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Reading like a Historian: Discipline-specific reading tools for undergraduates

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Reading like a Historian: Discipline-specific reading tools for undergraduates

Summary

This workshop is designed to help teaching assistants teach historical reading skills. One of the great difficulties history graduate students face is how to approach historical skill building with their undergraduates. Undergraduate courses in history can be heavily reliant on knowledge-based lectures, while tutorial hours are spent ensuring that students have absorbed the appropriate information from lectures and readings. Graduate students routinely complain that students, even when they do the assigned readings, rarely identify the appropriate information in those texts. Since reading techniques differ between disciplines, the failure to identify critical information is especially prevalent when non-history students take history electives

Although all historians recognize the importance of historiography to their craft, it is a difficult concept to define. Historiography involves a set of practical skills (analyzing secondary sources for specific information) and conceptual discussions (situating scholarship in the larger field). In my experience, students learn how to deconstruct primary documents in undergraduate history classes, but are less able to do the same with academic writing.

Given that teaching assistants rarely have control over course readings, the activities in this workshop are designed to integrate course material. Mastering historical reading skills will allow students to make meaningful contributions to tutorials and will also help them manage the heavy reading load of a history degree. In the long term, it will encourage them to become critical readers in other aspects of their lives.

Keywords

Historiography, reading skills, history, secondary sources

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SUMMARY

This workshop is designed to help teaching assistants teach historical reading skills. One of the great difficulties history graduate students face is how to approach historical skill building with their undergraduates. Undergraduate courses in history can be heavily reliant on knowledge-based lectures, while tutorial hours are spent ensuring that students have absorbed the appropriate information from lectures and readings. Graduate students routinely complain that students, even when they do the assigned readings, rarely identify the appropriate information in those texts. Since reading techniques differ between disciplines, the failure to identify critical information is especially prevalent when non-history students take history electives

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this workshop participants will be able to:

- identify and discuss the key distinctions between practical and conceptual historiographical skills;

- explain the five key criteria of historiographical reading;
- assess the utility of different teaching strategies in a variety of undergraduate history class scenarios; and
- produce a classroom activity that involves historiographical analysis (based on a predetermined scenario).

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

DeRose, J. J. (2009). Back to the Future with Textbooks: Using Textbook Passages from the Past to Help Teach Historiography. *The History Teacher*, 42:2, 229-237.

DeRose's technique for teaching historiography uses textbooks to help students trace the development of historiographical thought in sources that are otherwise strongly narrative. Although this article is based on DeRose's teaching at the high school level, the assignments can easily be adapted to undergraduate courses by selecting appropriately advanced textbooks.

DeRose's textbook activity focuses on the construction of events in historical writing. To begin, students read textbook accounts of McCarthyism from the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1990s. Once they read accounts from each decade they: (a) compare and contrast the accounts from all decades; (b) identify patterns of interpretation; and (c) form conclusions about why interpretations change (or do not change) over time. De Rose also suggests that students might interview parents or professors about a particular historical event and then explain inconsistencies between written and oral accounts.

These exercises would not be difficult to perform in a tutorial setting and would offer an excellent opportunity for collaborative group work guided by the tutorial leader. A variation on this activity is provided in the Activities section of the Appendix.

Hoefflerle, C. (2007). Teaching Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students. *OAH Magazine of History*, 21, 40-44.

Hoefflerle argues that students need to question the textbooks they rely on so heavily. Historiography and critical thinking not only introduce students to the reality of the historical profession, but also show them how they can contribute to historical debate.

Hoefflerle advocates an approach where students break down readings into several categories: author, topic, thesis, evidence, theory and critical analysis. By beginning with the more simple categories, students build confidence as they move through the list. This method makes critical reading a more manageable task for undergraduates by providing a strategy for approaching difficult texts. Hoefflerle's five key criteria for deconstructing articles will be discussed in the Teaching Techniques portion of the workshop.

Ricot, R. (2010). Students rewriting Gibbon, and other stories: Disciplinary history writing. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 9:2, 169-184.

Ricot, a professor of history and a writing mentor at University College London, argues that the critical reading of secondary sources improves historical writing. Understanding how professional historians structure and describe historical "facts" is the first step to improved student work. Critical reading compels students to acknowledge and interact with the interpretive side of academic scholarship.

