

How to analyze a scholarly article

Get up a head of STEAM: Survey, Thesis, Evidence, Argument, Motive.

Reading works of history for the purpose of analysis is not like reading a novel. It requires that you, the reader, develop a set of tools that allow you to regard texts as active reader—even as a skeptic—rather than as a consumer.

Survey

Begin by skimming the article, looking for the answers to the following questions:

- How is the article put together?
- Does it begin with one or more paragraphs that present the article's subject and its thesis, foreshadow its conclusions, and suggest why the author wrote it?
- Does it begin with a single, telling anecdote that becomes the starting-point for a broader examination of the topic?
- Does it follow a traditional story-telling form?
- Is it organized by topics or subthemes?
- Is explanation and interpretation found throughout the text, or does the author reserve it for a separate section of the article, usually the conclusion?

Thesis

Identify the thesis. Every good history article, and term paper, has one. A thesis is the main argument or explanation of a work of history. Each article should have a controlling argument, but there may be several sub-arguments in support of the thesis. If there are, identify them, too.

Remember. even though the facts an author discovers during research must guide the thesis, historians may interpret the same facts in somewhat different ways.

Evidence

Primary sources. What kinds of primary sources does the author use to make his or her case? (Read the footnotes!)

- If the author uses many kinds of primary sources, characterize them as categories of documents. Does the author rely on one or two key texts? If so, characterize them. For more detail on evaluating primary sources, see the separate handout on this topic.
- Does the author make effective use of his or her sources to enliven the article? For example, does the author use vivid quotations that give the reader a sense of the characteristics of the document being quoted or the special point of view of the document's author?
- Does the author include visual materials? Are these used as primary evidence or simply as illustrations—for example, to show what someone looked like?

Secondary sources.

- Does this work make use of published research by other historians? How is that research used? Does it add contextual or supporting information to the author's argument? Is it used by the author to distinguish his or her own work from the conclusions of others?

Argument

This is the information the author presents to convince the reader of the validity of his or her thesis. Historians have to select information that is pertinent.

- What does the author have to tell the reader to create a story that makes sense and supports the conclusion? Does the author provide enough information to convince you, the reader?
- Can you identify any lapses in logic that are evident even to someone who is not an expert in the field?
- Is the author unable to answer the questions he she poses because the evidence simply doesn't exist? How does the author handle that particular problem?

Motive for Writing

- Why did the author write this article?
- Does he/she claim to be breaking new ground and/or adding missing information to an existing historical narrative?
- Is he/she disagreeing with a prevailing interpretation of historical events or qualifying an existing interpretation?

Worksheet for analytic reading
Fill this out as you read.

Full bibliographical citation:

Structure of article:

Thesis:

Evidence:

Primary sources:

Secondary sources:

Argument:

Motives for writing the article: