

A POCKET GUIDE TO

Writing in History

SIXTH EDITION

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Introduction

WHY STUDY HISTORY?

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As any Harry Potter fan knows, the most boring class at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is History of Magic, taught by the dead (and "deadly dull") Professor Binns. The professor's droning lectures regularly send students into a stupefied trance, from which they emerge just long enough to scribble a few names or dates into their notes. Asked on one occasion about an unsolved mystery involving the school's past, Binns replies, "My subject is History of Magic. . . . I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends."¹ Students who take their first college history class with a sense of foreboding often think that real historians, like Professor Binns, are interested only in compiling lists of names, dates, places, and "important" events that happened sometime in the past. But history is much more than this. The historian's goal is not to collect "facts" about the past, but rather to acquire insight into the ideas and realities that shaped the lives of men and women of earlier societies. Some beliefs and institutions of the past may seem alien to us; others are all too familiar. But in either case, when we study the people of the past, what we are really learning about is the rich diversity of human experience. The study of history is the study of the beliefs and desires, practices and institutions, of human beings.

Why should we bother studying the past in our increasingly future-oriented society? There are as many answers to that question as there are historians. First, a thoughtful examination of the past can tell us a great deal about how we came to be who we are. When we study history, we are looking at the roots of modern institutions, ideas, values, and problems. Second, the effort we put into grappling

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 148–49.

with the worldviews of earlier societies teaches us to see the world through different eyes. The ability to recognize the meaning of events from a perspective other than our own is of inestimable value in our increasingly complex and multicultural society. Moreover, an awareness of various perspectives encourages students of history to engage in a critical analysis of their own culture and society and to recognize and critique their own assumptions. Finally, while historians, unlike Hogwarts' Professor Trelawney, don't have crystal balls with which to predict the future, an understanding of how past events have shaped the complex problems of our own times can help us make informed decisions about our future.

History is a complex discipline, and historians are a diverse group. They take different approaches to their material; they interpret events in different ways; they even disagree on such basic issues as whether and to what extent historians can be objective. These debates and disagreements amongst professional historians demonstrate the passion with which they approach their subject and ensure that the study of history will always remain fresh and exciting. Regardless of their approaches, however, all historians see writing as an important tool of inquiry and communication.

In addition to introducing you to some of the basic elements of what historians do, this manual provides guidelines for writing papers in the field of history at all levels, from first-year surveys to upper-division seminars. The vast majority of students enrolled in an undergraduate history course are not contemplating a career in history. Indeed, most history majors enter fields like law, government, business, and international relations. Nevertheless, the skills you will need to write an effective history paper—reading critically, thinking analytically, arguing persuasively, and writing clearly—will be useful to you wherever your academic interests take you and in whatever career path you choose to follow.

1a Historical questions

Historians come to their work with a deep curiosity about the past; to satisfy that curiosity, they ask some of the same questions detectives ask: *Who? What? When? Where?* and *Why?* Some of those questions are designed to elicit

“the facts” and are relatively easy to answer: *Who* was the emperor of Japan during World War II? *What* tools did eighteenth-century weavers use? *When* did the Vietnamese drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh? *Where* was the first successful French settlement in Canada? Other questions, however, are less easy to answer: *Who* was Jack the Ripper? *What* were the religious beliefs of the peasants of twelfth-century Languedoc? *When* did President Nixon learn about the Watergate break-in? *Where* did the inhabitants of the original settlement at Roanoke go? *Why* did the civilization of the ancient Maya collapse? Complex questions such as these have formed the basis of absorbing historical studies.

Historians also need to analyze relationships between historical facts. Many of the questions historians ask, for example, reflect their interest in understanding the *context* in which events occurred. For instance, a historian interested in nineteenth-century science would not simply describe great “advances,” such as Charles Darwin’s publication of his theory of evolution by means of natural selection. As we know from the heated debates of our own time, science takes place within a social and cultural context, and scientific ideas can have a deep impact on politics, religion, education, and a host of other social institutions. Therefore, the historian would also consider questions about historical context: What role did political issues play in the acceptance or rejection of Darwin’s theory? What other theories were current at the time, and how did they influence Darwin’s thinking? Why did some theologians find his ideas threatening to religion, while others did not? What impact did larger social, political, and intellectual movements and institutions have on the study of biology in this period? In other words, historians do not examine events in isolation; rather, they try to understand the people and events of the past in terms of the unique historical context that helped shape them.

