER 6: READING SECONDARY SOURCES

Remember the difference between primary and secondary historical sources? Primary sources are the documents from the past that provide evidence to historians. Secondary sources are the accounts written of the past prepared by scholars after the fact. You are likely to encounter two kinds of secondary sources in your history course: textbooks, and historical essays and books. Let's think about textbooks first.

Your textbook versus Wikipedia

Textbooks are a special kind of secondary source which offer a comprehensive introduction to the course subject. Especially in survey classes, your textbook will be the single most useful source of written information in your history course.

But why do instructors assign textbooks, anyway? Can't we just as easily find what we want in an encyclopedia, or even online? Here are some advantages textbooks have over resources such as Wikipedia:

- Textbooks are written by proven authorities who are experts in their fields. Wikipedia may be edited by almost anybody. A well-respected scholar (or team of them) writes a textbook, which is then rigorously evaluated by other scholars. For reliability, this beats Wikipedia by a mile.

- Textbooks are made to accompany history courses. Unlike Wikipedia, textbooks link together episodes in history through common themes. Your textbook will help you understand not just events, but the ways events fit together into larger patterns. For example, consider the two great Spanish conquests of Native American empires: Hernán Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs in 1521 and Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Inca in 1532. Wikipedia can tell you about each. Your textbook will not only tell you about it, it will help you understand what these events have to do with each other, and other key moments in the history of Europe's expansion into the New World.

- Textbooks also have study aids that Wikipedia lacks. They may include selections from primary source documents; important illustrations and figures (which may themselves be primary sources); useful maps, charts, tables, and timelines; and comprehensive glossaries of historical terms. Some textbooks come with supplementary readers of primary or secondary historical sources, workbooks of exercises to help you practice the new skills you are developing, and online quizzes and study aids.

Working with your textbook

Here are some suggestions for making the most of your textbook:

- Keep up with your assigned reading schedule, and be ready by having your text read before class.

- Note terms and concepts you don't understand, either by highlighting them in the text or keeping a separate list. Be prepared to ask about them in class.

- If you can, use a felt-tip highlighter to take note of particularly important sentences or passages. (We'll talk more about this soon.)

If you are using an electronic text, your e-reader is likely to come with a variety of tools for highlighting and noting. It is well worth taking the time to learn to use these!

- When it's time to study for exams, your textbook may offer bullet points or marginal notes on important aspects of the reading.

Your textbook versus your instructor

Everything in textbooks is true, right? After all, your instructor assigned it.

Not so fast. As with all academic disciplines, history is a subject of contention and debate. While some matters are beyond dispute (e.g., the United States attacked Japan with two atomic bombs in 1945), others are not (e.g., *why exactly* the United States dropped those bombs). This is useful to keep in mind, for instructors tend to use textbooks in two ways.

First, instructors may count on the textbook to fill in gaps in what is covered in the classroom. This way, they can focus their lectures on subjects of interest while still ensuring that students will not miss important material. For example, an instructor lecturing on the work of the 1787 United States Constitutional Convention may focus on the debates over the place of slavery in the new government, but rely on the textbook to cover the debate between large and small states. When lecturing on the causes of World War I, she may speak in depth about the preceding crises in the Balkans, but let the textbook cover the pre-war arms race between England and Germany over battleships. Stay abreast of textbook reading assignments, for they may be your only chance to learn what you will need for exams and other assignments.

Alternatively, instructors may argue with the textbook — either by directly challenging what's in the text, or by simply saying things that do not agree with it. Most likely, your experience will be a mixture of these possibilities.

This can become confusing, but *knowing when and when not to argue with your given texts, and your instructor, is a key to success in history courses*. If appropriate, raise a question in lecture. (This may actually help others, who probably have the same questions you do.) Discussion sections, if your class has them, serve as the best moments to discuss differences between your

instructor's lectures and the textbook reading. You may also visit your instructor during office hours, or communicate via email. In any case, remember that in asking questions, you are doing your job as a student.

Moments when your instructor and your textbook disagree are good opportunities to appreciate that history is not just a set of facts, but a broader discussion about the eternally debatable meaning of those facts. Often, what matters most is not "getting it right," but making a solid argument supported with good evidence.

Reading historical scholarship

While you may spend much of your study time reading your textbook, most history courses supplement the textbook with other secondary readings, which may come from many places. Some may be quite old and some very new; some may be dense and complex while some may be easily accessible; some may be written by professional historians and some written by others such as journalists, commentators, or experts in other fields. Reading secondary scholarship can be challenging. You are likely to read dense writing meant for professional scholars rather than students. You may encounter unfamiliar phrases and concepts, and authors who assume that their readers have knowledge that you do not yet have.

So imagine a student reading for history class. Abby sits in the common room with other students, skims her reading with headphones on. She doesn't understand everything she's read, but she feels prepared for class, expecting any important points she's missed to be covered there.

When test time comes, she bombs her mid-term. Frustrated that the exam called on her to understand so much detail from her readings, she asks her instructor how she might do better next time. The advice she gets is to read *actively* – that is, with a clear strategy that will make the most of her precious time.

