

The following is a sample annotated bibliography entry:

Fletcher, Richard. *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation*. New York: Penguin/Viking, 2004.

This book examines the interactions, both positive and negative, between Christianity and Islam in the medieval and early modern periods. Fletcher, formerly a professor of medieval history at the University of York, England, argues that despite some productive interactions in the areas of trade and intellectual life, Christians and Muslims did not achieve any real measure of mutual understanding in the period under discussion. Rather, relations between the two cultures were marked by fear and hostility on the Christian side, and disdain and aloofness on the part of Muslims. Fletcher cites numerous examples to demonstrate that even in the most multicultural parts of the medieval world (Spain, Sicily, the Latin crusader states), Christians and Muslims "lived side by side, but did not blend" (p. 116). Although Fletcher's book is brief (161 pages), it is both scholarly and eminently readable, even for a non-specialist, and provides a clearly argued introduction to the subject that elucidates both Muslim and Christian viewpoints. Footnotes enable the student to pursue the sources the author used, and a narrative bibliography provides suggestions for further reading. The book also includes a useful chronology.

3b-3 Critiques and book reviews

In order to demonstrate your ability to read a text critically and analytically, you may be asked to critique an article or review a book (a book review is simply a critique of a full-length book). You may feel unqualified to complete such an assignment; after all, the author of the text is a professional historian. However, even if you cannot write from the same level of experience and knowledge as the author, you can write an effective review if you understand what the assignment requires. Reviews and critiques of texts begin with careful, active, and critical reading. (See 3a for advice on reading critically.) Active reading requires you to keep the author's thesis in mind, note the evidence used to support that thesis, ask the critical questions for evaluating sources outlined in Chapter 2, and note your reactions and responses to the text

as you go. Your review or critique then grows out of this active reading.

A review or critique is not the same thing as a book report, which simply summarizes the content of a book. Nor does a review or critique merely report your reaction (for example, "This book was boring" or "I liked this article"). Rather, when writing a review or critique, you not only report on the content of the text and your response to it but also assess its strengths and weaknesses. So, for example, it is not enough to say "This book is not very good"; you need to explain and/or justify your reaction through an analysis of the text. Did you find the book unconvincing because the author did not supply enough evidence to support his or her assertions? Is the logic faulty? Or did you disagree with the book's underlying assumptions? Finally, note that *critical* does not mean "negative." If a book is well written and presents an original thesis supported by convincing evidence, say so. A good book review does not have to be negative; it does have to be fair and analytical. (Incidentally, when you are writing your critique or review, it is unnecessary to preface statements with *I think* or *in my opinion* since readers assume that as a reviewer you are expressing your own opinions.)

Though there is no one correct way to structure a critique or review, the following is a possible approach:

- Summarize the book or article, and relate the author's main point, or thesis. Make sure you briefly identify the author and note his or her credentials.
- Describe the author's viewpoint and purpose for writing; note any aspects of the author's background that are important for understanding the text.
- Note the most important evidence the author presents to support his or her thesis.
- Evaluate the author's use of evidence and describe how he or she deals with counterevidence. (See 4d-2 for a discussion of counterevidence.) Is the argument convincing?
- Compare this text with other books or articles you have read on the same subject.
- Conclude with a final evaluation of the book or article. You might discuss who would find it useful and why.

Note: While many of the elements of a review or critique are the same as those found in an annotated bibliography entry, full-length book reviews and article critiques should be much longer and more detailed than brief bibliography entries.

3b-4 Film reviews

You may be surprised to find a discussion of film reviews in a chapter called "Reading and Writing in History." However, a discussion of film in this context is appropriate for two reasons. First, while historians primarily rely on written texts, film and other visual texts have become increasingly important historical sources. Second, watching a film, like reading a book, should not be a passive exercise. If you use film as a historical source, you will need to approach or "read" a film with the same critical and analytical skills that you would apply to a written text. Just as there are different kinds of written texts, so too are there different kinds of films. The most common types of films historians use are documentaries and feature films. Identifying which type of film you are dealing with is the essential first step in writing a film review.