As they explore the relationships between and among events in the past, historians also examine the *causes* of events. The historical events that you will be studying and writing about can almost never be traced to a single cause, and historians are careful to avoid simplistic cause-and-effect relationships as explanations for events. For example, although the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand is often cited as the event that precipitated World War I, no historian would argue that it *caused* the

war. Rather, historians try to uncover the complex multiplicity of causes that grow out of the historical context in which events occurred.

Historians also ask questions about the relationship between *continuity* (events, conditions, ideas, and so on that remain the same over time) and *change*. Many of the questions historians ask reflect this interest. For example, a historian who asks, “What impact did the Black Death have on the economic and legal status of European peasants?” is interested in examining the changes brought about by the bubonic plague against the backdrop of the ongoing institution of serfdom.

Finally, while the past doesn’t change, historians’ interests—and the questions they ask—do. Historians, like the people they study, are part of a larger context. They are guided in their choice of subject and in their questions by their own interests and by the interests and concerns of their societies. As they ask new questions, historians look at sources in new ways. For example, in the 1950s, many standard U.S. history textbooks described Christopher Columbus as a heroic explorer; modern historians, writing from a more global perspective, have focused attention on the impact Columbus’s explorations had on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Historians may even discover “new” sources—sources that had always existed but had been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. For example, the civil rights movement helped draw historians’ attention to the central role of minorities in U.S. history.

History is a vital and dynamic discipline. We will never know all there is to know about the past because we are constantly posing new questions, and our questions, in turn, help us see the past in new ways. The best way to enter the world of the historian is to ask as many questions as you can about the particular historical issues you are studying. As you seek the answers, be aware of the new and more complex questions that your answers raise, and let those new questions guide your exploration further.

1b How this manual can help you

When you do research and writing in a history course, you become a participant in historical debate. You devise questions about historical topics, seek answers to those

questions in historical sources, and come to your own conclusions. In the papers you write, you need to construct arguments about the conclusions you have reached and offer support for them. This manual will help you understand the process from start to finish.

In Chapter 2, you will learn about the wide variety of sources historians use and how you can get the most out of them. Since critical reading is an integral part of effective writing in history, Chapter 3 walks you through some typical reading and short writing assignments given in history courses. Chapter 4 presents the nuts and bolts of writing an effective history essay, including how to develop a thesis, construct an argument, and organize your paper, while Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to how to write a research paper. Since all of the writing you do in history relies on your use of sources, Chapters 6 and 7 are designed to help you use your sources effectively while avoiding plagiarism. In addition, Chapter 7 includes models for documenting the sources you are most likely to use in an undergraduate history paper. Finally, Appendix A lists additional guides to writing in history, while Appendix B provides a list of resources you might wish to consult while doing research.

History, like other arts and sciences, provides a window onto the ideas and beliefs, the actions and passions, of human beings. Reading and writing history entail above all an exploration of who and what we are. This manual is designed to aid you in such exploration and to help you discover the pleasures of studying history.

Working with Sources

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As you begin to think about historical questions, you will find that your search for answers will require you to explore a wide variety of sources. You will look at materials written in the period you are studying, and you will read books and articles written by modern historians. You may examine maps, photographs, paintings, and pottery. Ultimately, you may discover that you need to broaden your knowledge in a wide variety of areas, for history often takes its practitioners into all manner of related fields: literary criticism, art history, and archaeology; political science, economics, and sociology. In any case, you will need to learn how to work with the sources on which the study of history is based.

2a Identifying historical sources

To answer their questions, historians evaluate, organize, and interpret a wide variety of sources. These sources fall into two broad categories: primary sources and secondary sources. To study history and write history papers, you will need to know how to work with both kinds of sources.

