for instance, including historically specific resonances, is an important part of the historian's toolkit. It is important not so much for its own sake as because it enables the reader to think laterally, to move in their imagination from text to text and from texts to contexts. Reconstructing the circumstances of a given source's production requires great skill. Careful textual analysis is necessary but by no means sufficient for doing so. The source's maker, their situation, including the pressures and structural constraints upon them, all need to be considered. Legal historians, for example, have been assiduous in pointing out that court records need to be critically assessed in just this way. All one's knowledge of a specific historical situation is mobilised in setting the source in its context of production, which has to be done in order to appreciate both its fruitfulness and its limitations for a particular project. These skills come from practice, from constantly checking and comparing different sources, and from familiarity with the particular historical situation that gave birth to them. In this way, yet again, we see that skills and content are closely connected.

Most sources are, as I have already emphasised, mediations, the products of complex minds, composed of conscious and unconscious dimensions. No sources are transparent records of a past situation, not even archaeological fragments. So historians need to be able to imagine the kinds of mediations at work in any given artefact, and I have suggested some of the means – textual and contextual – by which they do so. The problem is that there are a number of different possible approaches here, some of which are simply incompatible: there is no one 'historical method', just as there is no single method of textual analysis. The differences stem from fundamental assumptions, for example, about human nature. The language I have used and the examples I have given – metaphor, unconscious, mediation, and so on – already indicate a particular view (one I happen to think is well grounded), but many historians feel uncomfortable with talk of the unconscious, a situation which exposes profound disagreements about human nature and its study which cannot be resolved. It is essential to be open about these disagreements and to chart the exact ways in which they affect historical work. Taking notice and critically evaluating are *skills*, whereas claims about human nature are *beliefs*. Thus we can agree that an ability to analyse texts and objects critically is a fundamental historical skill, but may fail to agree on precisely what the analysis should consist of, or on what its founding assumptions should be. Are human beings the same at all times and places or not? Is self-interest their main motivating factor? Do historians need to think about the unconscious? On the answers to such questions will depend the detailed manner in which sources are interpreted. Skills and world views are intimately entwined, but by no means identical.

INTERPRETATION AND SKILL

If this seems complicated, questions of interpretation are yet more so, although again it is possible to summarise the skills required fairly briefly.[17] They include: using historical materials and ideas in a coherent argument,

showing their significance, especially in the light of other accounts, making convincing, plausible claims based upon research findings, and employing concepts, theories and frameworks appropriately. These are dependent on other skills: clear, logical and evocative writing, critical reading, making connections and the ability to see patterns and links, that is, to think laterally, integrating different kinds of materials. These are complex and subtle skills, and in so far as they can be taught, it is by the power of positive and negative examples. Yet interpretation is largely a matter of taste, and I use the word 'taste' advisedly to indicate that personal preferences are involved. These can be explained partly by the interpreter's training, politics and past experience, and they need not be completely idiosyncratic – a preference for a certain style of history can be shared by a number of people. The skills required for generating compelling historical interpretations are intricate and cannot be presented in terms of formulae. It does not follow, however, that they are mysterious. What follows is that they are embedded in the practice of history, not set apart from it, and can best be evaluated through results.

Perhaps the idea that there exists *a* historical method, along the lines of scientific method, is appealing because it appears to simplify questions of interpretation. Indeed the very notion of a method emphasises the gathering rather than the interpretation of materials. As we know, 'scientific method' is something of a fiction, since there are many methods used in the production of the kind of knowledge called 'science'. And so there are in history. It seems implausible, in any case, that a field as complex and diverse as history could have one unifying method. I would argue that the most important act historians perform is that of writing, because it is through writing that their disparate ideas are integrated into a single whole. Historical ideas, accounts and claims are apprehended by others via the written, and to a lesser extent the spoken, word. Writing is the foremost act of interpretation. As we saw in chapter 6, a sense of the past may be communicated by many means, yet *within* the discipline of history texts are the principal means of communication. It is curious then that the practice of history has been identified much more with the archive than with its results: with a privileged repository of sources rather than with historical interpretation in written form. This displacement requires careful consideration.[18]

