

## On the Reading of Historical Texts

### *Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy*

In an essay about reading historical texts, William Willcox asks us to consider two accounts of the storming of the Bastille, one by a member of the *ancien régime* and the other by a Jacobin:

No matter how honest the two men may have been, the event described by one has a quite different flavor from that described by the other. The historian can never see the event itself, in Ranke's famous phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; he can see it only through witnesses, and is as dependent on their eyes and emotions as on their pens. This is not to say that he must share their bias; quite the contrary. But he must understand it in order to allow for it.<sup>1</sup>

The call to "understand the bias" of a source is quite common in the reflective writings of historians. Yet as a guild, historians have been uncharacteristically tight-lipped about how they do so.<sup>2</sup> This is unfortunate, for the process is by no means self-evident. How exactly do historians put emotion back into the inanimate texts that they read? How do they provide voices to people who have been dead hundreds or thousands of years? And what about students of history, for whom a historical text is most often a textbook? Are they capable of engaging in this form of textual animation? Do students realize that they are as dependent on authors' hearts as on their heads?

In asking these questions I draw on my research with historians and high school students who “thought aloud” as they reviewed a series of historical documents. I begin by providing an overview of what I learned from historians, sketching in broad strokes an image of the skilled reader of history. Next, I compare this image to what emerged from an analysis of high school students’ responses to these same documents. I then speculate about the source of differences between historians and students. I end by outlining some of the implications of this work for how we define the place of history in the school curriculum.

### THE SKILLED READING OF HISTORY

Let me begin by explaining how my readings with historians and students were generated. I sat down with eight historians and taught them to think aloud as they read documents about the Battle of Lexington, the opening volley of the Revolutionary War. (The same procedure was followed for eight high school students, but more about them later.) The think-aloud technique asks people to verbalize their thoughts as they solve complex problems or read sophisticated texts. It departs from experimental research by focusing on the intermediate processes of cognition, not just on its outcomes. Moreover, thinking aloud differs from its discredited ancestor, introspection, in two ways: First, it asks people to report their thoughts as they are heeded in memory, not minutes or days later; and, second, it asks people to verbalize the contents of their thoughts, not the processes used to generate them.<sup>3</sup>

I purposely recruited historians with varied specialties and backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Some were steeped in the colonial period, but others, such as a specialist in Japanese history and a medievalist, knew little more about the Revolution than what they remembered from high school. The texts I assembled were similarly varied, from eyewitness accounts and newspaper articles to materials rarely considered in historical research, such as a passage from a school textbook and a piece of historical fiction.<sup>5</sup> In addition to asking historians to think aloud, I asked them to rank each document in terms of its trustworthiness as a historical source.

The first text set the stage for the other seven documents they would read. This was a letter sent on April 28, 1775, by Joseph Warren, president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, to Benjamin Franklin, the colonists’ representative in London. After the bloodshed at Lexington, Warren assembled depositions from eyewitnesses, attached a cover

letter, and sent the bundle off to Franklin. In his letter, he characterized the events at Lexington as “marks of ministerial vengeance against [Massachusetts-Bay] for refusing with her sister colonies a submission to slavery.”<sup>6</sup> Jack, a specialist in Native American history well versed in the colonial period, read this sentence and remarked:

What I think of is a book I read by Rakove<sup>7</sup> talking about how one of the problems at the time was getting the colonies to hang together, and to try to get some unity. So the “refusing with her sister colonies” is kind of an appeal to the other groups.

The subtlety of this comment is easily missed. To begin, this is not a commentary on the literal text read by the historian, for there is nothing in the text about discord or disunity among the colonies. Furthermore, while it might make sense to see the letter as an “appeal,” the letter was sent to Franklin for circulation among members of Parliament, so the appeal is literally directed to Great Britain. Indeed, what Jack sees here cannot be found on the page or represented in a diagram of textual propositions. What is most important to him is not what the text says, but what it does.

And what does the text do, according to Jack? First of all, it casts the confrontation at Lexington not as a minor squabble between nervous farmers and tired soldiers, but as a meeting of the broadest import—a fateful clash between representatives of the king and those of the thirteen American colonies. The phrase “refusing with her sister colonies” carries a dual purpose: It provides a frame in which to view the deaths of eight men, and it asks readers in Baltimore or Savannah (to whom this document would also be circulated) to bind their own fates to their northern cousins. In other words, this “appeal” was only partly designed to stir passions in London; it was also intended to rally the forces at home.

It is not the literal text, or even the inferred text (as that word is commonly used), that this historian comprehends, but the subtext, a text of hidden and latent meanings. Subtexts of historical documents can be divided into two distinct but related spheres: the text as a rhetorical artifact and the text as a human artifact. In the first sphere, the text as a rhetorical artifact, historians try to reconstruct authors’ purposes, intentions, and goals. But the subtext goes beyond a reconstruction of the author’s intentions, beyond the use of language as a linguistic technology for persuasion. In fact, many subtexts include elements that work at cross-purposes with authors’ intentions, bringing to the surface

convictions authors may have been unaware of or may have wished to conceal. These aspects fall into the second sphere, the text as a human artifact that frames reality and discloses information about its author's assumptions, world view, and beliefs. Such a reading leaps from the words authors use to the types of people authors are, a reading that sees texts not as ways to describe the world but as ways to construct it.

