

## Notes on “how to be a good historian?” or questions about history

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### 1. What is history?

History is the study of what man have done and said and thought in the past.

History is biography, that is, a work of the creative imagination in which the author attempts to recreate the life and thoughts of particular men who actually lived at a certain time.

History is the study of man in his social aspects both past and present.

All approaches to history and all historical schools of the 20th century fall under one or another of these definitions.

Historians must look at the events objectively during their researchs.

### 2. Why we have to study history?

The most general reason for the study of history is that it provides background (knowledge) for all other subjects and disciplines. But there are other important reasons why university students should study history. First of all, if history is correctly taught and studied, it allows for a new level of self-discovery and a new degree of empathy with other people. Everyone has a social as well as a personal self. We are all part of all that we have met and all that we have inherited from our families and communities. Historical study allows the student to perceive how the world of today came into existence and how the texture and community was built up by a complex combination of forces and events over many decades and perhaps centuries. Historical study allows the student to understand why he is the way he is an American, a Turk, a Russian, an English, etc. and also allows him to understand the historical process which has conditioned other people whom he encounters.

History is therefore a road to self-knowledge and a means of understanding the attitudes and motives of people of disparate backgrounds.

Last but certainly not least, history is worth studying because it is a creative act. It not only allows for but demands serious application and industry, the exercise of a creative imagination, and high qualities of literary exposition. Historical study informs and inspires, and at the same time it is an outlet for the creative urge exhibited by people of high intelligence and deep feeling. Excellence in historical study requires the critical insight and disciplined methods of the scientist and, at the same time, the fine sensitivity to both the drama of human life and the nuances of prose style that distinguish the novelist and playwright.

### 3. What history students do?

The history student, whether at the novice or the advanced level, who knows what is expected of him and knows how to fulfill these expectations will have a good attitude toward his work. The study of history is for him not a difficult and unpalatable chore but rather a wonderful opportunity, the means to social emancipation and intellectual maturity. He will realize that it is a privilege to study history and thereby to have the world of the past and the meaning of the present with all their fascinating richness and complexity, opened up to him by the achievements of modern scholarship. He will understand why serious historical inquiry is sometimes

prohibited by political authority and why instead students are required to accept the ruling group's propaganda myths about the past and present. In a free society it is the right of university students to commit themselves to excellence in historical study and to pursue unhindered by the state a full inquiry into actual course of social, intellectual, and political change. This historical inquiry is almost as valuable for students of literature, art, philosophy, and the social and behavioral sciences as it is for the history major.

History does not require intensive preliminary training in related fields, as physics requires advanced mathematical knowledge. Nevertheless it is necessary to set out at the beginning some basic requirements for historical study that must not be neglected. An effective start in the study of history, at whatever level it is pursued, requires an open mind. The student must always be ready to reconsider the historical methods and concepts with which he is familiar and be ready to adapt a new way of thinking.

The history major and graduate student must also be ready for new ways of thinking. Upper-class work in history will require much longer papers than usually assigned to freshmen, and this involves the new experience of organizing and writing a sustained work of historical exposition. The history major will also face the challenge of reading several conflicting interpretations of one theme or era and of developing critical tools to discriminate among alternative views. Graduate students are going to encounter novel bibliographical and linguistic problems; and they are likely to find that their teachers demand of them, when dealing with any particular problem, an exhaustive knowledge and rigorous precision that are usually overlooked even in advanced undergraduate work.

At any level of historical study the successful student will be the one who is not going to be trapped within the confines of familiar concepts and techniques. He must be prepared for the intellectual aspiration and experimentation that make possible conceptual growth and entry upon a new level of thinking. The greatest obstacle to learning history is the student's reluctance to try unfamiliar approach or to examine a new kind of problem. This self-defeating inhibition precludes the student from ever finding out that he is capable of original and superior work.