THE CULT OF THE ARCHIVE

There is no doubt that there is a considerable cult of the archive among many historians. It is where one cuts one's teeth, develops identifications with the 'raw' materials, lodges claims to originality and, to a degree, inhabits another world. What is implied by invoking this notion of 'the archive'? It certainly involves the authority of collections of unpublished sources, which are imagined as closer to their originating situations, that is, less mediated, when they are in an archive. 'The archive' implies a kind of intimacy with particular aspects of the past that are more personal, individual, private, and hence worth looking at precisely because they concern 'real life'. There are, in fact, many different kinds of archives, and it will be worth

tracking changes in attitudes in the next few years as more and more public archives are making records available on the internet. The love letters of a famous person, the confidential minutes of high-level political meetings, witness statements to a court, all share the qualities I have described, despite being distinct types of sources and typically located in distinct types of organisation. Many archives bear witness to the manner in which major areas of administration functioned and interacted with their constituencies. In these contexts quite separate social groupings come together – colonial administration would be an excellent example – and touch each other at pressure points, such as death, crime, political insurrection, dire poverty, and so on. Furthermore, much archival material can be understood in terms of stories. This is especially true of legal records, and hence they seem to offer a seduction into past worlds. Such narratives are recognisable types, they follow the patterns of contemporary fictional work, and hence they are particularly appealing. The use of familiar, attractive narratives becomes an issue for historians if, in writing up their research, they seek to trade on or reconstruct stories uncritically. However delicious, they should not be glamorised or used as substitutes for analysis. The entrancing stories in the archives are quite distinct from the historical arguments in which they will be deployed. Evidently there are many different kinds of archives: local, regional and national, personal, institutional, and so on; using them requires a wide range of skills and of background knowledge, above all about the processes that led to the generation, selection and cataloguing of their materials. Until recently, 'the archive' implied materials not looked at by anyone else or only by a few – the very idea nurtures historians' fantasies about their privileged access to the past.

I have presented the archive as enjoying a special place in the practice of history. In itself this is neither bad nor good, it is simply a feature of current historical practice. Naturally, like all other aspects of that practice, it needs to be held up for critical, yet sympathetic inspection. These complexities of the archive have clear implications for historians' skills. As I have already said, it is an absolutely basic skill to reconstruct the means by which materials were originally produced and have come into archives. We need to know how the archive has been managed and classified, whether items have been lost, destroyed or altered. Just as crucial is an insight into one's own responses to the material – the skill, if you like, of self-analysis. At another conceptual level altogether, there needs to be a critique of how and why historical achievement is still understood as being derived from the supposed quality of the primary sources. I have argued that this draws our attention away from interpretation and towards 'research', away from the historian's mind and towards historical actors and past states. While this move may be salutary in that it forces historians to engage deeply with other worlds, to recognise their difference, it may just be that it is also safer. If so much rests on the sources, we shift responsibility away from historians and towards their materials. I am not denying the myriad delights of archival sources, but I am giving priority to what is done with them by historians.

Historical achievement, then, derives from the manner in which sources are handled; it is not located in the sources themselves, however enchanting these may be. The skill of finding unusual, little-known or previously neglected sources is certainly valuable, and it reinforces my point, since the accomplishment is the historian's. I am stressing writing as a major historical skill because that is how achievement has to be judged. The transition from primary sources to historical account involves many steps, and is not a simple journey from document to book or journal article – typically there is much doubling back, many twists and unexpected turns. The quality of the resulting narrative, itself a composite, is what counts. Inevitably there are many different ways in which the final result is arrived at. The writer's choice of the theoretical framework, given that there are so many possibilities, is an obvious example – and this further reminds us that skills inform every part of historical practice. A less obvious example would be the selection of historical genres. I have laid great emphasis on the skills required to delineate a historical problem, but this is not independent of the genres through which it is given expression. It is vital to choose the right genre for the problem and vice versa. A journal article can only cope with certain kinds of problems: the genre has strict word limits and fairly rigid conventions and demands an exceptionally clear focus. In a book, by contrast, which requires distinctive writing skills, such as the ability to sustain a conceptual or narrative thread, it is possible to explore issues that are more ramifying and wide-ranging, possessed of different facets. Choosing a genre and using it well also involves decisions about the level of detail required, and where it should be located – in the main text or in the footnotes. We cannot legislate about such matters, since so many variables are involved. The way forward is to bear these issues in mind every single time we read a historical account. It is less a matter of having a formal checklist than of understanding the implications of the seemingly mundane elements that make up published historical work. The skills involved are inferred, backwards as it were, by comparing a range of practices and evaluating their effectiveness. Such an evaluation must take into account the chosen genre and its aptness, and place the work in the context of other similar accounts. We could summarise these points about the centrality of writing in historical practice by stating that all historical texts need the power to convince others. This is the art of rhetoric, which is an important historical skill, or rather a blend of skills, and is not to be understood pejoratively.

SKILLS AND NON-TEXTUAL SOURCES

So far, this chapter has presented historians as both users and producers of *texts*, but what about other kinds of sources and the skills needed to use them? Non-textual sources include items of visual and material culture, such as seals, maps, photographs, drawings, prints, paintings, jewellery, costume, tools and machines, archaeological remains, buildings, town plans, films – indeed any artefact. They also include music – compositions, libretti, performances, instruments, stage designs for operas, and so on. Non-textual