

Welcome to WHAP!

Getting the Most Out of Reading World History

Active or “close” reading means reading for meaning. The big challenges of reading are length and detail. If you understand the “big picture,” you can read much more quickly and effectively, because you can “see the forest for the trees.” That is, you can see the main ideas and recognize how specific information is provided to illustrate those big ideas. The three stages of reading described below will help you understand the “big picture” when reading this text and others.

Pre-reading

When approaching a text, it is helpful to spend a few minutes pre-reading the material. During the pre-reading stage, you are simply getting prepared for what you will be reading. This involves two steps. First, try to determine chronology, theme(s), and region(s). These are the three “dimensions” world historians use to understand and analyze the human narrative. Understanding this conceptual framework is central to being successful in a world history course. Do this by looking at chapter dates, the part or unit that includes this chapter (keeping in mind that not all books are divided into parts), the chapter that came before and the one that comes next, and the chapter title. Note that the next main section of a chapter may not describe something that happened later in time; it may simply reflect a different theme about the same time and place. Second, read the “Big Picture Questions” question at the end of the chapter. The title alone should give you a clue that these are important questions for understanding the chapter. Next, try to determine the major changes, comparisons, and connections discussed in the chapter by scanning the section titles, images and captions (maps, charts, photos, etc.), and any pedagogical tools included (chronologies, key terms, document headnotes, review questions, etc.). Also, skim the introduction to the chapter—usually reading the topic sentences of this section is sufficient.

During Reading

As you read chapters of this text, remember that reading is an active process—so stay focused. The meaning will only become clear as you work at it. The author has intentionally written an organized textbook and wants you to be able to follow along, so take advantage of the clues he’s provided, especially titles and headings.

Active readers use four skills to understand texts: *questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting*. These steps don’t have to happen in a particular order. In fact, once you become comfortable with them, they’ll pop up on their own in whatever order they choose, perhaps several at the same time—that’s when you know that they’ve truly become habits of mind. Use these skills along with note-taking to get the most out of your reading.

Questioning

Historians look at the world in a particular way, and they usually organize their writing around the particular historical thinking skills: cause and effect, comparison, interpretation, contextualization, periodization, patterns of continuity & change, argumentation. By questioning you can identify these patterns. Your textbook provides you with a series of margin questions that help you to identify what is going on in the narrative. In addition to the “Opening Vignette” (which serves as a hint about the author’s main idea) that opens each chapter, take time at the end of each section to pause and in writing, “Sum Up So Far”. That helps you put together all that you’ve read to that point in the chapter.

For every section you read, you want to find out the major subject. The easiest way to do this is to ask the “journalistic questions”: Who? What? Where? When? Why?

1. *Who* is the section about? History texts are almost always about people. Is the focus an individual? A social group? A political entity?
2. *What* does the section say about this person or group? Texts usually describe some major event or pattern. Did they do something important? Did something happen to them?

3. *Where* did the subject being described take place? Physical location is often crucial in history. Does this location help make sense of the subject in some way?
4. *When* did the events take place? Like physical location, chronology forms part of the historical context that makes events understandable. Does the text describe something unfolding over a very short period—or a longer one? Are there crucial events that came before that make the description understandable?
5. *Why* did the event or pattern being described take place—and why does it matter? Whether talking about a dramatic development or a continuity that endured for a long period of time, historians always attempt to understand what led to it. What reasons does the text provide for the event or pattern? How is the significance of the development explained?

Clarifying

As you read, ask yourself if there are any words you don't understand. If they're crucial for making sense of the passage, can you define them using a dictionary or other outside source such as Wikipedia? If there are any sentences you don't understand, do they become clearer when you reread them or as you read further in the text?

When a longer passage throws you off, usually clearing up difficult vocabulary will help make the passage understandable. If it doesn't, simply reread the sentence slowly a few times. If you're still unclear, back up—usually to the beginning of the paragraph—and try again. The most common way skilled readers get clarification is by rereading.

Summarizing

A summary is a brief review of the “big picture” of a particular section or chapter. After reading, briefly explain what each section is about in one sentence. Return to your questions, and be sure to look at the “Big Picture” questions in the “Second Thoughts” section at the end of the chapter narrative. They are designed to make sure that you understood the chapter.

Predicting

Based on your reading of an entire section or chapter, what do you think will come next in the text? How do you know? You may think predicting what's coming next is a waste of time, but it's a good test of how well you understand the flow of the text. If you're in a car with your family going to visit your grandmother, you probably know the route to get there. If your mother takes an unanticipated turn, it alerts you that something is different from what you were expecting—and prompts you to ask why. So if your prediction based on reading is wildly off, it may alert you to the fact that your previous idea of the “big picture” of the section was off for some reason. You may need to back up and reread a section, or at least move forward more alert to where the author is going.

Note-Taking

Of course, simply reading the text is not sufficient. You'll never remember everything that's important unless you take notes. Students experience many pitfalls when taking notes. You should only write notes *after* you understand what you have read. Actively *question, clarify, summarize, and predict* in your head (or out loud) as you read each chapter; then, go back through the subsections and take brief notes representing the key ideas of that section.

Brief is generally better—don't wear yourself out in the notes themselves. Find some consistent abbreviations for frequent words and use symbols. For example, an up arrow to indicate growth, a flat arrow to indicate cause/effect, and an “=” to indicate a definition, etc. Don't write everything; ask yourself if a particular point is a main idea or just an example. Make annotations in the margins, or get a stack of sticky notes and place them in the margins for your comments.