Here are the "ten commandments" for active reading she is given:

1. *Think pragmatically*. Each part of a well-crafted essay serves a purpose for the larger argument. When reading, think about why the author has spent time writing each paragraph. What does it "do" for the author's argument?

2. *Identify "signposts."* These are the basic structural cues in a text. Is the reading divided into chapters or sections? Are there subheads within the reading, or even subheads under subheads? Are the titles clearly descriptive of the contents, or do they need to be figured out (as in titles formulated from quotations)? Are there words or concepts in the titles (of the piece, and of subheads) that need to be figured out (such as novel words, or metaphors)?

3. *Topic sentences.* Topic sentences (usually the first sentences of each paragraph) tell you what the paragraph that follows will be about. These miniature arguments function as subpoints in the larger argument.

Example: "Diseases constituted yet another factor contributing to the rapid decline of native populations." This topics sentence tells you both where you are in the argument (a list of factors contributing to native de-population) and what the paragraph itself will be about (the role of disease in this process).

4. *Evaluate the evidence.* Pieces of evidence — in the form of quoted or paraphrased primary and secondary sources — are the building blocks of historical arguments. When you see evidence being used, try to identity the part of the argument it is being used to support. Ultimately, you will want to be able to evaluate the author's use of evidence. How does it support the point being made? Are there potential problems with this use of evidence?

Example: In 1622, one of the leaders of the Puritan settlement at Plymouth, described the colonists' success in fending off a raid from Native Americans, concluding that "Thus it pleased God to vanquish our enemies and give us deliverance." This evidence could support any number of possible points, from a simple description of the engagement, to a complex argument about the ways the Puritan world-view understood the role of divine power in human affairs.

SOURCE: Reprinted in William Bradford and Edward Winslow, *Mourt's Relation Or Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth* (Boston: John Kimball Wiggin, 1865), 54.

5. *Identify internal structures.* Within paragraphs, authors create structures to help readers understand their points. Identify pairings or groups of points and how they are ordered. In particular, pay attention to subtle *lists* — of reasons, points, or examples — that authors incorporate into their paragraphs.

Example: Imagine coming across a passage such as this in a paragraph: "One way to break down the debate is to divide causes between the reasonably obvious — factors that clearly helped generate consumerism, but did not necessarily provide the clearest or fullest part — and factors that may explain more but that are bit more diffuse." We can now expect a two-part structure to follow, with one portion devoted to "obvious but limited" factors in the rise of consumerism and the other to "diffuse but more important" factors.

SOURCE: Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

6. *Examine transitions.* Sometimes transitions from one paragraph or section to another serve merely to move the essay along. At other times, they can be vital pieces of argument, summarizing points just made, explaining the relationship between points, or suggesting the hierarchy of points in the argument.

Example: "As with Hemingway, Millay's first love was always her work." As in #3 above, a simple transition sentence such as this signals what came before and what is to come now. But transition sentences can be more substantive as well. Consider what is to come following this sentence: "In conclusion, I return to the theoretical and substantive issues with which I began this book and offer some final reflections upon them in light of the analysis of the formation of households and livelihood strategies in the three Nuba Mountain villages of Somasem, shair Tomat, and Shatt Damam." This sentence alerts readers that a summation of major points is to come.

SOURCES: David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47; Andrew Parks Davidson, *In the Shadow of History: The Passing of Lineage Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996) 297.

7. *Identify key distinctions.* Scholars often make important conceptual distinctions in their work. Stay attuned to moments when authors identify and explain key terms.

Example: An essay includes this sentence in its first paragraph: "The distinction between sin as defined by the Catholic Church and reiterated by the Portuguese state and the behavior of a large part of the Brazilian popular culture offers the opportunity to explore a series of issues critical to our understanding of that time and culture." From the start, we know that the author is going to rely heavily on the contrast between "sin" as defined by church and state, and "sin" as defined by everyday people.

SOURCE: Donald Ramos, "Gossip, Scandal and Popular culture in Golden Age Brazil," *Journal of Society* History 33, no. 4 (2000), 887.

8. *Identify explicit references to rival scholarly positions.* Moments when a scholar refers directly to the work of another scholar are important in understanding the central questions at stake. And if you really want to know who an author is talking to, look to the footnotes.

Example: An essay on Daniel Boone discusses how other scholars have typically addressed Boone's reputation for legal troubles: "John Mack Faragher writes that from 1786 to 1789, Boone was 'a party to at least ten lawsuits' but cites none. It has also been alleged by many other historians that Boone was sued for faulty surveys, failed claims, and breach of contract, all of which wrecked his finances and mired him in a downward spiral of debt, speculation, and loss of land." The very next sentence in the essay contradicts this position with a powerful thesis: "In truth, the records indicate that he once contacted an attorney and paid £5 for legal fees, and although he was involved in some litigation, it was not the type most biographers have alleged."

SOURCE: Neal O. Hammon and James Russell Harris, "Daniel Boone the Businessman: Revising the Myth of Failure," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 112, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 28.

9. *Stay attuned to strategic concessions.* Often authors seem to be backtracking, or giving ground to imagined opponents. This indicates not a confused author, but a strategy of anticipating and addressing criticism to strengthen the case. Often, these moments tell you that authors are in direct conversation with other scholars.