2a-1 Primary sources

Primary sources are materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration, either as participants or as witnesses. They provide the evidence on which historians rely in order to describe and interpret the past. Some primary sources are written documents, such as letters; diaries; newspaper and magazine articles; speeches; autobiographies; treatises; census data; and marriage, birth, and death registers. In addition, historians often examine primary sources that are not

written, like works of art, films, recordings, items of clothing, household objects, tools, and archaeological remains. For recent history, oral sources, such as interviews with Vietnam veterans or Holocaust survivors and other such eyewitness accounts, can also be primary sources. By examining primary sources, historians gain insights into the thoughts, behaviors, and experiences of the people of the past.

Sometimes, you may be able to work directly with primary source materials, such as letters or manuscripts in an archive. More often, you will use print or electronic versions of sources, such as edited and/or translated collections of letters or documents, images of maps or paintings, or facsimiles. (For more on evaluating edited and translated sources, see p. 11.) In either case, primary sources provide windows into the past that allow you to develop your own interpretation, rather than rely on the interpretation of another historian.

2a-2 Secondary sources

Historians also use *secondary sources*: books and articles in scholarly journals that comment on and interpret primary sources. Secondary sources are extremely useful. Reading secondary sources is often the simplest and quickest way to become acquainted with what is already known about the subject you are studying. In addition, examining scholarly books and articles will inform you about the ways in which other historians have understood and interpreted events. Reading a variety of secondary sources is also the best way to become aware of the issues and interpretations that are the subject of controversy and debate among professional historians, debates in which you, as a student of history, are invited to participate. In addition, the bibliographies of secondary sources can direct you to primary sources and additional secondary sources that you might find useful.

As valuable as secondary sources are, you should never base a history paper on them alone, unless, of course, you are writing a historiography paper (see 3b-6). Whenever possible, you should work from primary sources, studying the events of the past in the words of people who experienced, witnessed, or participated in them.

2a-3 Primary or secondary? The changing status of a source

While the definitions provided above seem fairly straightforward, it is not always easy to determine whether a particular text is a primary source or a secondary source. This is because the status of a source as primary or secondary does not depend on how old the source is, but rather on the historical question you are asking. For example, if you are writing about the reign of Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, written in the early second century CE, would be a *secondary* source because Suetonius was not a witness to the events he describes. If, however, you are writing about the debates among second-century Romans about the use and abuse of imperial power, Suetonius's work would be a *primary* source. Thus, the status of a source as primary or secondary depends on the focus of your research.

Note: How you access a source does not affect its status as a primary or secondary source. You can find both primary sources (such as collections of letters, newspapers, and photographs) and secondary sources (such as journal articles and books) in your library; you can also find both online. For example, *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, published by Cambridge University (<http://darwin-online.org.uk>), includes facsimiles of Darwin's notebooks, letters, and other original documents that would be considered primary sources. Similarly, many scholarly articles, which originally appeared in print journals, can also be accessed through electronic databases or archives such as JSTOR. (For more information about electronic databases, see 5c-4 and Appendix B.) Whether you access such articles in print or online, these are secondary sources.

2a-4 Uses of primary and secondary sources

Both primary and secondary sources can provide valuable information; however, they provide different kinds of information. Primary sources allow you to enter the lives and minds of the people you are studying. The documents people wrote—sermons and wills, novels and poems—and the things they made—music and movies, knife blades and buttons—bring you into direct contact with the world of the past. Secondary sources, in contrast,

are written by historians who can provide a broader perspective on the events of the past than the people who actually participated in them since they have more information about the context and outcome of those events, an awareness of multiple points of view, and access to more documents than any single participant. In studying nineteenth-century communes, for example, primary sources such as diaries, letters, or items that commune members produced and used can provide firsthand information about the thoughts, feelings, and daily lives of the people who lived in such communities. Primary sources would be less useful, however, in examining the larger sociological effects of communal living. To get a better understanding of those effects, secondary sources in which historians examine several such communities over time, or study the ways in which contemporary outsiders viewed communes, might prove more useful. In your own work, you will need to use both primary and secondary sources, always keeping in mind what kinds of information each of those sources can tell you about a topic.

