

HOW TO READ A HISTORY TEXTBOOK

Whether you are reading a textbook for your major or for a general education class, these reading strategies will help you understand and retain information while making meaningful connections and observations about historical events.

Textbooks are **tertiary sources** (as opposed to primary and secondary sources). For help reading primary sources, see the UWL's "Analyzing Primary Historical Documents" resource.

STRATEGIES FOR READING HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

- 1. Identify Purpose** – Before reading, your goal is to preview the content and understand what information you need to gain while reading.
 - Preview the chapter or section by viewing the **text features** (bolded words, headings, charts, images, etc.) to gain a general idea of the topics you will read about.
 - Review the discussion questions at the end of the chapter to find what information you will need to gain as you read.
 - Recall any prior knowledge that you have about the topics. This will help you make connections as you read. History is full of connections!
- 2. Summarize and Think** – While reading, your goal is to understand the main ideas and retain information.
 - Read one section at a time to gain overarching themes and ideas.
 - Take notes after reading each section.
 - Summarize the main idea of the section using the key events and people.

Textbooks will include some details that are not as important to the main idea, so the level of detail that you take note of depends on your professor's expectations and your learning style.
 - Make connections to other historical events that you have learned about. You may find that the events you read about were directly caused by earlier events, or you may find that they mirror earlier themes.
- 3. Analyze** – After reading, your goal is to understand the overarching themes and analyze them.
 - Make sure all of the relevant questions are answered. If not, revisit the text or conduct more research.
 - Organize the ideas in your notes. If you've found some connections in the ideas that you have read, you may want to create charts, venn diagrams, or concept maps to visually organize these concepts.
 - Relate to what you have read, drawing on personal experiences to retain information.
 - Find themes of cause and effect, change and continuity, comparison, and value.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

A primary way to engage with what you are reading is to ask yourself questions about a passage as you go. Below is a list of questions to ask during each step of the reading process.

1. **Before Reading** – Ask yourself the following questions before you start reading:
 - a. What concepts should I understand after I finish reading?
 - b. What will the reading be about?
 - c. What do I know about this topic or topics related to it?
 - d. What am I curious to know about this topic?
 - e. What level of detail am I expected to remember?
 - f. Review the discussion questions at the end of the textbook’s chapter.

2. **While Reading** – Continue to ask yourself questions as you read:
 - a. What was the main idea or theme of this section?
 - b. What people and events directly relate to the main theme?
 - c. How is this similar to other historical events?
 - d. Did another prior event cause this to happen?
 - e. How can I see the effects of this event today?
 - f. How can I relate to these people and their experiences?
 - g. How are the ideas in this chapter interconnected? Do the economics, culture, and politics of the time period interact with each other?
 - h. Do these events mark a change or continuity from earlier times?
 - i. Were these events positive, negative, or a combination of the two? Why?
 - j. What is my opinion on these events? (e.g., Was this wrong? Could something have been done differently?)

3. **After Reading** – Consider the following questions to analyze what you have read:
 - a. What were the main ideas and events of the chapter?
 - b. How do the ideas I read about relate to each other?
 - c. Did I answer the discussion questions?
 - d. Did I answer my personal questions?
 - e. What other information do I need to complete my understanding?
 - f. How might this new information shape my perspective of other events?
 - g. Can I find hope or encouragement in the historical events I read about?
 - h. What do these events reveal about humans and God?

PRACTICE NOW