

## Historiography: or, How to Write the History of History

Ever hear the phrase “a pitcher’s pitcher?” (If not, you should root for a better baseball team.) It refers to knowledge that insiders value—in this case, a pitcher’s throwing techniques that only fellow pitchers appreciate. Historiography is similar, minus the curveballs and sliders, though there are some screwballs. A subject’s historiography outlines how and why interpretations have changed over time. In other words, it is the history of history. And, just as good pitchers study their predecessors, so, too, do good historians study their predecessors.

### **Step 1: Assemble a Reading List**

Historiography gauges the scholarly opinions found in secondary sources about a topic. As a result, a historiography will be wide in scope. Assemble a list of all the sources related to your chosen topic. These days, meeting secondary sources is easy. Here are some places to start:

- Reference librarians and subject bibliographers in Memorial Library
- Bibliographies, encyclopedias, and other reference works
- The introduction and bibliography of recent secondary works
- Literature reviews in scholarly journals
- Your professor or TA

If your list begins to have hundreds or thousands of entries, narrow your topic. Rather than looking at the French Revolution, focus instead on the roles of women in the French Revolution.

### **Step 2: Take the Right Kind of Notes**

Reading for historiography is not the same as reading for content. Reading for content typically means figuring out who was where, when, and why. When reading for historiography, you are more interested in *how* and *why the author* wrote what they wrote. To answer these questions, take notes on the text’s scope, methodology, theoretical underpinnings, primary sources, and, above all, argument.

### **Step 3: Step Back**

Good notes only go so far. Next, you must identify patterns among the texts. To do this, use your notes to answer questions like these:

- How have previous historians answered the question they are grappling with?
- Are there different answers to the question at different periods?
- What are the biggest changes in the literature? When and why did these changes occur?
- What assumptions have historians made in examining this subject? Are they good assumptions?
- Why have historians focused on (or, conversely, ignored) the topic?
- Are there many disagreements among historians on this topic? What are they?

- Who is criticizing whom and why?
- Why do historians ask so many darn questions?

#### **Step 4: Put Your Work in Perspective**

Don't let the expansiveness of the secondary sources overwhelm you. Remember that historiography should highlight how your work is unique, original, and exciting, not prevent you from writing it! Ask yourself: "How does my work fit in with what other historians have said?" Keeping this in mind will keep your focus narrow. Of course, even this question is broad. To help make answering it possible, try breaking the question down into these related ones:

- Am I asking the same questions as scholars before me? If so, how is my method or answer different?
- Am I combining theories and/or methods that have not been combined before?
- Have other scholars looked at my primary sources? If so, how have they dealt with them?
- What does my account of the subject highlight that other historians have missed?
- What does my interpretation explain that other interpretations don't?

#### **Step 5: Write It!**

The historiography section in your essay will be significantly shorter than the notes you took while researching it. You will be condensing a wide range of scholarship into a cohesive discussion that addresses a central question.

Like the rest of your paper, however, your historiography section will have an argument. Don't just make observations about what other historians have said across time. Assess *why* they have said these things and, more importantly, what the limits of these interpretations are.

Historiography does not just survey old interpretations—it *tells us what is new about your interpretation*. Without comparing and contrasting your perspective to those of other scholars, readers won't know if what you are saying is original.

Do all this and who knows: you might just become a screwball!