

HINTS ON READING HISTORY BOOKS

While the most common forms of historical writing are narratives that tell specific stories, large and small, and biographies (another form of narrative), academic writing tends to be more analytical. This form of writing can be more challenging than narrative history, but it is relatively easy to come to terms with the various parts of an academic study in order to get command of it.

So apologies ahead of time for the length of these “hints,” but I think a quick read-through of these guidelines will go a long way to helping everyone get a useful handle on ANYthing we read in the next several years.

1ST, HERE ARE THE BASIC MODES OF HISTORICAL WRITING, both popular and academic, keeping in mind that these modes inevitably overlap. The examples are mainly from WTMA3 Book Club or Meet the Scholars sessions in the past.

Narrative: The traditional form of historical writing, in which the author tells the story of an episode, event, or epoch in history. The purpose is usually to relay the overall significance of the event, and the style tends to be descriptive as the author unfolds the story. Some of the best histories are largely narrative in form since stories form the *essential structure* of history.

Example = Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *TEAM OF RIVALS: THE POLITICAL GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN* (2006): a stunning narrative on Lincoln’s command of his contentious political allies.

Analytical: More abstract than the narrative, an analytical approach examines some aspect of an historical problem. The purpose of an analytical treatment is to assess the veracity of the evidence, the need for a variety of points of view, the possible importance of an event or development compared to another event or development, or the like; and the style tends to be intentionally objective, to best relay the intellectually aware voice of the author.

Example = Charles Postel, *THE POPULIST VISION* (2009): a topically rich discussion of this often misunderstood movement; and Robin Einhorn, *AMERICAN TAXATION, AMERICAN SLAVERY* (2008): a fresh take on the relationship between these two major subjects.

In fact, Postel's and Einhorn's works are also revisionist....

Revisionist: A revisionist study challenges the commonly held view of a subject, or one that is customarily asserted by historians. The term means to “re-see” and that is usually the purpose; while the style tends to be argumentative. Strongly (sometimes to the point of excess) argumentative revisions are called “polemics.”

Example = see “Analytical” above.

Methodological: A methodological approach focuses on some problem in researching a subject, either having to do with primary sources or with interpretation of sources. The purpose of a methodological study is usually to determine whether or not a particular source or sources are of any use, or whether or not historians can adequately interpret a particular problem; and the style can sometimes be quite personal. Methodological studies are more common in article than book form.

Example = Gary B. Nash, FORBIDDEN LOVE: THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF MIXED-RACE AMERICA (rev. ed., 2010): a lucid study of an often elusive topic.

Biographical/ prosopographical: Studies in which an individual life or group of lives (prosopography) form the centerpiece of the work: much akin to narrative history, although in recent years a more analytical approach to biography has been in vogue.

Examples = Gordon S. Wood, THE AMERICANIZATION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (2005); Joseph J. Ellis, FOUNDING BROTHERS: THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION (2002): both of these recent works combine traditional biography with focus on key main point.

2d, NOTE THAT AMERICAN HISTORY TENDS TO BE WRITTEN FROM ONE OF 2 PERSPECTIVES: CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT.

Because our history is so central to our identity and mission as a nation, American historians tend to write histories that either focus on “consensus” or “conflict” among American people regarding that identity and mission.

- A consensus-based study works with the understanding that common ideas, values, resources, or experiences tend to tie Americans together more than divide them. Good examples above = Kearns, Wood, and Ellis.
- A conflict-based study says the opposite: that contests over ideas, values, resources, or experiences tend to divide Americans as much as unite them. Good examples above = Postel, Einhorn, and Nash.

- Most popular American histories tend to focus on consensus; as do many academic studies. Conflict-style history is often harder to accomplish, because, whatever our differences, Americans tend to see themselves as a united people rather than a divided people, and past conflicts – even as huge a one as the Civil War -- are frequently homogenized into one narrative theme of American success.

It is certainly possible to produce history that combines these two styles, because of course agreement and disagreement – consensus AND conflict -- are aspects of any human endeavor. But in your broader reading you'll find that American historians tend to fall into one or the other category.

3rd, HERE ARE THE SIMPLE STEPS FOR TAKING COMMAND OF AN ACADEMIC STUDY:

1. BE MINDFUL OF THE SUBJECT OF THE BOOK.

- The subject is what the book is ABOUT; whereas the main point is what the author intends to SAY ABOUT the subject. The subject is the “given” of the book; by contrast the main point is the intellectually “active” part of the book, which needs to be “proven” or verified by the remainder of the study (see # 3).
- The subject (sometimes along with the main point) will be found in the title and subtitle (if any) of the book: see, for example, the full title of Doris Goodwin’s TEAM OF RIVALRS above, which summarizes the subject (Lincoln’s wartime Cabinet) and the main point (Lincoln’s political genius was in his work with his Cabinet). Or likewise, the full title for Gary Nash’s FORBIDDEN LOVE above, in which the subject is mixed-race America, and the main point is that the history of interracial love has been hidden in the larger American story.

2. DETERMINE THE SUBJECT’S MAIN SUBTOPICS:

- To get a further command of the subject, read through the chapter titles: these are summaries of the subtopics making up the subject as a whole.
- If not obvious in the title of the book, the subtopics will also provide the larger chronological and geographical scope of the book.

3. DETERMINE THE BOOK’S MAIN POINT IN GREATER DETAIL.

- The author’s statement of the main point (also known as the argument or thesis) will usually appear in the book’s preface, introduction, or prologue. In a narrative treatment, the main point is usually relatively “soft”; in more analytical treatments, it is usually

“harder.” But ALL histories, even biographies, have a main point: the author’s answer to a key historical or personal question, whether implicit (more often the case in narrative treatments) or explicit (more often the case in analytical, etc., treatments).

- To identify the main point, look in the introductory material (preface, prologue, introduction, etc.) for the statement that summarizes the key aim of the book, or that answers to the central question of the book. It can be but is not necessarily the last sentence. The main point may simply follow the phrase, such as “In conclusion...”, “The main point is...!”

4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN THEMES OF THE BOOK.

- All books also have main themes: conceptual categories into which the main point is divided. Authors may imbed these themes into the complexities of an introduction without making them very explicit: but it’s worth trying to determine main themes in an historical study, just as it’s worth developing main themes in teaching, to make the massive coverage and detail of any historical study or lesson plan more easily comprehensible.
- You also might try to determine: what kind of treatment is this (narrative, analytical, etc.), and is it consensus-based or conflict-based?

5. ASSESS THE SUCCESS OF THE BOOK’S ORGANIZATION, AND THE EXTENT OF ITS COVERAGE.

- The great bane of students is the detail in history, but of course, the detail is the evidence, and historians would have no “case” about anything if they didn’t provide evidence.
- But the usually very substantial amount of evidence in all historical studies can initially – at first reading – get in the way of taking command of the book.
- So, the easiest way to get command and be mindful of the book’s organization and various parts is to read the preface, introduction, or prologue, AND the conclusion, epilogue, or last chapter BEFORE reading the rest of the book. This will give you a strong sense of the goals and overall coverage of the book, and permit you to read it with greater attention to these items. Many historical studies do not have explicit conclusions: reading the last chapter or last part of it will do.
- You can also do a “quick read” through the whole book by reading the first sentence – topic sentence – of each paragraph, chapter by chapter. By the end of this experiment, you will have a true sense of what the author is aiming to do, BEFORE getting into the details – supporting evidence – of the study.

6. READ THE BOOK.