Documentaries

Documentaries are films that use primary sources (such as photographs, paintings, and documents) and commentaries on those sources by various authorities (such as historians, biographers, and eyewitnesses) to construct a narrative of a historical figure or event. For this reason, documentaries should be considered secondary sources. Ken Burns's series *The Civil War*, which uses primary sources such as documents and photographs as well as commentary from historians, is a good example of this type of film.

Documentaries about events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are able to make use of a unique primary source: *footage*. Footage is a direct film or videotape recording of an event. Footage can be produced by professionals, such as television news videographers, or by amateurs, like Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Footage is a primary source since it records events as they happen.

A documentary filmmaker's use of primary sources such as footage must be viewed critically. Filmmakers, like writers, choose what to record. Sometimes luck plays a part in the images they capture; filmmaker Jules Naudet was working on a documentary about the New York City Firefighting Academy when he filmed the hijacked plane hitting Tower 1 of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Usually, however, they are filming with a particular purpose, and sometimes with a particular audience in mind. Moreover, footage that makes its way to a news broadcast has been cut and edited. In evaluating a documentary that uses footage, it is useful to know why and by whom the original footage was shot and whether and for what purposes it has been edited.

Feature films

Feature films are films designed primarily as entertainment. They sometimes feature famous actors and always aim at box-office success. Historical rigor is not usually their primary concern, so we should not be surprised to find that such films vary dramatically in the accuracy with which they depict the period, events, and historical figures they ostensibly portray. At one end of the spectrum are films like *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which is based on a true story about a peasant who abandoned his family and the impostor who successfully took his place. The director, Daniel Vigne, consulted historical documents, attempted faithfully to re-create the material culture of the period, and made extensive use of historian Natalie Zemon Davis as a consultant. Consequently, this film might be considered a secondary source for our understanding of French peasant life in seventeenth-century France. In contrast, in his 1916 film *Joan the Woman*, legendary director Cecil B. DeMille took serious liberties with the historical accounts of Joan of Arc, inventing a love interest for her and linking her story with the English efforts against the Germans in France during World War I. DeMille's film has virtually no value as a secondary source for the history of Joan of Arc, but it is a valuable primary source for understanding American attitudes toward the Great War and the role of filmmakers in encouraging the United States to join the conflict. This points to an important consideration: *all* feature films can

be viewed as primary sources for the cultural and social history of the period in which they were made.

Because of the growing importance of film of all sorts, writing a film review is an increasingly common assignment. The suggestions provided in 3b-3 for writing a critique or book review also apply to a film review. In addition, you should do the following:

- Determine whether the film is a documentary or a feature film. Who is the intended audience, and for what reason was the film made?
- If the film is a documentary, note the academic credentials of the experts who provide the commentary. If it is a feature film, determine whether the filmmaker made use of professional historians as consultants.
- For documentaries and feature films, analyze the interests and concerns of the producer, director, and screenwriter. Note any other films they have produced, directed, or written that might help the viewer understand their interests and biases. In this context, it is useful to determine whether the people most responsible for the film have provided interviews or written commentary that might shed light on their work.
- Think about how the visual images presented in the film enhance our understanding of the subject and the period. Do the costumes and sets accurately portray the historical reality of the period? Does the film help us understand the material culture of the period?
- Analyze the cinematic techniques used to convey the story. Is the film shot in black-and-white or in color? How does the filmmaker use lighting to convey a mood or to make a symbolic point? How is one set of images juxtaposed with another to create an impression? What kinds of camera angles are used, and why?
- Analyze how the filmmaker uses sound. What kind of music is used in the soundtrack? Was it composed specifically for the film, or are classical or popular pieces used?
- Discuss the ways in which the filmmaker shapes the narrative. From what point of view is the story told? Does the film employ flashbacks or narrative voice-overs?
- If the film is based on a play or a specific text, compare the film with the original source. Are there

any themes or concepts portrayed more effectively in the film than in the text? Conversely, are there elements of the source that are eliminated or distorted in the film?