Let's return to Jack's reading of the Warren letter. What did he need to know in order to see this letter as an appeal to the other colonies? To be sure, he needed to know the secondary literature of the Revolution—in fact, he quotes a monograph by the historian Jack Rakove. But some of the eight historians I studied lacked such detailed knowledge and could not identify the Battle of Saratoga, virtual representation, the Townshend Acts, the Proclamation of 1763, and internal taxation—stock identification questions in a chapter review of a U.S. history textbook and part of a short quiz I gave to historians as part of the task.<sup>8</sup> Yet even among these “less knowledgeable” historians, we see the same general approach, if not the same specificity, in how they read documents. For example, Fred, the medievalist, made this comment on Warren's letter:

It's a way to try and get people in England to see things their way; it's encouraging loyalty to the king but it's saying the government has messed up. It clearly shows that the Regular troops are guilty of the violence at Lexington. . . . It's not just a recapitulation of events, but it in fact frames events in terms of . . . the relationship of the crown to its government, and these are two different things.

Despite his lack of factual knowledge (he answered only a third of the identification questions), Fred's reading bears a strong likeness to that of his more knowledgeable colleagues. For Fred, the document goes beyond a neutral description of events and attempts to “affect people's opinions,” to reassure them that, despite the bloodshed at Lexington, the colonists still pledge “allegiance to the king.”<sup>9</sup> In this reading, the letter “frames events” in terms of the relationship of the crown to its government, with the colonists pledging loyalty to the former while indicting the policies of the latter. In other words, Warren's letter absolves the king by laying the guilt at the feet of his appointees.

In both of these readings, the literal text is only the shell of the text comprehended by historians. Texts come not to convey information, to tell stories, or even to set the record straight. Instead, they are slippery, cagey, and protean, reflecting the uncertainty and disingenuity of the real world. Texts emerge as “speech acts,”<sup>10</sup> social interactions set down

on paper that can be understood only by reconstructing the social context in which they occurred. The comprehension of text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose, and plan—the same set of concepts we use to decipher human action.

## THE READING OF SCHOOL TEXTS

The view of texts as speech acts may apply to the primary sources I gave historians, but what about school texts? On the surface, such texts are worlds apart from the patently polemical documents these historians reviewed. It would seem that the school text, written so that students can read and retain the information it contains,<sup>11</sup> falls into a different category and would be less amenable to subtextual readings. To test this, I had historians read the following excerpt from an American history textbook:

In April 1775, General Gage, the military governor of Massachusetts, sent out a body of troops to take possession of military stores at Concord, a short distance from Boston. At Lexington, a handful of “embattled farmers,” who had been tipped off by Paul Revere, barred the way. The “rebels” were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground. The English fired a volley of shots that killed eight patriots. It was not long before the swift-riding Paul Revere spread the news of this new atrocity to the neighboring colonies. The patriots of all of New England, although still a handful, were now ready to fight the English. Even in faraway North Carolina, patriots organized to resist them.<sup>12</sup>

When asked to rank the relative trustworthiness of the eight documents, historians ranked this excerpt dead last, even less trustworthy than an excerpt from Howard Fast's novel *April Morning*. And for good reason, since the above passage contradicts primary accounts from both British and American sides, neither of which portrays the minutemen as “standing their ground” or “barring the way.” But beyond noting the factual inconsistencies of this account, historians constructed elaborate subtexts of its latent meaning. Fred's comment on this passage was fairly representative: “[The excerpt] aggrandizes the heroism and resolve of the people who begin the war on our side. They are informed, they ride fast horses, and they stand their ground.”

Students' responses followed a different course. I should begin by noting that these eight students were no ordinary group. They had average SAT scores of 1227, well above the national average for college-bound seniors. Their grade point averages (GPAs) were equally distinguished, with a mean of 3.5, and with two of eight students maintaining

a perfect 4.0. Moreover, these students, when compared with their peers, knew a lot of history. All had taken four years of history courses, and all scored significantly higher than a national sample on items from the history examination of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>13</sup> In short, these students represented the successes of our educational system.

The responses of Derek,<sup>14</sup> an ambitious college-bound senior, are illuminating. Derek maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA, scored 630 (verbal) and 690 (math) on his SAT, and was enrolled in an Advanced Placement American history course when I interviewed him. As I listened to and later analyzed Derek's reading of these documents, I was struck by how well he embodies many of the features of the good reader described in the education literature. He carefully monitors his comprehension and uses reading strategies such as backtracking when meaning breaks down; he pauses and formulates summaries after each paragraph; and he tries to connect the content of what he reads to what he already knows.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Derek rated the textbook as the most trustworthy of the eight documents he reviewed. Despite excellent reading skills and in-depth factual knowledge, Derek believed that the textbook excerpt was "just reporting the facts—"The rebels were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground." Just concise, journalistic in a way, just saying what happened." Nor was this response atypical. Another student characterized the textbook as "straight information," a neutral account of the events at Lexington Green. For such students, the textbook, not the eyewitness accounts, emerged as the primary source.