Students at all levels, from freshmen through graduate students, commonly attempt to avoid the challenge of a new way of historical thinking by taking refuge in humility. This failure of nerve takes the form of statements like "Who am I to criticize N's book? He is a famous historian, and I'm just a beginner." "How can I make any sense out of a collection of eighteenth-century documents? I have only a general outline knowledge of the period." If this specious modesty were to prevail, history would be a terrible bore because the student would only commit the professor's lectures and the textbook to rote memory and regurgitate them on exams. You will find this kind of humility to be worse than useless. In fact, if you let such an attitude govern your approach to historical study, you will never learn to think in an original and creative way, and the quality of your work will never rise above the lowest level of mediocrity.

Every student will develop distinct study habits that are best suited to his own personality, but there are certain general principles of work procedure you will have to follow if you are going to be a successful history student. In a peculiar way it is more difficult to develop good work habits as a student of history than as a student of physics or chemistry. In the sciences you will be doing much of your work in the controlled environment of a laboratory. Aside from requirement of attending classes, each history student is left to go to hell on his own way. You can save yourself a lot of frustration and the agony of learning how to study by trial and error if you decide at the outset to observe these rules:

a) Find a place conducive to study. If you need quiet for your work, find a quiet place, which on a college campus is most likely to be a library. If you need a background of Beethoven or the Beatles to inspire your work, find an appropriate place.

b) If during your history study you find that you have read the same line five times you will know that something is wrong, either with your place of study or with yourself. You cannot study history effectively when you are dazed, drowsy, or doopey. History study is not aimless turning of pages; it requires the full application of your intellectual resources. Artificial stimulants are no substitute for sleep.

c) There will be occasions when conferences with one or more fellow students in a course will be valuable and stimulating. But as a general rule, avoid group study, which involves either the exploitation of the conscientious student by lazy ones or the futile sharing of ignorance.

d) If the assigned required reading in a course leaves doubts and confusion in your mind, you may be greatly helped by reading alternative treatment of the same problem or subject listed among the supplementary books.

e) Cramming for exams and last-minute writing of papers produce only intellectual indigestion and poor grades. Learning history is a cumulative process. Even the brightest student has to work at history in a step-by-step way, which is outlined for you by the reading assignments. Assume that are the very least, for every hour in the history classroom you will spend three hours working on your own. Get started immediately the first day of the term, and proceed in a methodical manner, completing your assignments week by week. There is no other way to benefit from a history course.

f) Under no circumstances should you make use of "trotts", "ponies", course outlines, or mimeographed lecture notes prepared by commercial agencies, fraternities, or student entrepreneurs. There is no short cut to learning history. You must attend and comprehend the lectures and do all the required reading. Relying upon speciously attractive short-cut summaries is equivalent to putting your health in the hands of a medical quack.

For many students this advice on equipment and study habits will appear trivial, and even the discussion of the right attitude with which to begin work in history will seem superfluous. But another of these prerequisites, and this hampers their work along the way. Take pains to get started right, and you will be ready to take advantage of the magnificent intellectual opportunity provided by the study of history.

#### Modern Researcher is Reminding

"Every one of you gentlemen, every thinking man generally, is a seeker after sources and a pragmatic historian. You have to be both in order to understand any event that takes place before your eyes. Every business man who handles a complicated transaction, every lawyer who studies a case, is a seeker after sources and a pragmatic historian"<sup>1</sup>.

#### Research And Report As Historian's Work

#### The Report: A New and Fundamental Form

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Mommsen, Univ. Of Berlin, 1874.

In a once famous book on the Middle East, the English archeologist Layard printed a letter in which a Turkish official answered an Englishman's question. It begins:

My Illustrious Friend and Joy of My Liver!

The thing you ask me is both difficult and useless. Although I have passed all my days in this place, I have neither counted the houses nor have inquired into the number of the inhabitants; and as to what one person loads on his mules and the other stows away in the bottom of his ship, that is no business of mine. But, above all, as to the previous history of this city, God only knows the amount of dirt and confusion that the infidels may have eaten before the coming of the sword of Islam. It were unprofitable for us to inquire into it. O my soul! O my Lamb! Seek not after the things which concern thee not. Thou camst unto us and we welcomed thee: go in peace.