- Compare the film with other films, books, and articles on the same subject.

3b-5 Single-source analysis

As noted in Chapter 2, primary sources comprise the basic materials of historical research. Because examining and interpreting primary sources is so fundamental to the historian's craft, many professors ask their students to write an analysis of a single primary source.

A single-source paper can take many forms. You may be asked to analyze a book-length text, a shorter document such as a letter, an artifact such as a tribal mask, or an image such as a photograph. You may be assigned a particular source to analyze, or you may be allowed to write about a source of your choosing. Whatever the specifics of your assignment, a single-source analysis asks you to examine a primary source in depth, often without reference to the work of other historians, in order to determine what it can tell you about the people and the period you are studying.

In order to write an effective primary source analysis, you will first need to ask questions about the nature of the source itself: Who wrote this document or made this artifact? When was this source created, and why? The questions for evaluating primary sources listed in the Tips for Writers boxes in Chapter 2, pages 11 and 12–13, will help you begin to think about the fundamental aspects of your source.

Once you have answered the basic questions about your source, however, you must go beyond simple description and discuss the *significance* of the source: What can it tell us about the person who wrote or made it, or the time and place in which he or she lived? Can the source tell us anything about the structures and norms of the author's society? What a source can tell you depends on both the nature of the source itself and the questions you ask of it. Think of yourself as a detective interrogating a witness who is not very forthcoming. The source you are analyzing can tell you quite a bit about the period and people you are studying, but not all of that information is

obvious at first glance, and the “witness” might not volunteer everything it knows until you ask the right questions. In general, the quality of your source analysis will depend on the quality of the questions you ask; take enough time to read the document or examine the artifact carefully and extract from it every bit of information you can.

Finally, remember that a single-source analysis, like any other history paper, should focus on a thesis—the conclusion you have reached about the significance of the source as a result of your careful reading and analysis. (For more on developing and supporting a thesis, see 4c and 4d.)

3b-6 Historiographic essays

As noted in Chapter 1, historians frequently disagree about how to interpret the events they study. For example, some historians have interpreted the Magna Carta, a charter signed by King John of England in 1215, as a revolutionary declaration of fundamental individual freedoms; others have seen it as a conservative restatement of feudal privilege. These differences in interpretation reflect the varying approaches that historians take to their subject. For example, individual historians might be primarily interested in social, cultural, political, economic, legal, or intellectual history. They might approach their work from a Marxist, Freudian, feminist, or postmodernist point of view. Such orientations and affiliations affect the ways in which historians explore and interpret the past; thus, historians interested in the same historical event might examine different sets of sources to answer the same question. For example, in studying the causes of the French Revolution, Marxist historians might focus on economic and class issues, while intellectual historians might concentrate on how the writings of the philosophes (a group of French Enlightenment writers) affected political thought and practice. Moreover, since the historian’s work is embedded in a particular social and cultural context, historical interpretations and methodologies change over time. For example, the growth of the civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960s led to a greater interest in African American and women’s history. In order to

make students aware of a variety of interpretations and allow them to enter the exciting world of historical discussion and debate, some instructors ask their students to write historiographic essays.