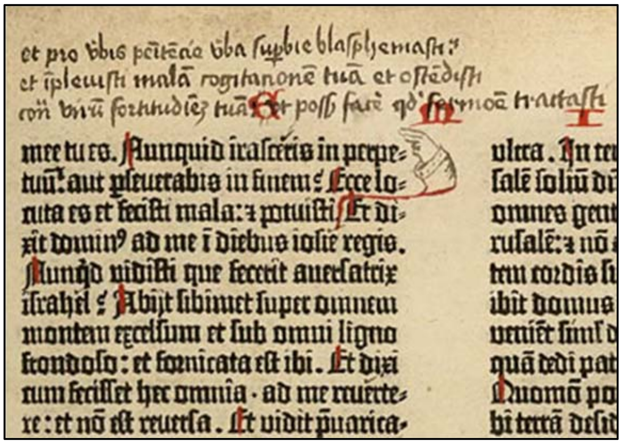
> **Example**: An essay on the stature of Europeans during the middle ages makes this concession in a footnote: "Some people may claim that genetic factors are responsible for the tall statures observed during the Middle Ages, pointing to the fact that northern Europeans are taller, even today, than those from more southern European countries (Schmidt et al. 1995)." The essay immediately continues with a counter-claim: "But the southern Europeans of the modern period, who tend to be poorer, are catching up, and in any event, studies of children around the globe indicate that children who grow up under similarly good environmental conditions have about the same heights (Malcolm 1974; Martorell and Habicht 1986)."
>
> SOURCE: Richard H. Steckel, New Light on the 'Dark Ages': The Remarkably Tall Stature of Northern European Men during the Medieval Era," *Social Science History* 28, no. 2 (2004), 216 n.9.

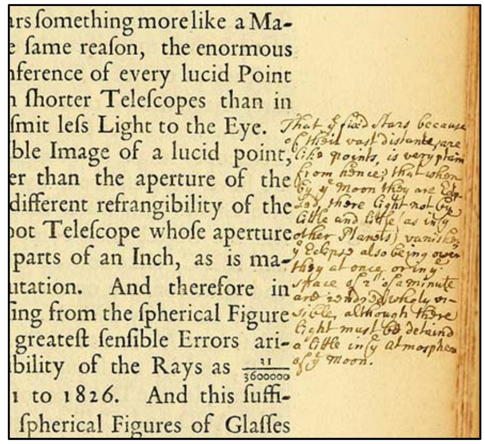
10. *Incoherence is the last possibility*. Sometimes it is very difficult to determine how a section of a piece is structured or what its purpose or argument is. Remember that authors do not always do their jobs, and there may be incoherent or unstructured portions of essays. But be careful to distinguish between writing that is simply difficult from writing that is truly incoherent.

Three practices for active reading

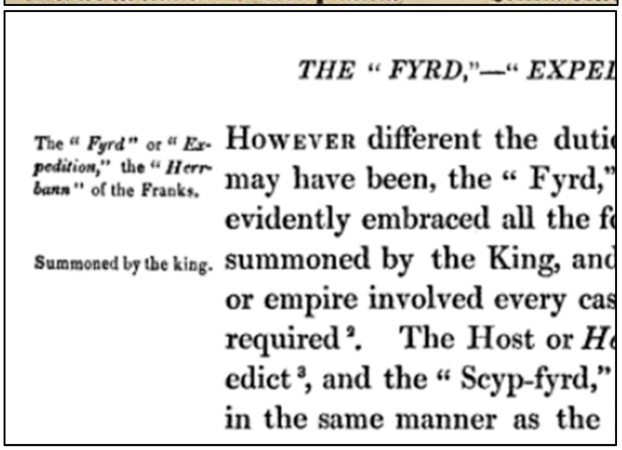
These commandments may be a lot to keep in mind as you read. But half the battle is acting the part. Here are three activities that may help you become a more active reader.

1. ***Marginalia*:** Ever since the invention of books, readers have scribbled on the margins of pages. These notes offer concise reminders of contents, and record readers' reflections on what they are reading.





rs ſomething more like a Ma-
e ſame reaſon, the enormous
ference of every lucid Point
n ſhorter Teleſcopes than in
ſmit leſs Light to the Eye.
ble Image of a lucid point,
er than the aperture of the
different refrangibility of the
bot Teleſcope whoſe aperture
parts of an Inch, as is ma-
utation. And therefore in
ing from the ſpherical Figure
greateſt ſenſible Errors ari-
bility of the Rays as $\frac{11}{3600000}$
1 to 1826. And this ſuffi-
ſpherical Figures of Glaſſes



THE "FYRD,"—"EXPE

The "Fyrd" or "Expedition," the "Herrbann" of the Franks.

Summoned by the king.

However different the duti
may have been, the "Fyrd,"
evidently embraced all the f
summoned by the King, and
or empire involved every cas
required [2]. The Host or H
edict [3], and the "Scyp-fyrd,"
in the same manner as the

Writing in books has a long and noble history. Scribes often included marginal notes in the medieval texts they copied (top left). Later, scholars made notes in the margins of their printed books, as in the case of a book owned by Sir Isaac Newton (top right). And many nineteenth-century history books included pre-printed marginalia to assist readers in skimming material, as in this 1831 text on Anglo-Saxon history (left).

