How to Read like a Historian

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Inspired by Professor Peter Filene of UNC Chapel Hill

For more tips: http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/christopher-endy

The linear method – FLAWED

Table of Contents and Back Cover: skim for overview
Introduction: careful & detailed reading
Conclusion: careful & detailed reading
Notes and Bibliography: quick skim
Introduction to each chapter: careful & detailed reading

The “bookends” method – MORE EFFECTIVE

Body of the most important chapters: skim
Body of less critical chapters: quick skim
2nd PAUSE: WRITE NOTES FOR 10-15 MINUTES
Arrive in class confident; leave prepared for essays & exams!

Questions for Notes Writing During the 1st Pause:
- What is the author’s research question, and what is the author’s thesis (i.e. the answer to that question)?
- Is the author’s thesis or method surprising to you? Why or why not?
- How does this argument and method relate to other readings?
- What evidence do you think the author will need to provide to prove the thesis?
- Which chapters are going to be the most important ones?

Questions for Notes Writing During the 2nd Pause:
- Did you accurately record the thesis during the 1st pause?
- Did the author support the thesis? If so, which chapters and which sources were the most effective or crucial? If not, what evidence or assumptions by the author were weak?
- How does this book relate to other works you’ve read? Does it confirm other readings? Does it contradict other readings?
- What avenues for new research does this book suggest?