In Ricot's rewriting exercise, students identify the style of an individual historian and then rewrite the author's theses in their own words. Turning the students into historians encourages them to read their own arguments closely and to analyze the differences between their rewrites and those done by their peers. This exercise will be discussed in the Teaching Techniques portion of the workshop and will also be included in the Activities portion of the Appendix.

Pace, D. (2004). Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of the Process. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 98, 13-21.

Pace argues that undergraduate students are not adept at isolating significant elements in readings because they are not taught how to read properly. The most common mistake made by history students is focusing on memorizing facts, which results in their losing sight of the narrative. Pace describes history as a story and reminds his students that it is necessary to "understand the point of the story, not to memorize all of the details." How can we ask our students to read, he asks, if we neglect to tell them how to read in a discipline-specific way?

Pace identifies five selective criteria that professional historians use to analyze historical scholarship. When reading, historians:

1. bring to a text a series of questions that need to be answered and add other questions as they arise from the process of reading;
2. identify the central thesis and the subsidiary arguments that explain or qualify it;
3. distinguish between arguments and the evidence used to support them;
4. commit to memory the central and the subsidiary arguments; and
5. retain selected bits of evidence to help them understand the nature of the argument and ignore the rest.

The above-noted steps are rarely intuitive. Pace suggests several helpful activities, both individual and group based, to help students alter their reading patterns. Pace integrates these steps into students' historical reading through an exercise called "Modeling Reading History Selectively." This approach is based on the visual representation of the mental operations. This process will be discussed in the Teaching Techniques portion of the workshop and will also be included in the Activities section of the Appendix.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Duration (min)	Activity	Organization	Details
10	Introduction	Entire group	Participants will introduce themselves, the class they TA, and their experience with secondary source analysis as undergraduates. Was there any? Did they take a specific class? Does anything particularly helpful/unhelpful stand out?
10	Open Discussion	Entire group	What are the advantages/disadvantages to teaching

			<p>historiography to undergraduate students?</p> <p>These will be summarized on the board in two categories.</p>
20	Presentation: Thinking about Historiography	Instructor	<p>Discussion of the conceptual and practical aspects of historiographical thought.</p> <p>David Pace's 5 historical reading skills.</p> <p>Discussion of Bloom's taxonomy and how historiographical thinking forces undergraduate students to use their higher order thinking skills.</p>
10	Break	Break	Break
10	Teaching Techniques	Instructor	<p>This will be a short presentation describing practical teaching techniques that students can use in their tutorials to encourage historical reading. Some of these techniques will be drawn from DeRose, Hoefflerle, Ricot and Pace.</p>
10	Activity: Classroom situations	Small groups of participants	<p>Divide into small groups and solve a teaching problem.</p> <p>Each group will receive a scenario explaining the number of students, subject area and class level.</p> <p>Groups will brainstorm activities to analyze the source material for that assignment (see the</p>

			Scenarios section of the Appendix for details) Suggestions will be written on a large sheet of paper.
10	Debrief	Small groups of participants	Groups will present their scenario and their solution to it. Will comment on what other groups suggested and how effective these solutions are.
10	Conclusion and Questions	Entire group	Sum up the overall hour and a half and give students a handout summarizing the activities in the Teaching Techniques section as well as a bibliography of helpful literature.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Scenarios and Classroom Activities

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Scenarios and Classroom Activities

Scenarios:

Group 1: You are the teaching assistant for a first year class on World History. Your 20-person tutorial has just had a lecture and readings on the Industrial Revolution. One of their readings is a textbook section on the Industrial Revolution in Germany, the other an article on the textile industry in England. How might you use teach historiographical thought with these tools?

Group 2: You are a teaching assistant for a third year survey course on Canadian history. The professor has assigned the students in your 10-person tutorial two readings: one is a new textbook reading from a French-Canadian author about the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, and the other is an older textbook written by an English Canadian. What activities can you come up with for reading these two works critically?

Activities:

Reading Selectively:

This exercise teaches students that they need to isolate the thesis and most important supporting evidence from a text, not memorize each detail. The first part of the exercise will explain the activity to students. In the following section, they will apply the skills on their own.

