

I. Use Secondary Sources as...

As a collection of facts

Use a secondary source if you need to find a particular piece of information quickly. You might need to know, for example, when Frederick Douglass lived, in what year the telephone was invented or the diverse population living in California during the Gold Rush.

As a source of background material

If your interests are focused on one subject, but you need to know something about what else was going on at that time or what happened earlier, you can use a secondary source to find the background material you might need. For example, if you are writing about the *Declaration of Independence*, you should use a secondary source to help you understand the political viewpoints of the period.

As an interpretation

Since the facts do not speak for themselves, it is necessary for the historian to give them some shape and to put them in an order people can understand. This is called an interpretation. Many secondary sources provide not only information, but a way of making sense of that information. You should use a secondary source if you wish to understand how an historian makes sense of a particular event, person, or trend.

II. Using interpretations

One of the most important tasks in reading a secondary source is finding and understanding that particular author's interpretation. How does that particular author put the facts together so that they make sense?

Finding the interpretation

Good authors want to communicate their interpretation. Because the reason for writing a book or article is to communicate something to another person, a good author will make the interpretation easy to find.

In an essay...

In an essay, particularly a short one, an author will often state the interpretation as part of the thesis statement. The thesis statement is the summary of what the author is going say in the essay. The thesis statement is usually found at the end of the introductory section or in the conclusion.

In a book...

In a longer work, such as a book, the author will very likely have many thesis statements, one or more for each section or chapter of the book. The thesis for the book as a whole will often be found either in the introduction or in the conclusion. The thesis for individual chapters are often found in the first or last paragraph. Topic sentences of paragraphs will also often have important clues as to the author's interpretation.

It is often helpful, particularly if you are interested in the author's interpretation to "gut" a book: Read only the first and last chapters in their entirety; for all of the other chapters, read only the first and last

paragraphs. If this is a well written book, this should give you a fairly good idea of the author's point of view.

The importance of the interpretation

An interpretation is the how a historian makes sense of some part of the past. Like a good story, well done history reveals not only the past, but something about the present as well. Great historians help us to see aspects of the past and about the human condition which we would not be able to find on our own.

Historians often disagree on interpretations

Some facts are ambiguous. Historians ask different questions about the past. Historians have different values and come to the material with different beliefs about the world. For these and other reasons, historians often arrive at different interpretations of the same event. For example, many historians see the French Revolution as the result of beliefs in liberty and equality; other historians see the French Revolution as the result of the economic demands of a rising middle class. It is, therefore, important to be able to critically evaluate an historian's interpretation.

III. Evaluating an interpretation

The Argument

1. What historical problem is the author addressing?
2. What is the thesis?
3. How is the thesis arrived at?
 - a. What type of history book or article is it?
 - b. What historical methods or techniques does the author use?
 - c. What evidence is presented?
 - d. Can you identify a school of interpretation?
 - e. What sources are used?

Evaluation

1. Did the author present a convincing argument?
 - a. Does the evidence support the thesis?
 - b. Does the evidence in fact prove what the author claims it proves?
 - c. Has the author made any errors of fact?
2. Does the author use questionable methods or techniques?

3. What questions remain unanswered?
4. Does the author have a polemical purpose?
 - a. If so, does it interfere with the argument?
 - b. If not, might there be a hidden agenda?

The Debate

1. How does this book or article compare to others written on this or similar topics?
2. How and why do the theses differ?
 - a. Do they use the same or different sources?
 - b. Do they use these sources in the same way?
 - c. Do they use the same methods or techniques?
 - d. Do they begin from the same or similar points of view?
 - e. Are these works directed at the same or similar audience?
4. When were the works written?
5. Do the authors have different backgrounds?
6. Do they differ in their political, philosophical, ethical, cultural, or religious assumptions?

Material courtesy of: David W. Koeller, North Park University, Chicago, IL.