Overall students had little problem formulating the main idea of these documents, predicting what might come next, locating information in the text, and answering literal and inferential questions about the content of the text. When analyzing the textbook, however, few students recognized that labeling the encounter at Lexington as an "atrocious" slants events and sets off associations with other "atrocious"—the Holocaust, My Lai, Kampuchea. None accounted for the quotation marks bracketing the word "rebels" or speculated about the author's intentions in putting them there. Students displayed little sensitivity to the contrast drawn between the "embattled farmers" and the troops of King George, a contrast that appeals to our tendency to side with the underdog. Unlike historians, no student commented on the progression in the description of the colonists, who go from "embattled farmers" to "rebels" and finally, shedding their quotation marks, emerge as "patri-

ots." No student noticed how the text hedges on the firing of the first shot, yet is constructed so that a causal relationship is easily perceived between the statements "The 'rebels' . . . stood their ground" and "the English fired a volley of shots." In sum, students failed to see the text as a social instrument skillfully crafted to achieve a social end.

We should not be overly critical of students, since these aspects of text, while central to the skilled reading of history, are rarely addressed in school curricula or in the educational or psychological literature on reading comprehension.<sup>16</sup> For example, one article on skilled reading lays out a "Taxonomy of Comprehension Failures," cataloging the things that can go wrong during reading. The authors cite such problems as the failure to understand a word, the failure to understand a sentence, the failure to understand the relationship between sentences, and the failure to understand how the whole text fits together. But no mention is made of the failure to understand the author's intention, the failure to grasp the polemic of the text, the failure to recognize the connotations (not just the denotations) of words, the failure to situate the text in a disciplinary matrix, or the failure to do any of a host of other things that loom large when reading historical texts. Similarly, these aspects of reading are overlooked when researchers train their lens on "comprehension monitoring." Because skilled comprehension is viewed as a relatively fluid and automatic process, comprehension monitoring is often seen in light of what might be called the "medical model of reading"—something readers do when they are in trouble or bogged down.

Annemarie Palincsar and Ann Brown, for example, see skilled reading as a relatively automatic process until "a triggering event alerts [readers] to a comprehension failure." At that point, expert readers must "slow down and allot extra processing to the problem area. They must employ debugging devices or active strategies that take time and effort."<sup>17</sup> But with texts that have larger rhetorical and social purposes, readers may also "slow down and allot extra processing" for reasons we have yet to understand. For instance, as historical texts become rich and conceptually dense, readers may slow down not because they fail to comprehend, but because the very act of comprehension demands that they stop to *talk* with their texts. This is the point behind Roland Barthes's distinction between "readerly" (*lisible*) and "writerly" (*scriptible*) texts.<sup>18</sup> Readerly texts are conventional documents that convey nonproblematic, straightforward messages, like how one changes the oil of a car or how a volcano spews forth lava. Such texts conform to ordinary expectations of meaning

and are often processed passively and automatically. However, writerly texts, in the words of David Harlan,

challenge the conventions that isolate and identify meaning in the readerly text. In order to find meaning in the “writerly” text, the reader has to enter the text personally, has to participate actively in the fabrication of whatever meaning is to be carried away.<sup>19</sup>

How do skilled readers of history enter into the text to “participate actively in the fabrication of meaning”? How do they “write” texts while reading them? One way they do so is by simulating an interpsychic process intrapsychically. In plain English, they pretend to deliberate with others by talking to themselves.<sup>20</sup> Keen observers of the reading process have long noted this phenomenon. For example, in a prescient essay that anticipated later trends in reader-response theory, Walker Gibson claimed that we read texts by simulating two readers, an “actual reader” and a “mock reader.”<sup>21</sup> The actual reader is an overall monitor of the meanings constructed during reading. But the mock reader is the reader who allows himself or herself to be taken in by rhetorical devices, to feel their effect, and to experience the associations triggered by crafted prose. When texts are straightforward and highly probative, the distance between the actual and the mock reader is minimal—indeed, there may be no distance at all. But with other texts, a chasm can form between the actual and the mock reader, and when this distance becomes too great, the actual reader intercedes and says with finality, “Enough! This text is not to be believed.”

The voices of actual and mock readers were audible in the protocols of historians, but other voices could be heard as well. The reading of history is complicated by the fact that historians are rarely the intended audience for the documents they review. As eavesdroppers on conversations between others, historians must try to understand both the authors’ intentions and the audiences’ reactions, all the while gauging their own reactions to this exchange. Indeed, sometimes the mock reader becomes a mock writer, joining in to rewrite a document with an author long departed. The example in Table 3.1 illustrates the dynamic interplay of this process.