Marginal notes are indispensible for active readers. When you come across passages that seem important but are hard to understand, use marginal notes to render the meaning of the passage in your own words. You can write these "translations" on sticky notes placed near the passage. This will enhance your comprehension, offer yourself a snapshot for later of your earlier understanding, and provide a study aid for exams and papers. If you can write on your reading and have no sticky notes, use the margins of the page. If you have an e-book reader, take advantage of its note-taking capabilities.

2. ***Note-taking*:** Use your notebook or a computer to record your understanding of what you are reading. Rather than take notes on every page of text you read, it is more efficient to employ the techniques above, then use your notebook to record the most important matters relating to your reading. The following prompts offer a framework for recording your responses. Remember to quote passages (with page numbers) where you found your answers.

- *General topic*: What seems to be the central historical phenomenon the author wrestles with? What makes this a challenging or significant problem?

- *Historical problem*: Can you find a clearly stated problem, or thesis question, in the introduction? Can you find the hint of a solution, or thesis, in the introduction?

- *Organization*: How is the essay organized? Into sections? What does each seem to be about? Does there seem to be a logic to the way the sections are organized? What might that be? Often, understanding how a reading is structured helps you understand its central points.

- *Thesis*: Can you find a thesis clearly stated? Sometimes this can be found in the introduction. Sometimes it is re-stated near the middle of the essay, as the author turns from explaining the problem to explaining the solution. Often it is clearly re-stated at the conclusion of the essay.

- *Argument*: Good historical arguments are too complex to be reduced to a single sentence. Can you create a short outline the main part of the author's argument? What are the pieces of the thesis, and how do they seem to fit together? For example, some historical argument outline a chain of causes leading to the central event. Others might list multiple causes in order of their impact on creating the central. See if you can break down the author's central claim in this way.

3. Record your own thoughts

You engage your reading most when you record your own thoughts on it. No other activity will better help you comprehend what you are reading, retain it for future use, and incorporate it into your growing knowledge of course material.

These prompts will help you reflect on your reading usefully. We will include sample reflections from Chris, who has just read an essay on John Brown's raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry in 1859. In it, historian Sean Wilentz reviews a book on the raid, concluding that "John Brown was not a harbinger of idealism and justice, but a purveyor of curdled and finally destructive idealism."[1]

- *Assessments*: What do you like or not like about the argument being made? Can you tell if you object to (or like) the argument based on what it argues, or based on how its argument is made?

> Sean Wilentz calls Brown a "homegrown terrorist," which seems very strange to me. Yes, Brown acted in violence, but he was fighting slavery. I can't think of that as "terrorism." But maybe Wilentz is right, and Brown's goals did not excuse his methods.

[1] Sean Wilentz, "Homegrown Terrorist," *New Republic* 233, no. 17 (October 24, 2005), 23-30.

- *Arguments*: Are there any places in the reading where you think the argument is weak? For example, are there points where evidence does not seem to effectively support the argument? Or where the logic of the argument itself may not seem valid?

> Wilentz says that Brown committed the 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre in Kansas against the proslavery Doyle family because a Senator (Charles Sumner) had been beaten while speaking against slavery in Congress. But our textbook says that proslavery forces had just sacked the antislavery capital of Lawrence. Maybe that's what Brown was reacting to.

- *Connections*: Is there anything else you have read (for this course, or perhaps others) that seems to support or challenge the arguments made in the reading? Can you find similarities with other events or arguments you've read?

> We read about Nat Turner's slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831. In some ways, John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry looks like a slave rebellion, since he hoped to spark an uprising. But no slaves actually rallied to his cause, while Turner actually attracted other slaves, who did rise up.

- *Consequences*: Can you think of possible consequences of the argument for other matters are you discussing in class? Does the argument, if taken to some logical conclusions, have implications for other key points you've been discussing in class?

> As I'm reading about how the Union sought to recruit slaves into the army during the Civil War, I'm reminded of what John Brown had tried to do just a few years earlier. How amazing that what he was hung for in 1859 came to be in 1862 and 1863.