2b Evaluating sources

If primary sources always told the truth, the historian's job would be much easier—and also rather boring. But sources, like witnesses in a murder case, often lie. Sometimes they lie on purpose, telling untruths to further a specific ideological, philosophical, personal, or political agenda. Sometimes they lie by omission, leaving out bits of information that are crucial to interpreting an event. Sometimes sources mislead unintentionally because the author's facts were incomplete, incorrect, or misinterpreted. Many sources are biased, either consciously or unconsciously, and contain unstated assumptions; all reflect the interests and concerns of their authors. Moreover, primary sources often conflict. As a result, one of the challenges historians face in writing a history paper is evaluating the reliability and usefulness of their sources.

Like primary sources, secondary sources may contradict one another. Several historians can examine the same set of materials and interpret them in very different ways. Similarly, historians can try to answer the same questions by looking at different kinds of evidence or by using different methods to gather, evaluate, and interpret

evidence. To get the most out of your reading of secondary sources, you will need to study a variety of interpretations of historical events and issues.

You can find general advice about critical reading in Chapter 3 (see pp. 20–23); the following sections provide specific suggestions for evaluating both primary and secondary sources.

2b-1 Evaluating primary sources

Since primary sources originate in the actual period under discussion, we might be inclined to trust what they say implicitly. After all, if the author is an eyewitness, why should anyone doubt his or her word? Alternatively, we might lean toward dismissing primary sources altogether on the grounds that they are too subjective; as any police investigator could tell you, eyewitnesses see different things and remember them in different ways. In fact, historians steer a middle ground between these two approaches. Although primary sources comprise the basic material with which they work, historians do not take the evidence provided by such sources simply at face value. Like good detectives, they evaluate the evidence, approaching their sources analytically and critically.

Historians have developed a variety of techniques for evaluating primary sources. One such technique is to compare sources; a fact or description contained in one source is more likely to be accepted as trustworthy if other sources support or corroborate it. Another technique is to identify the author's biases. For example, the historian Polydore Vergil asserted in his book *Anglica Historia* that King Richard III killed his nephews. Since Vergil was a contemporary of Richard III, you might accept his account at face value, unless you were also aware that the book was commissioned by King Henry VII, an enemy of Richard III who had organized a rebellion against him, killed him in battle, and seized his throne. Taking this fact into consideration, you would want to approach Vergil's work with a more critical eye, considering whether his loyalty to his employer led to any bias in his history. Historians also read their sources carefully for evidence of internal contradictions or logical inconsistencies, and they pay attention to their sources' use of language, since the adjectives and metaphors an author uses can point to hidden biases and unspoken assumptions.

Tips for Writers

Questions for Evaluating Text-Based Primary Sources

- Who is the author?
- When was the source composed?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the purpose of the source? (Note that some primary sources, such as letters to the editor, have a central theme or argument and are intended to persuade; others, such as census data, are purely factual.)
- How do the author's gender and socioeconomic class compare to those of the people about whom he or she is writing?
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?
- What biases are detectable in the source?
- Was the original text commissioned by anyone or published by a press with a particular viewpoint?
- How do other contemporary sources compare with this one?

Special considerations for editions and translations

- Is the source complete? If not, does the text contain an introductory note explaining editorial decisions?
- If you are using a document in a collection, does the editor explain his or her process of selection and/or translation?
- Are there notes introducing individual documents that provide useful information about the text?
- Are there footnotes or endnotes that alert you to alternate readings or translations of the material in the text?
- Are you using an edition or translation that most accurately reflects the current state of scholarship?

Thinking about editions and translations. As an undergraduate, you will probably not have the opportunity that professional historians do to work with original documents in their original languages. Instead, you will likely be relying on published, translated editions of primary sources or, increasingly, on documents posted on the Internet.

Using modern editions of sources in translation is an excellent way to enter into the worldview of the people you are studying. Be aware, however, that any edited text reflects, to some extent, the interests and experiences of the editor or translator. For example, the process by which

Tips for Writers

Questions for Evaluating Nonwritten Primary Sources

For artifacts

- When and where was the artifact made?
- Who might have used it, and what might it have been used for?
- What does the artifact tell us about the people who made and used it and the period in which it was made?

For art works (paintings, sculpture, etc.)

- Who is the artist and how does the work compare to his or her other works?
- When and why was the work made? Was it commissioned? If so, by whom?
- Was the work part of a larger artistic or intellectual movement?
- Where was the work first displayed? How did contemporaries respond to it? How do their responses compare to the ways in which it is understood now?