A historiographic essay is one in which the writer, acting as a historian, studies the approaches to a topic that other historians have taken. When you write a historiographic essay, you identify, compare, and evaluate the viewpoints of two or more historians writing on the same subject. Such an essay can take several forms. You might be asked, for example, to study the work of historians who lived during or near the time in which a particular event happened—for example, to explore the ways in which contemporary Chinese historians wrote about the Boxer Rebellion. A different kind of historiographic essay might require that you look at the ways in which historians have treated the same topic over time. For example, to examine how historians have treated Thomas Jefferson, you might begin with two pre-Civil War biographies—Matthew L. Davis’s *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* (1836–37), which provides a scathing critique of Jefferson, and Henry S. Randall’s contrastingly positive *Life of Jefferson* (1858)—and end with the most recent studies of Jefferson. Yet another such assignment might ask you to compare the views of historians from several historical schools on the same event. You might, for example, be asked to compare Whig and Progressive interpretations of the American Revolution or Marxist and feminist views of the French Revolution. Historiographic essays may be short or quite lengthy. In any case, a historiographic essay focuses attention not on a historical event itself but rather on how historians have interpreted that event.

A historiographic essay combines some of the features of a book review with those of a short essay or research paper. You should begin with a critical reading of the texts containing historians’ interpretations, keeping in mind the questions you would need to answer if you were going to write book reviews about them (see 3b-3). You should not, however, treat the historiographic essay as two or three book reviews glued together. Rather, you should synthesize your material and construct an argument in support of a thesis. The following thesis is from a student’s essay on historians’ interpretations of the colonial period of African history:

Historians have held dramatically different views about the importance of European colonial rule in Africa: Marxist historians, along with others who focus on economic issues, have tended to see the colonial period as an important turning point, while cultural historians have maintained that the impact of the West on the ancient cultural traditions of Africa was superficial.

In the rest of the paper, the student supports the thesis as he or she would do in any other history paper. (For a fuller discussion of formulating and supporting a thesis, see 4c and 4d.)

3c Taking history exams

History exams reflect your ability to synthesize the materials you have examined over the course of a semester into a coherent picture of the period you are studying. If you have been attending classes and reading actively and critically throughout the semester, the final exam should not be an occasion for panic but rather a chance to demonstrate your understanding of the people, events, and institutions you have been studying.

History exams can follow many different formats. One typical component of a history exam that allows the professor to evaluate the students' basic mastery of the material is a series of identification questions that ask students to briefly describe and note the significance of important persons, places, or events. Many instructors also test their students' ability to synthesize the material they have been studying throughout the semester by asking them to write short essays that discuss a particular historical question or issue in some detail. Since history exams can vary widely in format, it is important to pay careful attention to your professor's specific instructions. The following general advice, which includes strategies for answering identification questions and composing short essays, can help you prepare for any history exam.

3c-1 Preparing for an exam

The best preparation for an exam does not begin the day, or even the week, before the exam but takes place throughout the semester. Careful reading of the texts and

periodic review of your notes will ensure that you have a firm grasp of the material come exam time. Throughout the semester, you should do the following:

Attend class regularly and take good notes. It is not necessary to write down *everything* your professor says. When taking notes, you should listen for the main points and note the evidence given to support those points. (You will discover that your professor's lectures usually follow the same format as a good essay.) Follow the same suggestions for a discussion class; your classmates will often make important points about the material you are studying.

Review your notes regularly, preferably after each class. If you review your notes while the class is fresh in your mind, it will be easier for you to notice places where the notes are unclear. Mark these places, and clarify confusing points as soon as possible, either by researching the issue yourself or by asking your professor.

Keep a list of important ideas, people, and events. As you read your texts and review your class notes, it is useful to make a list of significant persons, places, events, and concepts along with a brief description of why they are important. Look up the definitions of terms with which you are unfamiliar. This not only will ensure that you understand the key ideas in the material you are studying but also will be particularly useful if your exam for the course includes an identification section. How do you know which items to include on this list? Some will be obvious; if you are taking a course called Twentieth-Century Dictators, it would be a good thing to be able to identify Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. In cases in which the importance of a person or an idea is not so obvious, look for other clues: words that are italicized in your texts; concepts that recur in several of your readings; and terms, events, or people that your professor has highlighted for you or written on the board.

Refer to your syllabus throughout the semester. Many instructors provide detailed syllabi that state the themes for each section of the course. Use the syllabus as a guide for your own studying and thinking about the course material.