

13 Accomplished History reading

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 and select your magnification.

Key points in Chapter 13

- Accomplished History readers are alert to differences in style and standpoint of History writers.
- Critical readers are not passive absorbers of information about the past but assess the writer's presentation and interpretation.

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD the joke about a special type of school pupil who can sit in a class and take information through the ears to the hand that holds a pen, writing notes, without it passing through the brain. High-grade students are very unlikely to be like that and if you have made only some progress with the skills described in this study guide you will not be one of them. This joke, however, points, at a much more sophisticated level, to the relationship between History students and the books they read.

History books that did not carry some reflection of the writer would be as dry as *Kessings Archives*, a weekly publication of raw news data. A history book is one person's account of the past and, in several ways, it will reflect the writer. There is a hint of this idea in Hans Holborn's comment 'Knowledge of the past can only be obtained through the subjective experience of the scholar'.

Writers of history and their books

A book will reflect the writer in several ways. This can be in the author's chosen focus, say, political history, or economic and social history, cultural history or gender issues. The book will also reflect a style of presentation, say strongly narrative style or a heavily analytical style. The book, also, may be associated with one of the speculative philosophies of History, St Augustine's, Immanuel Kant's, Spengler's or, more notably, Marx's interpretation of History. Christopher Hill's



69-page pamphlet (still in print since 1940) *The English Revolution 1640* is a particularly sharp example of the Marxist interpretation. Beyond these individualities, the writer may favour one form of explanation over another. Readers will need to delve into discussions on the critical philosophy of History to have a fuller understanding of the explanation issue: *Undergraduate History Study – The Guide to Success* (Sempringham, 1997) is a helpful point of departure for these questions. The reality of historical research is that much evidence on what we really want to know about the past is ambiguous or absent. This point is nicely made in Hugh Sebag-Montefiore's account in *Enigma: the Battle for the Code* (which deciphered the Nazi radio orders in the Second World War). Sebag-Montefiore wrote that it was not the brilliant scientist Alan Turing who made the crucial breakthrough but a 22-year-old History undergraduate, Harry Hinsley '... who in the course of his medieval studies, had become adept at making the most of scant historical evidence'. It is because information is incomplete that space is provided to reflect, to an extent, the *History writer's* ideas about human beings, the possibilities of human behaviour and the nature of the world.

Critical readers

As soon as the uncontentious, shorter overview texts are left behind, good readers are alert to notice claims unsupported by convincing evidence, dubious deductions and poor balance in books. Sophisticated students are not passive recipients of a book's contents but intellectually active and critical. They not only read the text but 'read' the standpoint, and the implied assumptions, of the writer. Readers of History should be particularly alert to the choice and use of concepts and terms. They are used by historians, in a way which is not dissimilar to Immanuel Kant's categories (which, he claimed, are the concepts which order our thoughts, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781), to give coherence to their account of the past and, thereby, the concepts mould their account. Also, a historian's chosen concepts may not be appropriate or valid. If you approach History books in this more critical and 'knowing' way you will gain far more from what you read and you will be on course for greater enjoyment in your studies and a top grade for AS/A History and beyond.