Alice, a specialist in seventeenth-century England who trained at the University of Wisconsin, read Joseph Warren’s cover letter to Benjamin Franklin. Table 3.1 shows an excerpt from her protocol. The first three lines, a congeries of pronouns, convey the complexity of reading history: Who are all these people? The protocol begins with the historian as actual

**TABLE 3.1**  
**Excerpts from Alice’s Reading of Joseph Warren’s Cover Letter**

TEXT	PROTOCOL
<i>Friends and fellow subjects:</i>	1. Again, I think I dealt with the rhetoric there, 2. you know, we know that once you know the 3. true story, you will sympathize with us. 4. I mean here is who really started the hostilities. 5. It’s a way of telling, you know, we are loyal 6. fellow subjects but, you know, look what’s 7. happened under this ministry.
<i>hostilities are already commenced in the colony by the troops under the command of General Gage,</i>	8. Again, between the lines one reads, either 9. you’re not getting any account at all, you 10. know, the news is being withheld [unclear], 11. or you’re not getting a true account, or 12. you’re not getting an authentic account, and 13. right away I’m going to tell you that it’s an 14. “inhuman proceeding.” Presumably, 15. again the rhetoric of it is that if you 16. knew about it, and you may not know about 17. it because you have not gotten a true, authentic 18. account, you would see how inhuman this 19. was, and again you would be on their 20. [side], the presumption is that you’re an ally 21. and that we have indeed a common enemy, 22. the common enemy being the minister who 23. may not have given you a true and authentic 24. account and tried to withhold this 25. information from you or may have tried at 26. least to put the information in such a way 27. that you are not aware of how inhuman this 28. proceeding was. Again, “alarming 29. occasion,” again this sense of urgency is 30. being emphasized here.
<i>and it being of the greatest importance that an early, true, and authentic account of this inhuman proceeding should be known to you,</i>	31. And there again, the inhabitants, so-called, 32. you know, have done absolutely nothing in 33. this account to call down any kind of military 34. action. They’re just inhabitants, they’re not 35. described as armed, they’re not described as 36. military, they’re not described as having done 37. anything provocative and immediately, as they 38. see the Regulars, they begin to disperse. In 39. other words, we are as innocent as lambs. 40. “Vengeance” is very strong of a word, typical 41. kind of overlay. 42. Note “we’re not alone in this fellows” [laughter]. 43. A pregnant “but” . . . you still have 44. time to intervene, we’re still loyal, but we’re 45. hard pressed. We still use the “royal 46. sovereign,” we are still fellow subjects of the King.
<i>By the clearest depositions relative to this transaction, it will appear that on the night preceding the nineteenth of April instant . . . the Town of Lexington . . . was alarmed, and a company of the inhabitants mustered on the occasion; that the Regular troops, on their way to Concord, marched into the said town of Lexington, and the said company, on their approach, began to disperse. These, brethren, are marks of ministerial vengeance against this colony, for refusing, with her sister colonies, a submission to slavery. But . . .</i>	

Note: Text in italics was part of the primary source document that Alice read aloud.

reader (line 1), acknowledging that she has already commented on a particular aspect of the text. But in line 2 she quickly assumes the role of mock writer, co-constructing the text with Warren (as indicated by the use of “we” in line 2 and “us” in line 3) to address their joint audience—not as “them,” but as “you,” the inhabitants of Great Britain and, later, King George himself. Lines 4–7 further highlight the flow of communication between actual and mock reader. In line 4, the mock reader begins by laying bare the subtext of the sentence “hostilities are already commenced.” Monitoring the mock reader, the actual reader offers a clarifying “It’s a way of telling,” but then flips back to the voice of the mock reader—“we are loyal fellow subjects” (lines 5–6). In the next section (lines 8–30), we find an explicit statement by the actual reader that she is constructing a message not found in the manifest text. Here again “you” refers to the mock audience, for whom the historian (taking on the voice of Joseph Warren) provides a running subtextual commentary. In lines 31–39, the historian summarizes what she has read (“they’re not described as . . .”), but adds a few interpretive markers such as “so-called” (line 31). In the final comment of this section (line 39), Alice turns from a review of the text to a summary of the subtext, again taking the voice of the mock reader: “we are as innocent as lambs.”

In this excerpt, reading simulates the give and take of social exchange. First we hear Warren’s voice, enunciating the real message behind his stilted prose. Next there is “you,” the citizens of Great Britain or King George himself. Then there is “we,” a reference to the historian as mock writer co-constructing the text with Warren. Finally, there is the “I” of the actual reader, who acts as stage director for this cast of mental characters, dictating their lines, monitoring what they say, and ultimately noting the breach between her own understanding and the claims made by the mock reader. And it is this “I” who ultimately breaks down in laughter at the disparity between her own thoughts and those of the characters she has created.

Written words fail to capture the elements of burlesque that characterize this reading. This is a ludic reading that jokes and jibes, that adopts mock-heroic and mock-tragic voices, and that ultimately degenerates into laughter when the actual and mock reader become so estranged that they barely recognize each other. Indeed, the historian’s laughter in line 42 hints at this breach. The mock reader turns into an object of ridicule enunciating her lines in melodramatic parody.