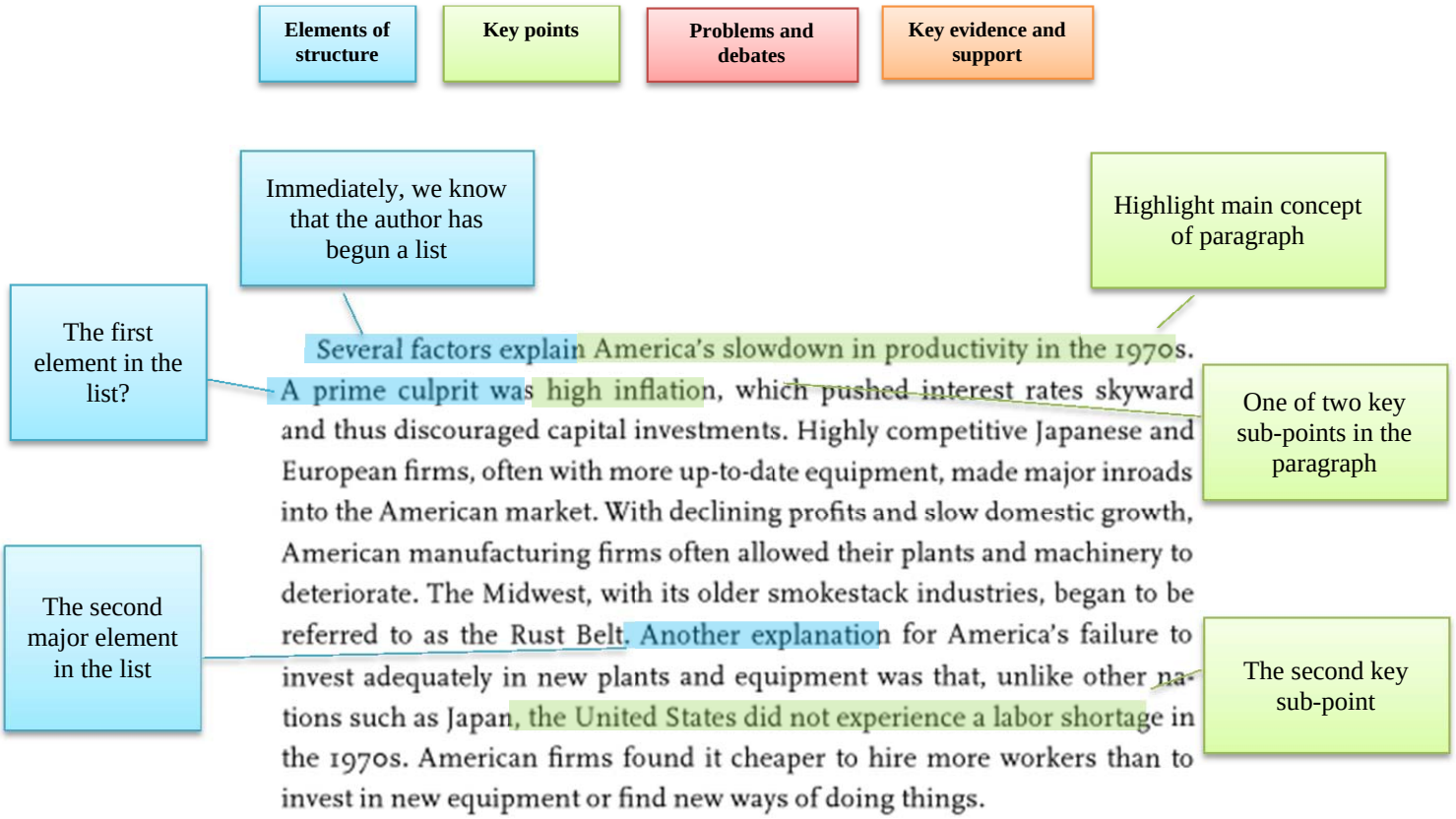
If you can use this process for important secondary readings, you will have gone far toward comprehending complex material. Best yet, you will have created concise study aids that will help you immensely in putting these arguments to use in class discussions, written assignments, and exams.

Remember, reading is an active process that should involve a comfortable chair, good light, a pen and pad, sticky notes, and several felt-tip highlighters. The amount of energy you put into your reading should depend on how significant the reading is. To determine this, pay attention to your syllabus, your instructor, and your discussion section leader. Ideas from readings that are discussed extensively in class are likely to appear on exams and assignments.

Working with readings: two examples

Let's illustrate some of the principles just discussed with examples of how we might highlight and understand paragraphs from secondary readings.

Think back on Abby, the student who skimmed her reading before class. With a new set of tools, she will make much better use of her time, and learn the material better. She considers the passage below, from a recent book on the history of business in the United States. Color annotations demonstrate some items of note. Throughout, she uses the following color key for her highlighting:



SOURCE: Stanley Buder, *Capitalizing on Change: A Social History of American Business* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 335-36.

Here is how she records her thoughts on this paragraph:

Explaining America's productivity decline in the 1970s

1. High inflation "discouraged capital investments"
    a. Japanese and European competitors began selling more to America
    b. Meanwhile, American industries often failed to maintain their plants
2. With a plentiful workforce available, US industries hired more workers rather than improved their processes

Some things to note:

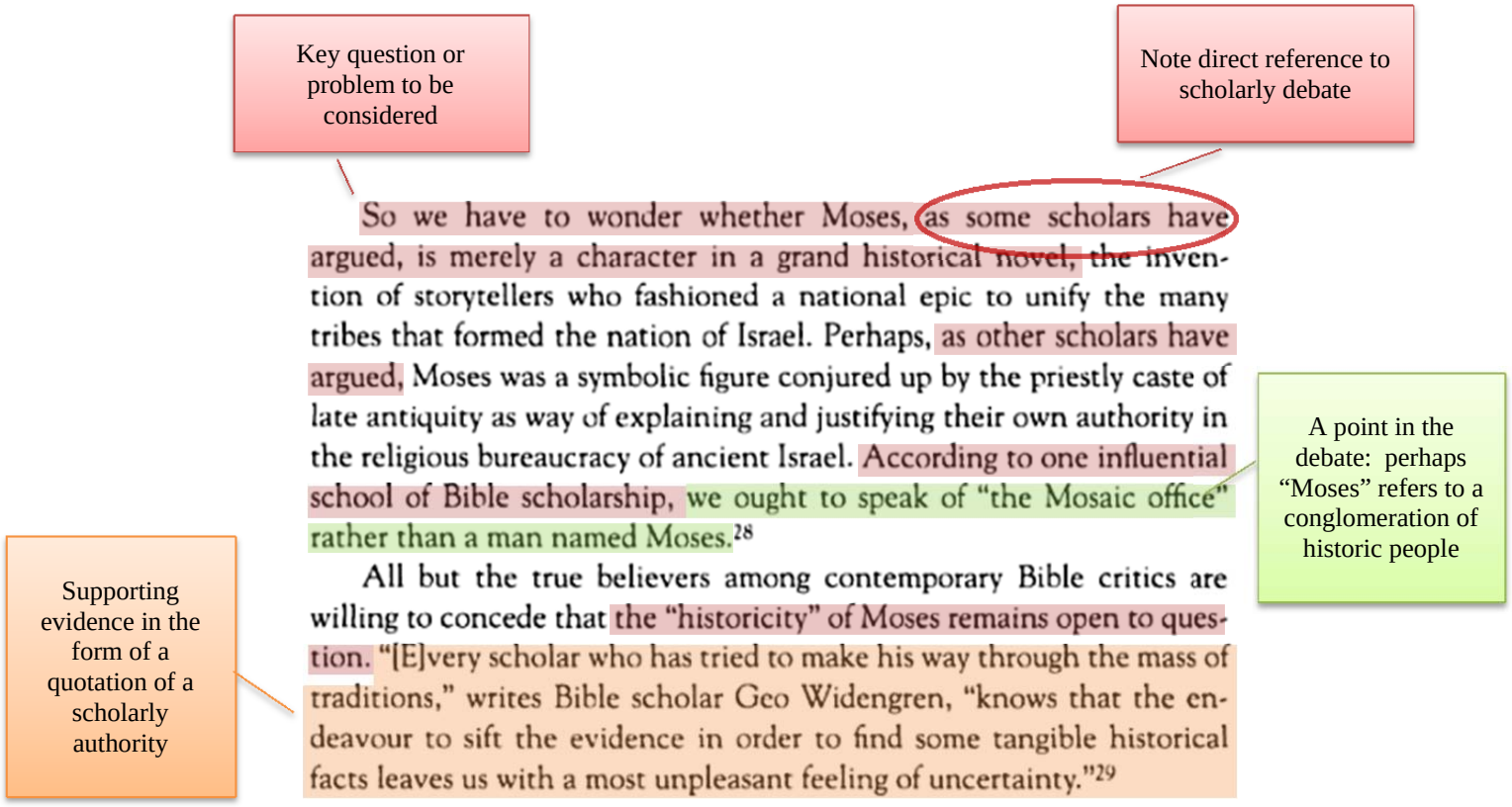
- As much as possible, Abby re-poses ("translates") the reading into her own language. This helps her understand the reading on your own terms, and helps her avoid inadvertent plagiarism. When she uses the author's words, she places them in quotation marks.

- She must sacrifice a little detail (such as a reference to the high interest rates that accompanied high inflation) to gain a concise understanding of the key points of the paragraph

- With this understanding, she may condense the paragraph in her notes into one concise statement: *In the 1970s, America's productivity declined. High inflation and a plentiful workforce in the US benefitted foreign competitors.*

When Abby "actively" reads in this way, she is doing far more than simply passing her eyes over the words and hoping the material sinks in. She is reading with a strategy, noting her reading in a way that helps her comprehension both now and later, and recording her thoughts. By using these techniques and reviewing her notes, she will be better able to retain what she's read.

Let's consider another example from Abby's reading:



SOURCE: Jonathan Kirsch, *Moses: A Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 21.

The first example sought to explain something by offering a list of reasons or causes. This passage is concerned not with answers so much as questions. It could be summarized simply: Historical problem: Was "Moses" a real historical person?

Despite that Abby can reduce this material to a sentence, she must remember that much information remains packed in it, such as the idea of a "priestly caste" acting with a motive of unifying the different groups of people who became Hebrews. She understands that her brief summation is not a substitute for a full knowledge of the reading, but a stand-in for a more complex set of ideas.

How your reading fits into the whole

Ever wonder how we learn? For example, why does it seem relatively easy for drivers to remember the rules of the road, but so hard for us to remember all the information we're exposed to in a history course?

One reason is that a driver's knowledge of driving is constantly reinforced by, well, driving. The more you practice something, the more you remember. Obviously, this applies to

history, or any other academic discipline. The more you go over the course material, the better you will remember it.

To "go over" the material effectively is the other part of how we learn. A large part of your review should seek to understand how the parts fit into the whole. Not only will this aid your own comprehension, it will make the material easier to remember. We recall details because we understand them as subsets of larger categories. Facts are hard to recall when separated from the broader points they support. Remembering the specific ingredients and steps of a recipe is easier when we understand that it is all coming together to make a pizza.