For photographs

- Who is the photographer? Why did he or she take this photograph?
- Where was the photograph first published or displayed? Did that publication or venue have a particular mission or point of view?
- Are there any obvious details such as angle, contrast, or cropping that suggest bias?

For cartoons

- What is the message of the cartoon? How do words and images combine to convey that message?
- In what kind of publication did it originally appear (newspaper, magazine, etc.)? Did that publication have a particular agenda or mission?
- When did the cartoon appear? How might its historical context be significant?

For maps

- What kind of map is this (topographical, political, military, etc.)?
- Where and when was the map made? What was its intended purpose?
- Does the map contain any extraneous text or images? If so, what do they add to our understanding of the map itself?

For sound recordings

- Who made the recording and what kind of recording is it (music, speech, interview, etc.)?
- Was the recording originally intended for broadcast? If so, why was it broadcast and who was the intended audience?

For video and film

- What kind of film is this (documentary, feature, etc.)?
- Who is the director, producer, and screenwriter for the film? Have they made other films to which you can compare this one?
- Who is the intended audience? Why was the film made?
- Does the film use particular cinematic techniques that convey a particular mood or tone? (For more on analyzing film, see 3b-4.)

the editor of a document collection selects which documents to include and which to leave out involves interpretation: the collection, as it appears in print, reflects how the editor has understood and organized the material and what he or she sees as significant. Similarly, excerpts from long documents can be useful in introducing you to the basic content and flavor of a document, but it is important to note that in the process of choosing excerpts, the editor of a document is making a judgment about what aspects of the source are important. You should read the whole source, if possible, rather than excerpts, in order to understand the significance of the entire document and the context of any portions of the source that you wish to discuss or quote. Finally, translation always involves decisions about word choice and grammar that can range from inconsequential to very significant.

Note: Often, the introduction to an edited volume, or the short headnotes that introduce individual texts in a collection, will not only provide useful background information about the text but also alert you to the editor's choices and intentions.

Primary documents require both careful and critical reading in order to be effective research sources. When you analyze a primary source, keep in mind the questions in the Tips for Writers box on page 11.

Thinking about nonwritten primary sources. Although historians work mainly from written sources, they also use a wide variety of nonwritten materials, including works of art, photographs, maps, and audio and video recordings. When dealing with nonwritten primary sources, you should consider the same questions about author, audience, and context that are outlined in the Tips for Writers box on page 11, while adding some questions from the Tips for Writers box on pages 12–13 that are specific to the type of source you are considering.

Evaluating primary sources: an example. In a letter written to Sheik El-Messiri in 1798, Napoleon expresses the hope that the sheik will soon establish a government in Egypt based on the principles of the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam. Those principles, according to Napoleon, "alone are true and capable of bringing happiness to men."¹ Should we assume, on the evidence of this letter, that Napoleon believed in the truth of Islam? A historian might ask, "Do we have any other evidence for Napoleon's attitude toward Islam? What do other primary sources tell us about Napoleon's attitude toward religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism? Do any other primary sources contradict the attitude toward Islam expressed in Napoleon's letter to the sheik?" In other words, "How accurately and to what extent can this source answer questions about Napoleon's religious beliefs?" In addition, historians try to understand or interpret their sources even if those sources do not offer the best or most accurate information on a certain topic. As it happens, Napoleon did not believe in Islam. This does not mean, however, that his letter to the sheik has no value. Instead, a good historian will ask, "Under what circumstances did Napoleon write this letter? Who was Sheik El-Messiri, and what was his relationship to Napoleon? What does this letter tell us about Napoleon's willingness to use religion to his political advantage?" Thus, to write about historical questions, you will need to know how to approach many different kinds of primary sources and ask appropriate questions of them. (For more on writing about primary sources, see Chapters 3 and 4.)

1. Napoleon Bonaparte, "Letter to the Sheik El-Messiri," in *The Mind of Napoleon: Selection from His Written and Spoken Words*, 4th ed., trans. and ed. J. Christopher Herold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 104.