Here reading moves beyond an author–reader dialogue to embrace a set of conversations—exchanges between actual and mock reader,

between mock writer and mock audience, between mock reader and mock audience, and between any one of these characters and the “I” of the actual reader. Instead of a single “executive” directing a top-down process, mature readers of history may create inside their own heads an “executive board,” where members clamor, shout, and wrangle over controversial points.<sup>22</sup> Texts are not “processed” as much as they are resurrected, and the image of reader as information processor or computing device, which often dominates current discussions of reading, seems less apt than another metaphor: the reader as necromancer.

To illustrate how readers reconstructed authors from their textual remainders,<sup>23</sup> let me describe another one of the sources I used, a diary entry by Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College in 1775. Stiles not only wrote about his life as a college administrator but described in great detail the unfolding events of his day. His entry about Lexington began: “Major Pitcairn [the British commander] who was a good man in a bad cause, insisted upon it to the day of his death, that the colonists fired first. . . . He expressly says he did not see who fired first; and yet believed the peasants began.”<sup>24</sup> At this point, Mary, a specialist in Japanese history, commented:

Ezra Stiles for all his supposed democracy comes across as very kind of classist in a way. I mean, you can tell that Pitcairn is from the same class as Stiles. Maybe not, but they both are men of integrity because of their upbringing, so he’s “a good man in a bad cause.” And I get that sense from some of the terms that Stiles uses—I don’t know what Stiles’s background is but I assume he’s not aristocratic but he’s educated, probably a man of the cloth if he was president of Yale in the late eighteenth century; at that point probably most of them were clergy. So he was educated even if not a noble. But Pitcairn probably was, because until World War II, I believe, most British commanders were, or its officers were, from nobility of some sort.<sup>25</sup>

In Mary’s reading, Ezra Stiles is a “classist” (based on his haughty tone and his use of “peasants”), a cleric (based on textual cues and her background knowledge), well-educated but probably not a member of the aristocracy, and a hypocrite (based on the discrepancy between Stiles’s patriotism and his reference to his compatriots as “peasants”). Elsewhere Mary talks about Stiles’s motives for writing, but here her comments are not about the author’s intentions but about the man himself. Similarly, when Tom, an expert on Portuguese colonization in the New World, read Stiles’s entry, he deepened his voice and dangled his pencil from his mouth as if it were a pipe:

I'm thinking [voice deepens]: a nice Yale man trying to say something, you know, [voice deepens again] "Major Pitcairn was a veeeeeery good man." I'm just thinking that this is the voice of reason, Ivy League high Episcopalian orthodoxy. . . . "Peasants"—it's just a great word . . . I mean here we are reading about the American Revolution. After all, it's supposed to be a bunch of yeoman farmers vigorously defending their rights and here is the president of Yale . . . whose ancestors came from England and who made enough money to send him to Yale and get him to be president of Yale. . . . This is the elite talking about the peasant.<sup>26</sup>

In both of these readings, texts are not lifeless strings of facts, but the keys to unlocking the character of human beings, people with likes and dislikes, biases and foibles, airs and convictions. Words have texture and shape, and it is their almost tactile quality that lets readers sculpt images of the writers who use them. These images are then interrogated, mocked, congratulated, or dismissed, depending on the context of the reading and the disposition of the reader. In such readings, authors, as well as texts, are decoded.

But the converse is also true: Just as readers decode authors, so texts decode readers. Because texts present plays of potentialities, not sets of meanings forever fixed, the think-aloud protocols I obtained may tell us more about those who read these texts than about those who wrote them.<sup>27</sup> In the above protocol, the word that riles the historians is "peasants," a word that calls up images of class struggle between peasants and elites. Whatever Ezra Stiles writing in 1775 may have meant, in the minds of these two historians, educated at Harvard and Stanford in the latter half of the twentieth century, Stiles's peasants become the peasants of Marx and Engels, who join with the urban proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Yet, when we look at the historical uses of "peasant" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that the word can simply mean "one who works on the land, either as small farmer or as laborer . . . one who relies for his subsistence mainly on the produce of his own labor and that of his household." So what did Ezra Stiles mean?

It is no doubt problematic to attach the connotations of "peasant" found in *Das Kapital*, written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to Ezra Stiles's entry of 1775. In fact, one could argue that these two historians have got it wrong: Stiles was not making a distinction between rich and poor, privileged and downtrodden, peasant and elite, but simply noting a difference between urban and rural, between those who, like himself, earned their bread by administering a college and those who earned it by the sweat of their brow.

If only the problem were that simple! The *Oxford English Dictionary* enumerates other ways in which "peasant" was used before and during Stiles's lifetime. As early as 1550, the word had taken on pejorative connotations, implying ignorance, stupidity, and boorishness, modified by adjectives like "buzzardly" and placed in apposition to "coward" and "rascal." So the question remains: Did Stiles think of these men as farmers, nothing more? Or did he think of them as ignoramuses, men who shared little in common with the honorable Major Pitcairn, who was, after all, a "good man in a bad cause"?