Whether you're working with a textbook or other secondary source readings, try to see how big points can break down into smaller and smaller points. (This same principle applies to your entire history course.) Connecting facts to the points they can support actually makes it easier for you to recall them on exams and papers, because it is easier for you to remember structures -- "chunks" -- of information than it is to remember lots of disconnected details. Your job is to learn the chunks, or understand how the specific bits of information you learn in class support larger points the instructor makes.

Examples of "chunking"

Let's consider an example from Bernardo's Western Civilization course. The instructor has been discussing the emergence of the feudal system of military obligation, and has presented three primary source examples.

Example 1: Medieval oath of fealty. During the middle ages, oaths of loyalty were so common that they took on standard forms. Here is one such conventional promise, which a noble would swear to his new overlord.

> "I do hereby promise that from this day forward I will be faithful and obedient to this my lord, as long as I shall live, and will aid him so far as I can to the best of my knowledge and power, both by my counsel and help, according to my office in all things, without fraud and evil intent and without any guile, seduction, or deception and without respect of any person; and neither . . . will I contrive anything to do hurt to his honour or the peace and tranquility and stability of Holy Church or the Kingdom entrusted to him, or will I . . . ever place any stumbling-block which could be contrary or harmful to his safety either in the present or the future. So may God help me and the protection of these Saints."
>
> SOURCE: *The Collected Historical Words of Sir Francis Palgrave*, R.H. Inglis Palgrave, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 7:777.

Example 2: Bayeux Tapestry scene 23, "Ubi Harold sacramentum fecit VVillelmo Duci" ("Where Harold made an oath to Duke William"). In 1066, French nobles under command of William of Normandy invaded England and took the crown from King Harold. This panel of the famous Bayeux Tapestry, which was crafted to tell the story of the Norman invasion of England, depicts the English lord Harold swearing an oath on holy relics. The panel

illustrates William's claim that Harold had sworn an oath of loyalty to him, and thus did not deserve to inherit the kingdom of England.

SOURCE: Wikimedia commons.

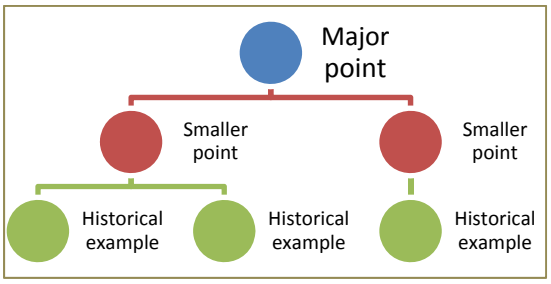
Example 3: Map of Anglo-Saxon England from the Burghal Hidage, a 10th-century list of fortresses and defensible points. Each of the noted places on the map owed military service to the king in instances of invasion (such as by the Danes). Based on traditional systems of levying troops such as the Anglo-Saxon fyrd*, the system represented here constituted a distinct alternative to feudal forms of obligation.*

SOURCE: Internet <http://thisisnotengland.co.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?t=140>

Bernardo's challenge is to think about how these examples connect to these parts to the whole. He thinks about the larger points these examples make, and then the smaller points and evidence in support of them. Making the effort to outline the structure and hierarchy of his readings is a

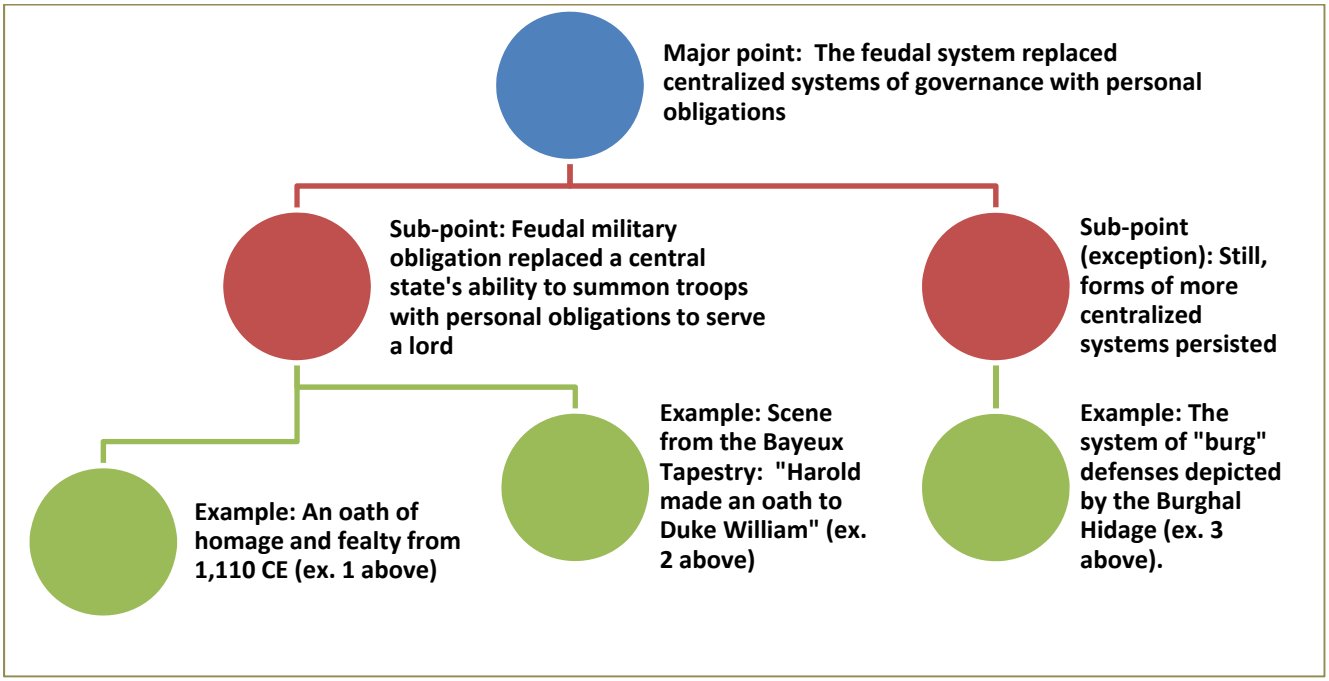
powerful device for committing its argument to his memory, and making it accessible for him to recall later.

