

“The Pink Sheet”

CLASS PREPARATION AND STUDYING

Basic Idea. The key to learning the complexity of material that exists in history is *multiple exposure*. That is, you learn far more by going over the material again and again, even if you miss things once in a while, than you do when you diligently try to memorize every word on every page.

Reading. Try to proceed in this order:

- (1) Decide how much time you have before you begin. Then do all of the following things at greater or lesser speed in whatever time you have.
- (2) Flip quickly through the pages assigned, looking at illustrations and scanning headlines, just to get the idea of what’s contained in the section.
- (3) Read through the entire section *quickly* but with *great concentration*, marking or underlining important things with a pencil or pen. Don’t get bogged down in things you don’t understand. Be sure to work in a place where you can concentrate very closely.
- (4) Once you’ve finished, go back and review only what you’ve marked in the text. If you understand what the passage is about just by seeing your mark, then continue on to the next one. If not, re-read the passage around the mark you don’t understand, again *quickly* but with *great concentration*, until you remember.
- (5) At the end of this process, make an entry in your notebook for each of the half-dozen or so major events or ideas contained in the reading as follows:
 - (a) label the event or idea in the margin of your notes;
 - (b) run across the page the *who, what, where, when, why, how, and so what* of the event or idea (see the reverse of this sheet). You should do all of this from memory, so that you train your mind to *recall*.
- (6) When your memory goes absolutely blank on you, go back to your marks in the text, but do so only as a last resort; you want to train your mind to recall.
- (7) Leave both vertical and horizontal spaces in your notebook between what you write. The spaces should be larger than the room you use to write in.

In Class. You should note teacher comments that add to your understanding of the material. You may often find that you have made an error of fact or interpretation in your reading notes. These are usually explained away in class. Correct your reading notes as needed. Errors of fact and of judgment are normal and should be expected, but they should become less frequent as you become more experienced. You also may find that you have completely overlooked something of importance or spent lots of time on something the teacher thinks inconsequential. What you *have* learned will prove to be valuable in tests and papers, so don’t discard it just because the teacher doesn’t mention it.

General. This system may sound time-consuming, but it works. It is considerably quicker than pounding through the pages of your text trying to master every single word. Moreover, you’ll be looking for *meaning* and *significance* as you read, and you won’t get bogged down in trivia, because you know you’ll be quizzing yourself at the end of each reading session. Finally, you’ll be exposed so many times to the material in one sitting, that you’ll become very familiar with it. Whatever time you spend on your work is utterly wasted if you don’t understand or remember it, right? Using this system, you’ll both understand and remember.

READING AND NOTE-TAKING IN HISTORY

Themes. Remember, there is no certain truth about history. The very uncertainty about history makes it challenging and stimulating, though frustrating as well. One way to proceed is to ask yourself the historian's questions:

- who* did it?
- what* did they do?
- where* did it take place?
- when* was it done?

If you have the answers to those questions, you have the *data*. But then you must ask yourself three more questions:

- why* was it done?
- how* was it done?
- so what?*

If you can answer those questions, you have produced an *analysis*, from which you can make an interpretive overview.

That means you can derive one or more *themes* from what you've studied. All important history can be understood in the form of themes. A theme is the statement of conflict and the resolution of that conflict, if any. The most obvious to spot is personal conflict (e.g., Napoleon vs. Wellington or Lincoln vs. Davis). Usually, however, more helpful are the conceptual conflicts (e.g., urban vs. rural, capitalism vs. communism, Jackson's image as a nationalist vs. Jackson's image as a states' rights advocate). There is always a conflict, so there is always a theme. In your reading notes, you should list the various themes you've encountered. Once you've done that, you will have a helpful analytical framework in which to organize the *data* in your notebook.

Matrix charts. Another helpful structure is the *matrix chart*, which is employed to compare things that are *similar, but different*. A matrix chart lists the things to be compared in a column on the left and the criteria for comparison across the top. Generally speaking, the historian's most obvious basis for comparison is the list of seven questions above: *who, what, where, when, why, how, and so what?* As you master this model, you'll want to make more complex matrix charts like this one from my own notes:

thinker	hum. nature	role gov't.	fund. value	problem	ind./state	pol./econ.
John Locke (England, 1632-1704)	rational; self-interested; equal in natural rights	preserve natural rights, especially property rights	property: "lives, liberties, and estates"	tyranny	social contract; people give up freedom to guarantee natural rights	property is a natural right; no unlimited accumulation, though
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (France, 1712-1778)	peaceful, timid, amoral, but rational; society corrupts	promote equality and execute the "general will"; create basis for morality	equality	tyranny; decadence of society	social contract; individual obligated to follow organic society's "general will"	equal distribution of property; property is a social right

This is a useful way to review the material I've read about and by Locke and Rousseau; I am contrasting the philosophers' views on human nature and the role of government, their fundamental values, the dangers or problems that most concern them, and their perspectives on the ideal relationships between the individual and the state and the political and economic spheres of life.