2b-2 Evaluating secondary sources

Reading secondary sources helps us understand how other historians have interpreted the primary sources for the period being studied. Students sometimes hesitate to question the conclusions of established scholars; nevertheless, as with primary sources, it is important to read secondary sources critically and analytically, asking the same questions you ask of primary sources. Evaluate a secondary source by asking the critical questions listed in the Tips for Writers box on page 16. (For more on critical reading, see 3a.) In addition to the critical questions listed in that box, it is especially important to do the following when you work with a secondary source:

Consider the implications of the publication date. If it is important that you know the most recent theories about a historical subject, pay special attention to the publication dates of the sources you are considering. A 2000 article reviewing theories about the construction of Native American burial mounds may contain more recent ideas than a 1964 review. Do not assume, however, that newer interpretations are always better; some older works have contributed significantly to the field and may offer interpretations that are still influential. (As you become more experienced in historical research, you will be able to determine which older sources are still useful.) Moreover, older sources might offer a historical perspective on how interpretations of an issue or event have changed over time, which is particularly important if you are writing a historiographic essay (see 3b-6).

Evaluate the logic of the author's argument. Any book or article makes an argument in support of a thesis. (For detailed information on what a thesis is, see 4c; for a discussion of how the thesis relates to the argument of a paper, see 4d.) Once you have identified the author's thesis, you should evaluate the evidence he or she uses to support it. You may not be in a position to judge the accuracy of the evidence, although you will build expertise as you continue to read about the subject. You can, however, evaluate the way in which the author uses the evidence he or she presents. You might ask yourself whether the evidence logically supports the author's point. For example, Margaret Sanger, who founded the American Birth Control League in 1921, was also involved in the U.S. eugenics

movement, which advocated, among other things, for the sterilization of individuals deemed “mentally incompetent.” This, however, does not justify the conclusion that *all* early-twentieth-century birth control advocates favored eugenics. Such an assertion would be a logical fallacy known as a *hasty generalization*.

You should also ask whether the same facts could be interpreted in another way to support a different thesis. For example, G. Stanley Hall, an early-twentieth-century American psychologist, amassed evidence that demonstrated a correlation between a woman’s educational level and the number of children she had: Women who attended colleges and universities had fewer children than their less educated sisters. From this fact, he concluded that higher education caused sterility in women.

Tips for Writers

Questions for Evaluating Secondary Sources

- Who is the author? What are his or her academic credentials? (You will often find information about the author in the preface of a book; journals sometimes include authors’ biographies, either on the first page of the article or in a separate section.)
- When was the text written? (On the importance of publication dates, see p. 15.)
- Who is the publisher? Is the text published by a scholarly press or a popular one? (For more information on scholarly and popular presses, see p. 17.)
- Who is the intended audience for the text (scholars, students, general reading public, etc.)?
- What is the author’s main argument or thesis? (For more on identifying the author’s thesis, see p. 22.)
- Does the author use primary sources as evidence to support his or her thesis? Is the author’s interpretation of the primary sources persuasive?
- Is there primary source evidence that you are aware of that the author does not consider?
- Does the author contradict or disagree with others who have written on the subject? If so, does he or she acknowledge and effectively address opposing arguments or interpretations?
- Do the footnotes/endnotes and bibliography reference other important works on the same topic?
- Does the author build his or her argument on any unsubstantiated assumptions? (See pp. 15–17.)

A modern historian looking at the same evidence might conclude that education allowed women to become economically independent, freed them from the necessity of forming early marriages, and allowed them to pursue careers other than raising children.

Another consideration is whether the cause-and-effect relationships described in a source are legitimate. It may be true that event A happened before event B, but that does not necessarily mean that A caused B. For example, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon. The following winter was particularly harsh in the United States. We should not conclude, however, that the lunar landing caused a change in weather patterns. This would be a *post hoc* fallacy, from the Latin *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this).

Finally, consider how the author deals with any counterevidence. (See 4d-2 for a discussion of counterevidence.)

Distinguish between popular and scholarly sources. If you consult secondary sources for your paper, it is important that you use scholarly, rather than popular, sources. Scholarly sources are written by experts in the field; usually, they are peer-reviewed—evaluated by other scholars—before being published. To determine whether a secondary source is scholarly or popular, consider the following questions:

- Does the author have academic credentials?
- Does the book or article have notes, a bibliography, and other academic apparatus?
- Is the source published by an academic press?
- Does the book or article analyze and interpret primary sources or the work of other scholars?