1. Choose two passages from a historical text (preferably with a distinct topic sentence).
2. Put the first on an overhead or projector and ask the students to isolate the most important points.
3. After this discussion, show the passage again, but this time with the font size changed to indicate the importance of each section (the larger the text the more important the passage).

For example:

“The attacks on drunkenness penned by the likes of Philip

Stubbes were motivated by a religious desire to redefine

Englishness as part of a wider moral reformation. For Stubbes,

drunkenness was a feature of old, corrupt England: an England of not only licentious fairs but also sordid drinking dens. Every city, town and village, Stubbes complained, ‘hath abundance of alehouses, taverns and inns, which are so fraughted with malt-worms, night & day that you would wonder to se them ... swilling, gulling, & carousing from one to another, till never a one can speak a ready word.’

Indeed, from the earliest period of the Reformation alehouses

were identified as a particularly pressing problem, for both

moral and political reasons.

Nicholls, J. (2009). *The Politics of Alcohol: A history of the drink question in England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

4. Break students into smaller groups, give them the second passage, and see if they can isolate the important material by themselves.
5. Take up their answers as a group.

Source: (Pace, 2004).

Textbook comparison:

Comparing textbooks from different eras demonstrates the contextual side of historical writing. This is an important aspect of historical reading; students need to understand the external factors (society, culture, politics) that influence historical interpretation.

1. Locate three passages about the same event from different textbooks. It is best if there is variation here, especially in terms of decade of publication or the slant of the text (economic, cultural, political history etc.).
2. Divide the class into groups.

3. Have each group read one of the passages, summarize the point of view and approach, identify the passage/chapter in the text that best summarizes the major thesis of the book.
4. Discuss their responses as a class.

Source: (DeRose, 2009).

10 Minute Book Review:

This activity familiarizes students with evaluating books. They learn the skills to determine what type of historical book they are reading, and whether it will be useful to them. This practice encourages students to be more judicious in their choice of material for research essays.

1. Divide the class into groups of two.
2. Pass out several selected academic books so that each group has one.
3. It is best to choose a variety (economic, social, political, cultural and popular histories are good options).
4. Have the students deconstruct the text without reading any of the content.
5. They should be looking for: date of publication, place of publication, publisher, author's name, title and subtitle, chapter titles, book organization, references (the section at the back dealing with manuscript sources, primary sources, secondary sources etc.).
6. The students should then decide what this information tells them. What can the date and place of publication reveal? What about the title? What is specific/unspecific? Can they formulate the research question or problem that the author may have had in mind? What do the chapter titles say about how the author approached the problem? Do they think that the subject matter of the chapters is broad enough to explain the topic of the title? Is anything missing? What would they like to see/would they have included? Can they comment on the types of sources the author is using? What kind of history is this? In many cases, the inability to answer questions about sources will indicate that their book may not have been academic writing.
7. Get your students to switch books with another group and repeat the process.
8. At the end, have an open discussion with the class to see what their responses were for their initial books and what knowledge this information gave them. How was their analysis of the second book different?

9. Discuss why these skills might be useful?
 - a. Choosing appropriate library books for assignments.
 - b. Having a basic understanding for what the text is and what it can tell you from the beginning.
 - c. Choosing which sections of a book are helpful and determining which are not (reading selectively).

Article deconstruction

This exercise teaches students to deconstruct an academic article, looking for argument, supporting evidence, organization, and methodological technique. It encourages students to read selectively for relevant information.

1. Have the class read an article (either in class or in preparation for class – in the former case, choose a shorter article)
2. Once they have finished reading, divide them into small groups and have them identify:
 - a. thesis;
 - b. main supporting arguments;
 - c. sources; and
 - d. genre of history
3. Take up their responses as a class.

Authorial Voice:

This exercise encourages students to think about authorial voice. They deconstruct a passage from a historical text and then rewrite the main argument in their own words. This forces them to evaluate the presentation of their own arguments, including their organization and diction. It also demonstrates the interpretive nature of historical writing.

1. Choose one passage from a historical text.
2. Divide the class into groups of three.
3. Have the students identify the main argument of the passage.
4. As a group, have them rewrite the argument in their own words.
5. Discuss how their rewrites were different or similar. Why did they choose certain diction? Did their summaries all have similar meaning? Can they suggest reasons for variation?

Source: (Ricot, 2010).

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