To solve this dilemma, some historians would recommend that we shed our presentist conceptions, immerse ourselves in the language of the past, feel what past actors felt, and understand the connotations that they, not we, attach to words. Only by renouncing our own condition can we come to know the past on its own terms. Historians have sometimes gone to great lengths to do this; Robert E. Lee's biographer Douglas Freeman tried to reconstruct what Lee thought by limiting himself to what Lee knew, and then writing a biography within these boundaries of knowledge and ignorance.<sup>28</sup>

No doubt our understanding is enriched when we learn that "peasant" has multiple meanings, but this knowledge does not put to rest the question of what Stiles meant; it simply widens it. This is why the image of the author constructed in readers' minds remains just that—an image—which, in Carl Becker's words, is always shaped by "our present purposes, desires, prepossessions, and prejudices, all of which enter into the process of knowing. . . . The actual event contributes something to the imagined picture; but the mind that holds the imagined picture always contributes something too."<sup>29</sup>

## AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF TEXT

When we compare how historians and students read these documents, we see dramatic differences on practically any criterion we select. By itself, this news should shock no one; after all, historians know much more history. But on closer examination, this explanation tells us precious little. We simply substitute ascription for explanation when we say that historians "did better" because they are historians. What does it mean to "know more history"? What goes on when a historian of labor in the twentieth century or a medievalist who specializes in thirteenth-century Islamic texts sits down to read about the American Revolution?

One might suppose that dramatic differences in topical knowledge separated these two groups, particularly if we define such “knowledge” as the names, dates, and concepts of the American Revolution that often appear in history tests. In point of fact, two high school students answered more of the identification questions (e.g., “What was Fort Ticonderoga?” “Who was George Grenville?” “What were the Townshend Acts?”) than one of the historians, and another historian got only one more answer than most students. But knowing history is more complicated than answering such questions. That students so rarely saw subtexts in what they read, that their understanding of point of view was limited to which “side” a document was on, that they rarely compared one account with another, instead searching for the right answer and becoming flustered in the face of contradictions—all hint at a need for something more than knowing names and dates.

The differences in each group’s approach can be traced, I think, to sweeping beliefs about historical inquiry, or what might be called an epistemology of text. For students, reading history was not a process of puzzling about authors’ intentions or situating texts in a social world but of gathering information, with texts serving as bearers of information. How could such bright students be oblivious to the subtexts that jumped out at historians? The answer may lie in an aphorism of Tertullian, the second-century church father whose first principle of biblical exegesis was *credo ut intelligam* (“I believe in order to understand”). Before students can see subtexts, they must first believe they exist. In the absence of such beliefs, students simply overlooked or did not know how to seek out features designed to shape their perceptions or make them view events in a particular way. Students may have “processed texts,” but they failed to engage with them.

Such beliefs may help to explain differences in the use of the “sourcing heuristic,” the practice of reading the source of the document before reading the actual text. Historians used this heuristic nearly all of the time (98 percent), while students used it less than a third (31 percent). For most students, the text’s attribution carried no special weight; it was merely the final bit of information in a string of textual propositions. To historians, a document’s attribution was not the end of the document but its beginning; sources were viewed as people, not objects, as social exchanges, not sets of propositions. In this sense, the sourcing heuristic was simply the manifestation of a belief system in which texts were defined by their authors.

When texts are viewed as human creations, what is said becomes

inseparable from who says it. But for some students, authors and their accounts were only loosely connected. So, when one student initially read the excerpt from Howard Fast, he knew something was wrong: “You can’t really believe exactly what they’re saying. It’s going to be, the details are going to be off.” But by the time this student reached the last document, his reservations about Fast had fallen by the wayside, as elements from this fictitious account were clearly present in his understanding. An Americanist, on the other hand, paused when he encountered the claim that the colonists were drawn up in “regular order.” Remembering that an earlier document described the battle formation, he flipped back to the Fast excerpt and then burst into laughter: “Oh, that’s from Fast! Forget it! I can’t hold on to Fast; I can’t do that. But it’s funny; it stuck in my mind.” Here we see the opposite case: a detail is remembered, but the historian cannot remember its source. Reunited with its author, the detail is rejected, for this historian knows that there are no free-floating details—only details tied to witnesses.