If you are still not sure whether a book or article you want to use is an appropriate secondary source, consult your professor or a reference librarian.

Note: While popular magazines are not appropriate *secondary* sources, they can be excellent *primary* sources for certain research topics. You might, for example, consult back issues of *Time* magazine in order to explore how the news media covered the collapse of the Soviet Union, or examine the advertisements in *Good Housekeeping* for a paper on women’s economic importance in the period between the two world wars.

2b-3 Evaluating online sources

As noted above, the Internet provides ready access to both primary and secondary sources. Editions of a wide variety of written primary sources (letters, treatises, government publications, even whole books) are available on the Internet, as are cartoons, photographs, images of antique maps, and other nonwritten primary sources. (For a list of some databases containing primary sources of interest to historians, see Appendix B.) If you are looking for secondary sources, historians may publish their research online in electronic journals like the *E-Journal of Portuguese History* (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/); in addition, digitized versions of countless scholarly articles are available in electronic databases such as *JSTOR: The Scholarly Journal Archive* (<http://www.jstor.org/>), which scans and archives a wide variety of scholarly print journals. (For a list of useful electronic sources, see Appendix B.)

Web sites maintained by universities, museums, government agencies, and other institutions can be a gold mine for students whose access to large research libraries is limited. Making effective use of the Internet as a research tool, however, requires you to anticipate and avoid the special problems that it presents.

The most significant difficulty you may encounter when trying to evaluate a source accessed online is determining its credibility. When working with such a source, first determine if it has a print or real-life equivalent. Is it an article from a journal that is published in print? Is it an artifact that resides in a museum? If the source actually exists in physical form, you can refer to the Tips for Writers box on pages 12–13 to help you study and evaluate it. If, however, the source exists only online, you must use extra caution in evaluating it. This is because, while articles in scholarly journals and books from academic presses are carefully reviewed by other scholars in the field, anyone with Internet access can create a Web site or a blog. You should also be aware that many popular online resources are not appropriate sources for scholarly research. For example, *Wikipedia*, the widely used online encyclopedia, is comprised of entries written largely by anonymous authors. The entries are not peer-reviewed; moreover, anyone can modify a *Wikipedia* entry. Therefore, even though many of its entries may be informative

and accurate, *Wikipedia* cannot be considered a reliable academic source.

The questions in the Tips for Writers box below will help you determine whether an online source is reliable. In general, the most worthwhile sites with the most accurate sources will probably have a scholarly affiliation. You can find reputable sites by consulting your professor or a reference librarian, or by browsing Appendix B.

Tips for Writers

Questions for Evaluating Online Sources

- Is the author's identity clear? If so, what are his or her academic credentials? Does the author list an academic degree? Is he or she affiliated with a college or university? Are there other Web sites that provide additional information about the author?
- Does the author provide evidence for his or her assertions, such as citations and bibliographies? Are the sources up to date? Are the sources for statistics included?
- Is the site affiliated with an academic institution, press, or journal? The Web address—or URL—can provide some clues to such affiliations. If *.edu* or *.gov* appears in the address, it has been posted by an educational or governmental institution, which should give you a greater degree of confidence in the material it contains.
- Is the site sponsored by a particular organization? (Look for *.org* in the URL.) Do you know anything about the interests and concerns of the person or group that publishes the site? (Check the home page or click on "About" to find a mission statement.) Does the organization seem biased?
- Does the site allow users to add or change content? If so, the site cannot be relied on to provide accurate information, even if it includes notes, references to academic sources, or useful links. (This is the case, for example, with *Wikipedia* articles, which often include scholarly apparatus but can be altered by any user.)
- What is the purpose of the site? Is it designed to inform? Persuade? Sell a product?
- Does the information on the site coincide with what you have learned about the subject from other sources?
- Has the site been updated recently?
- Does the site contain useful links to other sites? Are the linked sites affiliated with reputable institutions or persons? If you are still unsure if an online source is reliable, it is best to consult your professor or a reference librarian.