

Reading articles

This sheet provides some tips on reading journal articles. They can be just as easily applied to reading books.

A) You must locate and identify the argument:

Have a look for:

1. Statements of intention (historians often use the following language to express their aims: explore, examine, investigate... If you find any of these key terms, you may have located a succinct statement of what the author is setting out to do.
2. Statements of argument. Here again there is a distinctive language that may help you identify arguments: argue, significant/significance; previous interpretations 'inadequate'. Examples: 'I shall argue that the British monarchy endured because ...'; 'Dr Bloggs underestimated the level of violence during riots, which should be seen as pervasive'
3. What's in the opening paragraph? Does it give a statement of intent or a summary of claims?
4. Structure: The way an article is set out can give you clues. Are there subheadings? Do they give a summary of the argument?
5. What's at the end of the piece? A conclusion, a discussion of the material in terms of its broader significance?

Once you have located the argument, make notes on that argument, how it is developed and the kind of evidence and example that the author uses to support their argument.

B) You must locate the historiography: what is the debate and where does it appear?

Historians spend a lot of time 'talking' to or 'arguing' with other historians. It's important to examine these references and they may help you get a sense of what the author is claiming for her/his work (as different from that of others, or building on previous interpretations)

You might find:

1. Direct references to other historians' work (individuals mentioned by name – but clarify whether a named individual is a historian or a primary source);
2. General characterisations of historical work ('there has been much discussion of'; 'historians of ...'; 'historians have previously argued that ...');
3. Distinctions drawn between the argument this historian makes and other historians' views.

Again, make notes detailing the historiographical context of the argument. Pay particular attention to publication dates and consider how the debate has developed over time.

NB: Don't get bogged down! You don't have to start at the beginning and read every word. At times it's useful to flip through an article, finding the argument, statements of intention etc. Once you've got the skeleton, it's easier to grasp the details and get a sense of overall meaning.