H331, U.S. History, 1865-1900
Reading Journals, "Predatory" Reading, & Some Related Hints on Writing

I. Suggestions for Reading

For this class, it may be helpful to keep a journal. You may want to keep it in the form of a diary. When a reading "speaks" to you, write down how you feel or think that the reading relates to you, to your life, and to the world around you. In addressing these issues, however, try to explain what you think the author is trying to say – what the author is trying to argue. This explanation ought to be rooted in the text that you are reading, and it should not be merely an opinion or sense or feeling of what you think the reading is trying to argue.

Keeping the journal may help you, in crucially important ways, prepare for the essays you will submit in H331 and for the longer paper due at the end of the year. Why? Because journal-keeping demands active engagement with the material you read, it is an effective way to gain mastery over the material. Some additional explanation, much of it borrowed directly from Prof. Patrick Rael of Bowdoin College,[1] might be helpful in trying to come to terms with how to read in an engaged way:

Reading scholarly work requires a different set of skills than you might use when reading, say, a novel for pleasure. Most of us cannot read scholarly material as if it were pleasure reading and expect to understand the scholarly material satisfactorily. Most of us need to become what Prof. Rael calls "predatory" readers. That is, we must learn to identify the important parts of the scholarly material we read by engaging it in a kind of conversation and by asking questions of it. To do this, begin by trying to figure out the argument.

[1] You can access Prof. Rael's site on reading and writing at: http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/.

What is an argument? Generally speaking, arguments have three components: a problem or question the author wants to answer or solve; a solution or answer, which also can be read as a hypothesis; and the supporting evidence.

To understand the argument and its structure, we need to identify, understand, and evaluate these three components.

Here are some hints about how to get a fix on an argument and its structure:

1. Each part of a well-crafted argument serves a purpose for the larger argument. When reading, try to determine why the author has spent time writing each paragraph. What does it "do" for the author's argument?
2. Identify "signposts," the basic structural cues in a piece of writing. Is the reading divided into chapters or sections? Are there subheads within the reading? Subheads under subheads?
3. Concentrate on topic sentences, which are usually the first sentences of each paragraph, and which usually are miniature arguments. Important topic sentences function as sub-points in the larger argument. (They also should tell you what the paragraph that follows will be about.) When reading, try to identify how topic sentences support the larger argument.
4. When you see evidence being used, try to identity the part of the argument it is being used to support. Evidence is the building blocks of historical arguments.
5. ***Pay careful attention to transitions***. In the best writing, transitions provide vital pieces of the argument by explaining the relationship between points or by suggesting the hierarchy of points in the argument.
6. Identify explicit references to rival scholarly positions. Moments when a scholar refers directly to the work of another scholar are important in understanding the questions at stake.
7. Focus on "strategic concessions." Often authors seem to be backtracking, or giving ground, only to try to strengthen their cases. Examine such instances in your readings closely. Often, these signal moments where authors are in direct conversation with other scholars. Such moments may help steer you toward the argument.

8. Remember that incoherence also is a possibility. Sometimes it is difficult to determine how a section of a piece is structured or what its purpose might be. Remember that authors do not always do their jobs, and there may be incoherent or unstructured portions of essays. ***Trust yourself to have the ability to know when a writer fails to make sense***.
9. Finally, remember that most of us cannot read a piece of scholarship from start to finish and hope to understand its structure. Most of us need to examine it (or sections of it) several times.

Additionally, here are three big questions to ask of secondary sources, primary documents, and even works of literature:

- **What is the author saying? What does he or she want us to learn from his or her work?** In other words, what is the author's central claim or thesis? Then, you can ask what allows the author to back up his or her claim. The thesis of a work in history, or in historiography, often tries to explain how or why something happened. This means that the author will have to: (1) describe what happened (the who, where, when, what of the subject); and (2) explain or analyze how or why it happened. It may help to think about what picture emerges from an author's work and what explanation he or she gives about why the picture looks the way that it does.

- **Why does the author say what he or she says?** Historians often are engaged in dialogues with other professionals. Is the author arguing with a rival interpretation? What is it? Sometimes historians take aim at conventional wisdom; if you think this is the case, then you need to consider what the author is trying to challenge or complicate. What deeper agenda might be represented by this effort?

- **In what ways is the author's argument weak or vulnerable?** Good historians try to make a case that their conclusion or interpretation is correct. But

cases are rarely airtight. How and where is the author vulnerable? Where is the evidence thin? What other interpretations of the author's evidence might be possible? At what points is the author's logic suspect?

II. Suggestions for Writing

The skills necessary for "predatory" reading translate into many of the skills required to write with clarity and persuasion. The more skilled you become at figuring out how an author structures his or her argument, the more skilled you will become at putting together your own arguments.

Interpreting a text and then writing about it can be a tricky enterprise, and at the very least you will need to consider the following in the effort:

- What is the purpose of the author? What evidence can you marshal to support your claim?
- What argument and strategy does she or he use to achieve her or his goals?
- What are the presuppositions and values – in the text, and in your head when you engage the text?
- Who is the author and what is her or his place in society? You will have to justify your thinking about this.
- Why did the author create the text?
- What is the text trying to do? How does the text make its case? What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal? How does it carry out this strategy?
- Who is the intended audience of the text? How might this influence its rhetorical strategy?
- To which arguments or concerns does the author respond that are *not* clearly stated?
- Do you think the author is credible and reliable? Why?
- What is the significance of the text? What does it teach you?

As you prepare your answers to these questions, you will lead yourself toward an interpretation about the text. And this interpretation will need to be justified and defended. Your defense will constitute your argument about the text.

In general, please consider the following guidelines as you write:

- **Above all, assume that you are writing for a general audience and not one that is familiar with the text you are discussing. Why? What does this assumption force you to do?**

- Typically, there are three parts to a paper:

  The introduction is usually one paragraph, or perhaps two. Its purpose is to: (1) set out the problem to be discussed; (2) suggest the structure of the argument; and (3) CLEARLY STATE THE THESIS. To succeed in writing a strong introduction, you will need to establish the issue your paper confronts. Where and when are we? What are we examining? It is especially important to clearly define the limits of your exploration. You also will need to set the tone of your paper. And make sure you convey that the topic is of vital concern. Above all you must let your reader know where you are headed – how you plan to tackle the subject – without giving away your best and most dramatic ideas.

  The body usually takes up several pages, and constitutes the bulk of your paper. Here is where you offer support for your argument. You therefore will need to ask yourself, "What (evidence) do I need to support my argument?" The general movement in the body is from the general to the specific. Start with general statements, such as: “U.S. federal policy toward native peoples aimed at either assimilating or exterminating them.” Then, move on to specific statements which support your general statement, such as “The origins of the policy of assimilation can be traced back to George

Washington's aide, Henry Knox."

In writing paragraphs, remember that each one requires a topic sentence, and that a key job of the topic sentence is to tell the reader what the paragraph will be about. As the body of the paper must flow from one idea to the next, transitions are critically important. This linking of ideas is accomplished through transitional phrases. There are transitions between paragraphs, and transitions within paragraphs. Often the last sentence of a paragraph begins to guide the reader to the next idea. Alternatively, the topic sentence of the next paragraph may accomplish this.

The conclusion is usually one paragraph long and briefly recapitulates your thesis. But the conclusion should do more than simply re-state the argument. It also should suggest why your argument is important or raise a larger question.