

# Close Reading

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about what is probably the most important skill historians need: critical reading. Events are constantly being recorded and over the past century we have come up with many new ways to record events. Writing, though, has always been the dominant way events were recorded. This means that if we are to study history to learn about the past and prepare for the future, we will have to be strong readers. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Close Reading
  - a. Source 1: Newspaper Editorial
  - b. Source 2: Newspaper Article
2. Top 4 Ways to Vet Your Sources



## BEFORE YOU START

What do you think it means to read like a historian?

## 1. Close Reading

To better understand an event or time period, a historian needs to be a careful reader. In Challenges 1 and 2 of this Unit, we discussed the importance of analyzing a source to determine whether it's relevant to your goals. In this challenge, we will dive deeper into what to do with a source once you've found it.

The strategies historians use to examine historical sources are useful for understanding many other kinds of information. Whether you're working on an assignment for school or a project for work, close reading can help. When you read a source closely, you look at several layers of information that enable you to place it in context and understand its meaning. Doing a close reading often means reading the text multiple times, with a different set of questions in mind each time.

Let's look at the different kinds of reading historians do with their sources, as well as the questions they ask with each.

- **Reading for origin and context:** Who wrote this text? When and where did they write it? What do I know about events happening at that time?
- **Reading for meaning:** What is the author's main idea? What is the text generally about?
- **Reading for argument:** What is the author's point of view? Are they trying to convince the reader of

something? What are the different parts of their argument? Is it supported by evidence?

Let's walk through an example of how these close reading questions might work in everyday life. We'll examine two sample pieces of information about a given topic that you might find in, say, a well-known local newspaper.

### 1a. Source 1: Newspaper Editorial

Consider the first source, an editorial written by a local high school teacher giving his opinion that the city council should approve funding for a new athletic complex that would benefit students in the community. Here is an excerpt:

*As a teacher and a member of this community, I have seen firsthand the positive effects of athletic competition for my students. A new athletic complex for the town would benefit not only the students but also their families, who would have better access to fitness.*

Types of Reading	Questions to Ask	Answer
Reading for origin and context	Who wrote this?	A high school teacher who lives in the community and works closely with students.
Reading for meaning	What is the author's main idea?	Editorials are opinions—he is trying to convince the community to fund the athletic complex. He may leave out information that could hurt his case, such as the opinions of other school or community members who disagree with him.
Reading for argument	What is the author's position?	What evidence does he use to support it? The teacher believes that funding the complex is in the best interest of the community. He supports his position by stating that students and families would have “better access to fitness.”

### 1b. Source 2: Newspaper Article

Now look at the second source, a newspaper article about school funding in the United States that reports on research about the effects of support for extracurricular activities. Read the excerpt below:

*The recent study by a prominent research group found that increased support for extracurricular activities like arts, athletics, and after-school programs correlated with higher student achievement. “This isn’t an unexpected finding,” said Dr. Jill Hanes, the group’s director, “but we’re glad the data supports what educators have believed for decades.”*

Types of Reading	Questions to Ask	Answer

Reading for origin and context	Who wrote this?	A journalist who interviewed researchers and academic experts.
Reading for meaning	What is the author's main idea?	An assessment of how certain types of school funding affect student achievement.
Reading for argument	What is the author's position or point of view? What evidence supports it?	The journalist set out to write an objective article that reports on the findings of experts. The article includes direct quotes from named, credible researchers.

Both of these sample sources, published in a reputable newspaper, are trustworthy, but they contain different information. An editorial relates the opinion or beliefs of the person who wrote it; a news article reports on events and issues. Reading closely will help you recognize who wrote a source, why they wrote it, and what information the source is communicating.



#### BIG IDEA

The questions we've discussed on this page are the kinds you need to ask in order to read closely and critically—like a historian. They can help you figure out the context of the text, understand its meaning, and confidently assess the reliability of what the author has written .

## 2. Top 4 Ways to Vet Your Sources



### Problem Solving: Skill Tip

Worried your sources aren't watertight? No matter if you're taking a stance on a political issue, reinforcing your work proposal with data, or trying to persuade your family and friends to donate to a good cause, you need trustworthy sources to back up your points! If your sources can't hold water, neither will your argument.

In this challenge's *Quick Tips*, use the easy checklist below to see if your sources have what it takes to stand up to scrutiny.

### Is Your Source...

- **Up-to-date?** Information changes quickly and can become outdated overnight. To ensure your information is up-to-date, check when it was posted or published, and confirm you have the most recent version. (Remember, not all topics require current sources. If you're working on a paper about the life of Martin Luther King Jr., for example, it would make sense to use newspaper articles from the time period to help reinforce your point.)
- **Qualified?** Your Uncle Stan may have a lot to say about immigration, but that doesn't make him an expert on the topic. To determine whether sources are qualified to be experts, consider their credentials and organizational affiliations. For an online source, you can also check the URL to see if that reveals anything about the source's legitimacy (for example, a .gov URL means the source is coming from the U.S.

government).

- **Accurate?** Even if a source is qualified to speak to the information it is providing, that doesn't mean the information is accurate. It's important to consider your source's sources, too. If you can't verify the information anywhere else, it might be time to consider ditching that source.
- **Biased?** Even facts can be presented with bias. So, consider whether your source is presenting information that is skewed (with political, cultural, or religious bias) to push the audience to draw a conclusion. And keep this in mind when it comes to making your own arguments, too!



#### HINT

You can download these quick tips as a PDF below to keep for yourself to ensure your sources are reliable, no matter what type of information you're looking for.



[Quick Tips: Top Four Ways to Vet Your Sources](#)



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how historians apply the skill of **close reading** to sources to deepen their understanding. You learned that close reading involves reading a source multiple times with different sets of questions in mind, pertaining to origin and context, meaning, and argument. You also viewed a demonstration of close reading through an analysis of two sources related to the topic of funding for extracurricular activities (**Source 1: Newspaper Editorial** and **Source 2: Newspaper Article**). Finally, you learned about the **top 4 ways to vet your sources** which includes checking to see if your source is up-to-date, qualified, accurate, and biased.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.