The metaphor of the courtroom may help us understand these differences. Historians worked through these documents as if they were prosecuting attorneys; they did not merely listen to testimony but actively drew it out by putting documents side by side, locating discrepancies, and questioning sources and delving into their conscious and unconscious motives. Students, on the other hand, were like jurors, patiently listening to testimony and questioning themselves about what they heard, but unable to question witnesses directly or subject them to cross-examination. For students, the locus of authority was in the text; for historians, it was in the questions they formulated about the text.<sup>30</sup>

What accounts for the fact that a group of bright high school seniors displayed such a rudimentary sense of how to read a historical text? How could they know so much history yet have so little sense of how to read it? These are not simple questions, and their answers lie beyond the scope of this chapter. But, at the very least, we can point to the types of texts students have read in their history classes. Textbooks dominate history classrooms, and, as Peter Schrag has noted, history textbooks are often written “as if their authors did not exist at all, as if they were simply the instruments of a heavenly intelligence transcribing official truths.”<sup>31</sup> Avon Crismore has documented Schrag’s claim. In a discourse analysis of history textbooks and academic and popular historical texts, she found that “metadiscourse,” or indications of judgment, emphasis, and uncertainty, was used frequently in historical writing but



appeared rarely in conventional textbooks. Crismore found that most textbooks abjured hedges like “may” or “might,” “appears” or “perhaps,” providing little indication that interpretation had anything to do with the words on the page. Such writing may contribute to students’ inability to move beyond the literal: “What happens to critical reading (learning to evaluate and make judgments about truth conditions) when hedges . . . are absent? When bias is not overt (as it is not in most textbooks) are young readers being deceived?”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps Crismore overstates her case. Perhaps her findings and mine are little cause for alarm; perhaps students’ naive beliefs about text will simply be sloughed off when they get to college. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. For example, James Lorence, in observations of college freshmen, found beliefs similar to those described here. Many students, he wrote, “expect a document to reveal something which they may regard as ‘the truth.’ . . . They persist in seeking a definitive conclusion on the reliability of the source before them.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Robert Berkhofer has written about the “historical fundamentalism” he encounters frequently among undergraduates, who “treat their assigned readings and textbooks, if not their teachers, as divinely inspired.”<sup>34</sup> At Carnegie Mellon University, researchers Christina Haas and Linda Flower had undergraduates think aloud as they read a series of polemical texts. They found that college students could easily decipher the basic meaning of texts and formulate the gist of what they read. However,

these same students often frustrate us, as they paraphrase rather than analyze, summarize rather than criticize texts. . . . We might hypothesize that the problem students have with critical reading of difficult texts is less the representations they are constructing than those they fail to construct. Their representations of text are closely tied to content: they read for information. Our students may believe that if they understand all the words and can paraphrase the propositional content of the text they have successfully read it.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, students may not be the only ones who embrace these beliefs; sometimes they share them with their teachers. In a study of knowledge growth among high school social studies teachers, Suzanne Wilson and I interviewed one teacher who told us that interpretation had little role to play in historical understanding: “History is the basic facts of what happened. What *did* happen. You don’t ask how it happened. You just ask, ‘What are the events?’”<sup>36</sup> In sum, we can locate entire epochs of history—the Middle Ages, for one—when precritical notions of historiography were embraced by adolescent and adult alike.<sup>37</sup> The notion that such

beliefs are naturally abandoned as students enter adulthood has neither data nor history on its side.

## FROM WAYS OF READING TO WAYS OF KNOWING

In our zeal to arrive at overarching models of reading, we often ignore qualities of the text that give it shape and meaning. When historical texts make the journey from the discipline to the school curriculum, we force them to check their distinctiveness at the door.<sup>38</sup> The historical text becomes the “school text,” and soon bears a greater resemblance to other school texts—in biology, language arts, and other subjects—than to its rightful disciplinary referent.<sup>39</sup> So, for example, the defining feature of historical discourse—its constant reference to the documentary record through footnotes—is the very aspect that drops out when historical texts become history textbooks. No wonder many students come to see history as a closed story when we suppress the evidence of how that story was assembled.

More broadly, the epistemological distinctions that first gave rise to the labels “history,” “physics,” “literature,” and “mathematics” become eclipsed in the school curriculum. Although we carve the school day into separate periods, hoping thereby to teach students to be multilingual in various ways of knowing, we too often end up teaching a single tongue. Although students learn different vocabularies in different classes—“mitosis” in biology, “theme” in English, “Declaratory Acts” in history, and “function” in mathematics—these lexical distinctions share a common deep structure: Knowledge is detached from experience, it is certain and comes shorn of hedge and qualification, its source is textbooks and teachers, and it can be measured with tests in which every question has a right answer.<sup>40</sup>

The process of disciplinary homogenization is evident even in textbooks used in teacher training. So, for example, one popular reading textbook tells prospective teachers that, when reading historical documents, “students need to be guided to reading strategies for recognizing the uses of documents and for learning how to read them.”<sup>41</sup> But rather than delineating such strategies or describing what historians do, this book directs readers to the chapter on “Reading in Science.” However, approaches to “reading in the content areas” that equate reading about the structure of DNA with reading about the structure of the American Revolution obscure the underlying assumptions that give texts meaning. Even the

increased emphasis on domain-specific knowledge in the cognitive psychological literature may have unwittingly contributed to this confusion by equating knowledge with information.<sup>42</sup> In this view knowledge itself becomes generic, classified according to the number of facts and relationships represented in a semantic net or “if/then” conditions formalized in a production system. But domains, as Louis O. Mink reminded us, go beyond compilations of facts and concepts or executions of productions. They constitute “unique and irreducible modes of comprehending the world,”<sup>43</sup> sweeping ways of organizing experience and conducting inquiry into who we are. Thus, the topic of Western mountain ranges means one thing to a geologist, another to a historian, and still another to Ansel Adams. Reading is not merely a way to learn new information but becomes a way to engage in new kinds of thinking.

