

Writing Workshop: September 20 2013

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Document Analysis Assignment (Background)

Primary documents are the raw material upon which historians (and political scientists sometimes) rely in order to find insights into a situation, or evidence for their ideas and arguments about a particular issue/problem/question. They are documents that were written during the particular time period being studied. In a sense, they are often the first evidence of something having happened, or of something having been thought or stated. As such, they can provide an “**insider’s view**” of a situation or context. They are **raw, firsthand, or original (i.e. primary)** in that their main focus is not to interpret other (secondary) documents. Examples of primary documents include the following: diaries; manuscripts; interview transcripts; letters; **politicians’ speeches or addresses; governmental (national or international) charters, declarations, covenants, mandates, memoranda.** For this assignment, you will be analyzing a primary document from the one of the latter two groups.

How to Proceed?

- I) Standard Principles of Communication/Rhetoric for your paper:
 - A) Audience: **For whom** is the document intended? **To whom** is the writer writing? (for your professor, yes, but also, for who else? ... community of scholars, peer reader, etc.)
 - B) Purpose: **What is the purpose/goal** of the document? **Why** is the writer writing the document? (**Why are you writing this paper?** Answer: to understand in depth what a particular primary document is about (its meaning and purpose); to explore its relevance in relationship to significant themes within the course; and to communicate all this clearly and logically to your reader.

- II) Some questions to consider when analyzing your primary document:
 - A) **Who wrote** the document?
 - B) Who was the **intended audience**? Is this known?
 - C) **When** was the document written? When was it disseminated?
 - D) **Under which (Because of which) particular historical/political/military/economic circumstances** was the document composed? (What was the **historical/political/military/economic context of the document?**) How much is this context made explicit within the document itself?
 - E) What is the **author’s/s’ particular perspective** on this context or set of issues? Does/do the author/authors make his/her/their perspective explicit within the document? How so? If the perspective is implicit, how do you glean it?
 - F) **Why** was the document written? **What were its purposes?**
 - G) What is the **tone or style** of the document? What kind of language is employed? What is the rhetorical effect of such language?

III. Possible format of paper (this is a rough guideline only!

- A) **Introduction: background context** of the document (circumstances under which it was written or created, i.e. II) D) and a **thesis/focus statement about its relevance to course themes**, e.g. what it might reveal, in general, about the tensions between national interests and international relations, particularly within this time period. (1/2 page)
- B) **Background summary of document:** here is where you might explore/answer some or all of the questions in part II (A-C, E-G) ((1 ½ to 2 pages)
- C) **Elaboration of argument/thesis:** here you might provide a detailed elaboration of several connected ideas/points, backed up by evidence from the document and other sources (3 to 5 references), about what this document might teach or reveal to us about a particular idea/theme or set of ideas/themes related to the course, and how, specifically, it does so. (4 to 5 pages)
- D) **Conclusion:** a good conclusion does more than summarize the arguments contained within a paper. Here, you might talk about the broader implications of your ideas/arguments regarding this source's importance or relevance, particularly within the "grand sweep" of modern international history (seventeenth to twentieth centuries) (1/2 to ¾ page)

Guidelines for the Book Review Assignment TRN150YL0101

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- It will be impossible to summarize all (or most) of the book's **content**. So do not even attempt to do so! Instead, a key goal is **1) to find/isolate/determine the author's primary thesis or argument (arguments?)**, as well as the way in which he/she/they **develop/explain this thesis** within the body of the book. (One way to determine the latter is to study the chapter/section headings.) Some authors are very explicit about their arguments and logical development; others "hide" the argument in an implicit fashion.
- A second key goal of this book review (or any book review for that matter) is **2) to evaluate critically the author's arguments**. In other words, you should locate strengths or weaknesses within the author's argumentation/logic and support your points with reference to the author's ideas. This does **not** mean superficially finding "fault" with the author's argument(s), nor wholeheartedly and simplistically agreeing with the author's argument(s). Real scholarship is not black or white; instead, ideas are complex and nuanced. As a result, good critical thinking/evaluation of an author's argument means understanding how and why he/she/they argue the way they do. For example: On what theoretical perspective does/do the author(s) base his/her/their arguments? Does/do the author take into alternative perspectives? How does he/she/they do so? What kinds of sources does the author rely on? Why do you think this is so? Does the author question his/her sources or not?
- A third key goal of this book review is **3) to relate the author's key arguments/ideas to course material/themes/issues**. (e.g. How do ideas in the book "shed light on such concepts as identity, culture, and nationality?") In other words, what general problems/concepts/issues within this course does the author engage with? How, specifically, does/do the author(s) do so?
- In terms of how to **structure your book review**, you may choose to address each of these three goals separately in three distinct sections of the essay. Another option is to integrate the goals and divide your book review into different thematic sections. Generally, the second option is probably more difficult.
- If you choose a **work of fiction**, there is no real thesis/argument so the first two goals will not apply. Instead, you will **locate/discuss broader themes or ideas within the work**. You also might address some of the following questions: Why do you think the author wrote this book? What light might this book shed on some problems/issues/concepts within the course?

THE BOOK REVIEW OR ARTICLE CRITIQUE: GENERAL GUIDELINES

A review (or "critique") of a book or article is not primarily a summary. Rather, it **analyses, comments on and evaluates** the work. As a course assignment, it situates the work in the **light** of specific issues and theoretical concerns being discussed in the course. Your review should **show** that you can recognize **arguments** and engage in **critical thinking** about the course content. Keep questions like these in mind as you read, make notes, and then write the review or critique

1. What is the specific **topic** of the book or article? What overall **purpose** does it seem to have? For what **readership** is it written? (Look in the preface, acknowledgements, reference list and index for clues about where and how the piece was originally published, and about the author's background and position.)
2. Does the author state an explicit **thesis**? Does he or she noticeably have an axe to grind? What are the **theoretical assumptions**? Are they discussed explicitly? (Again, look for statements in the preface, etc. and follow them up in the rest of the work.)
3. What exactly does the work **contribute** to the overall topic of your course? What general problems and concepts in your discipline and course does it engage with?
4. What **kinds of material** does the work present (e.g. primary documents or secondary material, personal observations, literary analysis, quantitative data, biographical or historical accounts)?
5. **How** is this material used to demonstrate and argue the thesis? (As well as indicating the overall argumentative structure of the work, your review could quote or summarize specific passages to describe the author's presentation, including writing style and tone.)
6. Are there **alternative ways** of arguing from the same material? Does the author show awareness of them? In what respects does the author agree or disagree with them?
7. What theoretical issues and topics for **further discussion** does the work raise?
8. What are **your own reactions and considered opinions** regarding the work?
 - Browse in published scholarly book reviews to get a sense of the ways reviews function in intellectual discourse. Look at journals in your discipline or general publications such as *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *London Review of Books*, or *New York Review of Books* (online at www.nybooks.com/archives/).
 - Some book reviews summarize the book's content briefly and then evaluate it; others integrate these functions, commenting on the book and using summary only to give examples. Choose the method that seems most suitable according to your professor's directions.
 - To keep your focus, remind yourself that your assignment is primarily to discuss the book's treatment of its topic, not the topic itself. Your key sentences should therefore say "This book shows...the author argues" rather than "This happened...this is the case."