Here is a diagram of how Bernardo might connect all these pieces:



Complex material becomes easier to recall when we "chunk" it, or come to understand it as a structure of ever smaller points supporting larger points.

Below is an example of a small chunk dealing with feudal obligations in medieval Europe.



Developing a structure of large and small points will help you immeasurably in retaining vital bits of course information.

"Chunking" practice

Let's see how structure in secondary readings works in a paragraph from a sample essay. This excerpt is taken from an article by Barbara Welter, on what she terms "The Cult of True Womanood," or the set of values associated with ideal female behavior among middle-class Americans living in the northern states before the Civil War. Read through and see if you can organize the ideas in the passage.

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. . . Without them . . . all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. Religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength. . . . Religion belonged to woman by divine right, a gift of God and nature. This "peculiar susceptibility" to religion was given her for a reason: "the vestal flame of piety, lightened up by Heaven in the breast of woman" would throw its beams into the naughty world of men. So far would the candle power reach that the "Universe might be enlightened, improved, and harmonized by WOMAN!!" She would be another, better Eve, . . . bringing the world back "from its revolt and sin." A popular poem by Mrs. Frances Osgood, "The Triumph of the Spiritual Over the Sensual" expressed just this sentiment, woman's purifying passionless love bringing an erring man back to Christ. Caleb Atwater, Esq., writing in The Ladies Repository, saw the hand of the Lord in female piety: "Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence." And Mrs. John Sanford... agreed thoroughly: "Religion is just what a woman needs. Without it she is ever restless and unhappy..." [These writers] spoke of religion as a kind of tranquilizer for the many undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was better to pray than to think.[2]

Here is a plausible way of organizing this excerpt:

Main concept: explaining the Cult of True Womanhood
4 virtues (piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity)
focus on piety or religion
- *general point: women's piety would help redeem the sinful world of men*
- *example 1: poem by Frances Osgood*
- *example 2: essay by Caleb Atwater*
- *example 3: words of Mrs. John Sanford*

We have just structured this small portion of Welter's essay. Does it help us predict what is to come? If Welter argues that the Cult embodied four main virtues, and this excerpt explores the first (piety), then perhaps next will come a discussion the other three virtues. The more we practice outlining our reading, the easier it will become to remembering main points. We will also get better at seeing the structure of historical arguments in all of our readings.

Finally, two good questions to ask when you get stuck

1. *The "as opposed to what" question*

[2] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

One of the biggest challenges to reading historical scholarship is simply not knowing enough to be able to confidently question what you are reading. Over time, you will come to appreciate that even the most authoritative-seeming authors are actually participating in a lively debate with other authors. *All academic history is explicitly or implicitly argumentative*. For example, when we read a historian arguing for the vitality of medieval science in western Europe, it helps to know that he may be writing against an older tradition of viewing this period as a "dark age" in which the light of learning had been nearly extinguished.

When you are having trouble understanding what is so special about a point an author makes, ask the question *as opposed to what?* When a scholar suggests that the Puritans did not all apply severe standards of dress or oppose social enjoyments, imagine the position this argument might speak against. In this instance, the scholar is challenging, or seeking to *revise*, an older tradition that painted the Puritans as joy-averse prudes. Even if you cannot answer the *as opposed to what?* question with surety, simply *imagining* the possibilities constitutes a key habit of mind for historical thinkers.

2. *The "so what?" question*

So what? is not an impertinent question to ask of your reading, regardless of the answer, because it helps you understand the significance of an author's argument. As with the *as opposed to what?* question, *so what?* asks us to speculate on what an author may be trying to say with a point that otherwise seems lacking in context or significance. If you read that emperors in Ming China forbade overseas trade by private individuals, or that pilgrims in medieval Europe took trips to the Holy Land in search of cures for their medical ills, the *so what?* question challenges you to understand what is at stake for the authors of those claims. Perhaps the Ming changes constituted a sharp break from the past, when the state actively supported trade. Perhaps understanding the medical nature of early medieval pilgrims will tell us much about how they thought of the body and how it could be cured of illness.

It can be frustrating to read claims and not understand their full significance. Speculating reasonably — with reference to your other course material and common sense — is another key historical habit of mind. Even if your speculation is not "right," you will be practicing a skill critical to making history.