

## Handling scholarly literature

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An important condition for historical work is the reading and understanding of scholarly texts. The following points can help you handle such texts.

### “Skimming” texts

You can find out quickly whether a particular book is at all relevant for your theme. Read the title of the book or article carefully. Does the title help you understand what the book or text is about? Does the title make it clear which timeframe and location is the focus of the text?

“Skimming” texts

If you are still not sure whether the book is appropriate for your further work, have a look at its table of contents and bibliography. A glance at the foreword, the conclusion and the opening words of individual chapters can also serve to help you discover whether the book can provide information that you need for your research.

### Literature list

Make yourself a list – of reasonable length – of relevant books.

### Reading techniques

It is absolutely impossible to read every text from cover to cover. That is why you should give each text a cursory read. With cursory reading (also called speed reading) one deliberately looks for particular keywords and passages that contain the needed information.

Reading techniques

The next step is to read these individual passages intensively. In this case it is useful to ask the following questions:

1. What information is important for my research?
2. On which facts does the author depend to bolster his hypothesis?



## Record the important elements

While reading, you should record the key points encountered in your reading. It helps with comprehension and also lets you report on what you have read at a later time in your own words.

On the so-called "excerpt," you should mark author, title, place and year of publication of the text you have read. It is important to note each key point with its relevant page number, so you can note the location of the source in case you decide to cite the thoughts of the author in your work. Important terms, parts of sentences, sentences and passages should be written down in full. Commentary and your own thoughts about individual passages should also be included in the excerpt, but must be marked as your own notes.

»Excerpt«

## Question the literature

As with any other written source, it is also important that you pose critical questions when considering scholarly writings:

- Are the questions that the author asks answered? Is the manner in which the author comes to his answers convincing?
- Can the author show, with help from primary sources, that his statements are true, or is it mere supposition?
- Can you follow the author's line of argumentation? Are you convinced?
- Has the author illuminated all the important aspects of the theme? Did he fail to ask important questions or answer counterarguments?
- Did the author's chosen standpoint unduly limit the view of the theme?

Critical questions