This unruffled public servant obviously made no annual report of any kind to anybody – those were the good old days. At the distance of a century it is interesting to note the three things which he so courteously declined to provide. They are: vital statistics, business reports, and history. Modern life as we know it would stop it information of these three kinds were not readily available on every sort of subject. All over the globe, every moment of the day, someone is being asked to make a search and write a report on some state of fact, or else to read and analyze one, so that action may be taken. It is the way we try to substitute intelligence for routine and knowledge for guesswork.

This characteristic behavior of modern man justifies the conclusion that “the report” is fundamental in the conduct of affairs. It is by now a familiar form, like the business letter or the sonnet.

Every report, moreover, implies previous research, whether by the reporter or by someone else. Thousands of men not connected with academic life are thus turned into more or less able scholars. The Turkish official of today has dropped his hookah, leaped from his cushion, and is busy counting the houses for the Ministry of the Interior. The figures he will report are then published as government statistic, which other researchers will use for still other reports – from the university student writing a paper on modern Turkey to the businessman who wants to raise capital and establish a branch office in that country.

Among the many useful documents that may strictly or loosely be classed as reports there is no essential difference of outlook or method. The student writing a book report for a Freshman English course is doing on a small scale and with a single source the same thing as the president of a corporation who prepares his annual report to the stockholders, or as a President of the United States when, with the aid of all his departments, he reports to the people on the state of the Union. True, scope and purpose differ and this affects the worth of the report as an historical record. But the general form and the devices employed are identical in all three. The reader will readily think of other illustrations of the same truth.

The common element in all these performances is that they present the same problems of investigation and exposition and solve some vast reservoir of information. Apart from the special facts which, to pursue the examples above, the treasurer of a corporation or the Secretary of State supply to their respective presidents, the sources for the millions of words uttered in reports are the familiar ones – newspapers, learned journals, histories, statistical abstracts, law cases, state papers, and so on through the many categories of books found in great libraries. This huge accumulation is what the researcher must learn to use in order to satisfy his particular need. And this being the common lot makes it possible to discuss research and reporting regardless of their occasion or subject.

## The Historical Attitude Underlines Research and Report

To regard the report as a form is further justified by the fact that attitude and technique of the report writer are derived in a straight line from one of the great academic disciplines – History. It is from historical scholarship – originating with the antiquarian – that the world has copied the apparatus of footnotes, references, bibliography, and so on, which have become commonplace devices, not to say household words. It is from the historical study of texts by philologists and historians that writers at large have learned to sift evidence, balance testimony, and demand verified assertions.

At this point someone may object that there remains a great difference between the scholar's main interest and that of an ordinary report writer. The former seeks to know the past; the latter is concerned with the present, generally with a view to plotting the future; hence their outlooks must be quite different. This difference is more striking than significant. Whatever its purpose, a report is invariably and necessarily historical. Insofar as it reports facts it gives an account of the past. Suppose a study of American foreign policy designed solely to change future action. It can do so only by criticizing principle or person: but to do this its arguments must lean on the evidence of what has been happening – on what is past, recorded, and beyond the reach of change. What else is this but a piece of history?

The same holds true when a report is, as we say, “purely factfinding”, for example, a survey of the conditions of the public schools in a certain town. This description of “the present” is actually a description of the past – recent, it may be, but nonetheless a backward glance. Only events already gone by can disclose the prevailing state of things. Even an unassuming book report by a college student of literature is a record of the past. It is in the first place a record of what the student thought and felt at 2 A.M. the day it was due. The essay is part autobiography, part criticism, and part literary history. The book was probably read earlier and compared with still older experiences; and words of the book, which the report may quote, refer to a yet more remote past. Whatever else it may be, every report is historical and cannot avoid being so.

Hence the attitude of the historian and the way he goes to work form an indispensable part of the report writer's equipment, no matter what his subject may be – literary, economic, political, scientific, or anything else that belongs among serious recitals of fact.