

The W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

The Intellectual Work & Events

HOW TO READ AN HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH

I. STEPS IN THE READING PROCESS [*Major Works* course notes (hispol track), ca 1997]

1. read the preface, introduction, table of contents to find out what the author's stated **purpose** is and how he/she intends to accomplish it.
2. read the footnotes and/or bibliography to see what kinds of **evidence** the author is drawing on and what other works in the field have preceded the one you are reading.
3. **read the entire book** through taking notes and/or making marginal comments as you proceed; remember to read the footnotes as you go along.
4. **reread** the parts you have underlined as well as your own comments. this should give you a pretty firm idea of what you do or don't understand about what you have read.

II. How to situate the book in various contexts.

1. to get some idea of the conversations or controversies in which the book may be involved **read several book reviews**. these can be located by consulting the BOOK REVIEW DIGEST for the years during which the book first appeared. you also should consult the major historical journals, all of which have indices, such as the AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY, THE JOURNAL OF SOUTHERN HISTORY and perhaps the relevant speciality journals such as the JOURNAL OF SOCIAL HISTORY, SOCIAL SCIENCE HISTORICAL REVIEW, PAST & PRESENT, or the relevant state historical journals. if the book is a particularly difficult one you might want to consult the reviews before you read the book so you have a better handle on the major issues.
2. **read the footnotes!** historians use footnotes to point you to the sources of their ideas and conclusions and to locate their work in relation to the work on the same subject that has already been done. footnotes also allow you to trace the author's steps if you do not find the conclusions or arguments very persuasive.
3. **read the bibliography!** one way to get some idea of what a particular monograph is attempting is to read ,or browse intensely, one or more of the works that the author is attempting to revise, surpass, refute, confirm, etc.
4. **check for symposia or reports on panels or conferences** if the book is particularly noteworthy or controversial it might be the subject of joint reviews, symposia ,panels at conventions or special conferences.

the dialogue generated in these formats can be extremely useful in highlighting the main issues and points of difference.

5. **browse the library shelves** to the left and right of where your book would be located to get some idea of the range of works on the same or similar topics.

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An Afterthought by Amilcar Shabazz (2017)

The above reading strategy may be viewed in relation to its mode of production—the late capitalist research university. It is well traced by the US/UK academic historical discipline as well as “identitarian” interdisciplines like American Studies, Gender Studies, Classics, etc. See <https://amst522.wordpress.com/2010/09/13/how-to-gut-a-book-or-the-best-advice-my-grad-school-advisor-ever-gave-me/> for a purported “graduate student” POV; or <http://www.artsweb.bham.ac.uk/NStanden/impchina/guttingabook.htm> qua a learning skill. What are your thoughts? Can you use any of it?

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[<https://blogs.umass.edu/wbdubois/2017/11/30/how-to-read-an-historical-monograph/>].
