

2 Hunting for information

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen

Key points in Chapter 2

- Begin from the short, general accounts in order to gain an overview.
- Decide which sources to proceed to next. These will be the sources which are right for you because they relate to questions to which *you* want to find answers.
- Effort will be needed to find them. They will not arrive, unsolicited, in plain brown packages, on your desk.
- Seek out sources which are particularly illuminating. They may be monographs or articles in journals. Use them selectively to add refinement to your work.
- When you are familiar with the topic, seek out sources which give sharp interpretations, theories and arguments.

READING FOR AN ESSAY or assignment is, it would seem, an activity very unlike ancient villagers hunting a mammoth or an Eskimo searching arctic ice for seals, but you should recognise some similarities by the end of this chapter.

The use of reading lists

Students often begin work for an assignment or essay with a list of sources from their teacher or tutor. If the reading list includes comments on the sources the list is a lot more helpful, but either way the list is usually students' initial guide, but it is only the beginning. The list should be subjected to a number of questions that relate to your needs. Are all the sources necessary for you? Are the sources easily available? Are they of the same type? Should some sources be used before others? Are all the sources equally helpful? Are there other, more helpful, sources that are not listed? When considering these

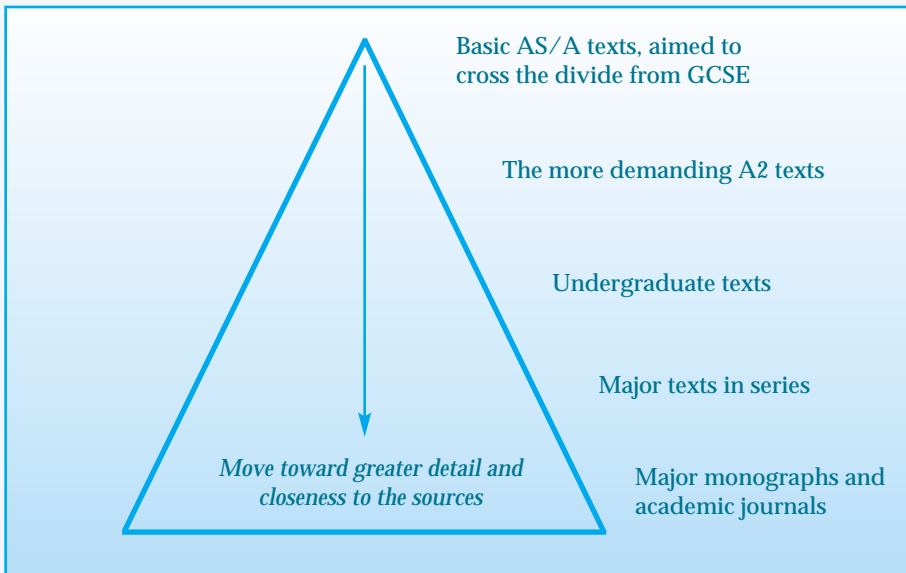


questions, have the categorisation of sources given below in mind.

The hierarchy of texts

If you look at a library History shelf you will see a range of types of books. This is one categorisation - but you can make your own.

- Short summary reviews, 100 to 150 pages, such as Lancaster Pamphlets or Macmillan - Studies in European History series.
- Students' basic texts of narrative and analysis, such as Hodder - Access to History series, Longman - Seminar Studies, Manchester University Press - New Frontiers in History series or Routledge - Historical Connections series.
- Major texts, often in a series, which thoroughly cover several aspects of history over, say, 80 years - for example Longman's Foundations of Modern Britain or the Short Oxford History of the Modern World.
- Texts which bring together work on particular themes, sometimes in series, for example Macmillan's Social History in Perspective series or texts, such as Longman's Profiles in Power series, assembled round a person or collections of essays on a topic, such as Macmillan's Problems in Focus series.
- The next step in thoroughness and complexity can be represented by major works on a particular topic: for example J.J. Scarisbrick's *Henry VIII* (1968) or John Röhl's *The Kaiser and His Court* (1995).



The hierarchy of texts



There is a similar hierarchy for History journals. They range from useful articles in general History magazines, such as the *BBC History Magazine*, to shorter student-centred articles in *new perspective*, *History Review*, *Modern History Review* and *History Today* through *History*, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, *the Historical Journal*, *English History Review*, *Past and Present* to journals, such as *Economic History Review*, *Ecclesiastical History*, *European Review of History* and *The Local Historian*, which serve sub-disciplines of History.

Stage 1: an appropriate point of entry

The point to be made is that, depending on how well you know the topic because of previous work, you should enter the information chain (the hierarchy of information) at the appropriate level and avoid the temptation to enter at too high a level.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that you know nothing about the topic. What is the best strategy to follow when you have access to a rich array of books and journals? As the topic is new to you, your first task is to gain a general overview which will give you some perspective over the whole topic. Once you have an overall view you will be less likely to make misjudgements with reading choice or to be bogged down with information, the significance of which will be unclear to you. Therefore, first find a short summary or general account to read. At this stage your notes should be general rather than detailed and, as you read, reference to a chronology or, better still, your creation of a chronology (on a separate piece of paper) will help you with orientation. You may find a short summary or general account in a Lancaster Pamphlet, Hodder - Access to History or a Longman - Seminar Studies type book. If you cannot find a short summary then a good encyclopedia account would be better than nothing.

In addition to your short notes and a chronology, a list of questions, to which you will later seek answers (write them, either at the bottom of your pages as you write notes or on a separate sheet) is even more useful, because it will prime your mind to search for what you need to deepen your understanding.

Stage 2: further steps towards topic mastery

Having gained a foundation of understanding, you are ready for the next stage of research into your topic. This stage will require you to consider the books from your teacher's or tutor's list and books listed in bibliographies at the end of the shorter studies. Bibliographies which include comments about the books are particularly helpful. At this second stage you will probably use two kinds of books. You will



read chapters, or parts of chapters, of major texts and monographs (books on only one subject). Your notes at this second stage will be more selective but more thorough.

Stage 3: adding class-leading refinement

When you have both an overview and a good grounding on the topic from stages 1 and 2 your final stage of work could be to search out books or articles which are particularly sharp or controversial in their interpretation and analysis, and books which give powerful insights. Examples of the latter could be Friedrich Meinecke's *The German Catastrophe*, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* or Fritz Fischer's *Germany's War Aims in the First World War*, and these books, which can add greatly to your understanding, are not necessarily huge in size. You should see yourself as a sort of Inspector Morse and develop a detective's 'nose' for really helpful books. You can gain an idea which these are from repeated references in the books you read, from footnotes and from comments in bibliographies. Academic journal articles, usually focused on a theme or argument, summarise recent research or new interpretations. They can be dense and turgid but the skilful reader will speedily extract the key ideas and evidence. Higher-level texts usually have references that lead you to articles. Use of this type of information will convey to those who read your work that you are an experienced and capable information and interpretation acquirer and that you have begun to make inroads into the mastery of the topic.

The three-stage strategy outlined here is a simplification of the procedure a skilled student will follow. In practice, you will probably work on stage 3 while continuing with stage 2.

Time for securing sources

Alert students find the most important resources quickly. You may find the best books in libraries which you want to consult are not available until your assignment is finished because smarter students, who are more organised and quicker, take out the texts before you.