

Research workshop

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[Author's note: This exercise was developed for use at a range of levels, from introductory to seminar. Students are divided into groups of two to four and each group is given a text. Texts are selected to represent a wide range of publication types and interpretive methods--a monograph, an article from a periodical or edited collection, canonical and revisionist work, traditional and innovative approaches, scholarly and popular writing, etc. Groups are given 30 to 45 minutes to work through the guidelines below and organize their findings into a coherent outline of points. The teacher, in some cases joined by a reference librarian, circulates from group to group. The class then reassembles and each group presents its findings.]

The purpose of this workshop is to develop your ability to assess and compare prospective research sources before devoting yourself to a close reading. This skill is essential in the early stages of any research project. More generally, the ability to evaluate a body of material quickly and critically is an excellent skill to have in many professional situations.

I. Assessing the source. Examine the text quickly and strategically. Don't let yourself get caught up in a close reading: go through it rapidly but with concentration. Try to determine the following:

1. Scope. What are the basic parameters of the study (subject, time period, etc.)?

2. Argument. What are the central goals, themes, or claims?

HINT: Examine the table of contents, introduction & conclusion, chapter or section headings, the beginnings & endings of chapters or sections, and the first & last sentences of paragraphs.

3. Approach. How would you characterize the author's interpretive approach? Does it seem to be grounded in a particular academic discipline or methodology?

HINT: Pay attention to the kinds of sources the author draws upon, the kinds of questions s/he asks, and any statements s/he makes about her/his research methods or analytical framework (such statements are often made in prefaces or introductions).

4. Publication context. What do the text's publication conditions and production values suggest about its intellectual goals and audience?

HINT: Consider the publication date & publisher, the range of essays included in the same source (for periodicals & essay collections), the presence of advertisements (for periodicals), and design features (layout, illustrations, etc.). See if the publication is part of a series or related to a specific event (conference, exhibition, etc.).

5. Audience. For what kind of reader do you think the text was produced? What factors lead you to this assessment?

II. Assessing the author. To assess a text critically, it is important to have a sense of who the author is and the factors that have shaped her/his work.

1. Find out as much as possible about the author.

HINT: Check the text itself for references to institutional affiliation, training, nationality, professional experience, research funding, and other works by the same author (this information often appears in author biographies or acknowledgments). If you find an affiliation, look for further information on the institution's website. Also do an internet search for the author.

2. Find at least one other work by the same author.

HINT: Try the online library catalogue, a periodicals database, and/or WorldCat.

3. How does the information you have found shape your sense of the author's intellectual

authority? How does it expand your understanding of her/his choices of subject and interpretive approach in the text you are examining?

III. Making the source work for you. Critical assessment is useful only if you can bring your insights to bear on your own research and writing.

1. If you were doing a research project, how would you use this source? What are its most interesting and useful contributions? In what ways is its usefulness limited?

2. List two potentially useful references from the text's notes or bibliography and explain why they sound promising.