

# 2.d.

## Some Keys to Good Reading

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Three important questions to ask of secondary sources:

- **What does the author say?** That is, what is the author's central claim or thesis, and the argument which backs it up? The thesis of a history paper usually explains how or why something happened. This means that the author will have to (1) tell what happened (the who, where, when, what of the subject); (2) explain how or why it happened.
- **Why does the author say it?** Historians are almost always engaged in larger, sometimes obscure dialogues with other professionals. Is the author arguing with a rival interpretation? What would that be? What accepted wisdom is the author trying to challenge or complicate? What deeper agenda might be represented by this effort? (An effort to overthrow capitalism? To justify Euro-Americans' decimation of Native American populations? To buttress claims that the government should pursue particular policies?)
- **Where is the author's argument weak or vulnerable?** Good historians try to make a case that their conclusion or interpretation is correct. But cases are rarely airtight – especially novel, challenging, or sweeping ones. At what points is the author vulnerable? Where is the evidence thin? What other interpretations of the author's evidence is possible? At what points is the author's logic suspect? If the author's case is weak, what is the significance of this for the argument as a whole?

Broad approaches to essay reading:

- What is the general subject of the author's investigation?
- What are the central problems or questions the author is investigating?
- What is the solution or explanation the author offers?
- How does the author go about convincing us that the solution/explanation is correct?  
That is, what is the structure of the argument? What are the major points, and what minor points are subordinated under each major point?

What is the author's argument?

- C What is the thesis question?
- C What are the premises underlying it?
- C What is the thesis?

- C What is the “road map”; that is, given this thesis, what are the individual points the author will have to prove to make the thesis be true?
- C What assumptions has the author made which remain unaddressed?

There are two general steps to reading scholarship:

**Stage 1: Observation.** What is the author’s argument and how is it structured? *This is the first read through the piece. Your objective is merely to understand what the author is trying to do.*

**Stage 2: Evaluation.** Where is the argument particularly strong or weak? What about it is weak? *This is the second read and subsequence analysis of the piece. Your objective is to evaluate the author’s success in making her or his case.*

- Evaluating argument structure: What are the steps in the argument? How is the author breaking down sub-points? Why might the author be doing it this way? What other possibilities did the author not choose?
- Does the author do what the author sets out to do?
- Was what the author set out to do the right or a useful enterprise in the first place?