The image of reading comprehension presented here differs dramatically from images that often emerge from the education literature. Why? First, each image has a different starting point. Most of our portraits of the “good reader” come from schoolchildren, naive readers not yet socialized into disciplinary ways of knowing. The essence of reading comprehension becomes whatever it takes to do well on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the Nelsen-Denny, the Gates-MacGinite, or any of a host of standardized reading measures. But these tests, all of which bear a strong family resemblance, are poor approximations of the slippery and indeterminate texts we encounter in the real world. Our definition of “reading comprehension” becomes what the reading comprehension tests measure: the ability to do well on specially designed passages written by absentee authors, each passage self-contained and decontextualized from the discipline that gives it meaning; the ability to respond correctly to multiple-choice questions that presume an unambiguous right answer; familiarity with formats that disguise the fact that texts are written by people whose beliefs ineluctably creep into their prose; skill at decoding literal as opposed to latent meaning; and the ability to process independent passages rather than create intertextual connections across multiple texts. In short, reading comprehension is defined by the texts, by the readers, and by the measures we use to study it.<sup>44</sup>

When we abandon the controlled vocabulary of the comprehension passage and look not at schoolchildren but at people who read for a living, we end up with a different image of comprehension.<sup>45</sup> It is not that one of these images is right and the other wrong; clearly, each tells us different things. But we do have a problem when there is a mismatch between the

questions we ask and the image of reading we select. If we ask, “What does it mean to comprehend a historical text?” and rely exclusively on what generic reading comprehension tests tell us, we may learn a great deal about reading, but little about reading history.

If this is true, what standard should we use to judge the comprehension of historical texts? Despite widespread testing of schoolchildren’s comprehension of history and social studies passages, the question of standards is seldom addressed, even in an age obsessed with standards. Robert Linn lamented this situation when he wrote that “there has been a disproportionate amount of effort devoted to the solution of problems that assume the existence of a standard in comparison to answering questions about where the standard comes from in the first place.”<sup>46</sup> And where should our standard come from? To me, there is only one defensible answer. We must look to the discipline.

For many years it often seemed that no one in the discipline was looking back. But several developments suggest a dramatic change. The report of the Bradley Commission on History in Schools represents a considerable effort by historians, professors of education, and high school teachers to sit down and ask tough questions about the school curriculum.<sup>47</sup> The Organization of American Historians (OAH), reversing a trend set in 1947 when it discontinued the “Teachers’ Section” of its major journal, has launched the *Magazine of History*, a publication devoted exclusively to the problems and prospects of precollegiate history. And in a presidential address to the OAH, traditionally a survey of the latest advances in historiography, the University of Maryland’s Louis Harlan<sup>48</sup> devoted his remarks to school history and the role that historians might play in its reform—a major shift from an earlier address that sounded the death knell for disciplinary efforts to improve school history.<sup>49</sup>

This flurry of activity has raised penetrating questions about many topics—the intellectually vacuous “expanding horizons” curriculum in the elementary school, the quality of textbooks, the warrant for claims about what students can learn, and the impact of standardized tests on student learning. These criticisms signal a valuable start in any reform effort. But the questions we most need to answer—“What would teachers have to do differently to create history classrooms where real learning takes place? How would teachers learn to teach in these different ways?”—are rarely addressed by these reports. The Bradley Commission, mostly mute on issues of pedagogy, noted that, as with life, “variety is the spice of learning,” and encouraged teachers to select from a wide range of teaching methods and techniques. But exemplary

teaching is not just a function of selecting the right mixture of methods, any more than historical interpretation is just a function of selecting the right mixture of documents: Variety, as Suzanne Wilson notes, may be entertaining but it is not necessarily educative.<sup>50</sup> Expert teaching entails not a selection of methods, but the transformation of knowledge.<sup>51</sup> History teachers must take what they know and create representations of content that engender new understandings among children who often come to school with scant motivation to learn. To do this is an intellectual achievement of the highest order—no less an achievement than arriving at a sophisticated understanding of the content one wants to teach.

One exception to historians' reticence on pedagogy is Tom Holt's *Thinking Historically*, published by the College Board.<sup>52</sup> A thoughtful meditation on his teaching of undergraduates at the University of Chicago, Holt's work contains much of value. He describes an undergraduate history course that begins with "unlearning," an attempt to disabuse students of the impression that history is a fixed story. Instead of examinations in which students list, as Woodrow Wilson once put it, "one damn fact after another," they receive primary documents and pretend to be museum curators who must annotate these documents for an exhibit. Holt purposely juxtaposes sources with opposing viewpoints and has students construct narratives that constitute ongoing conversations with the past, not "a closed catechism or a set of questions already answered."<sup>53</sup>

These are all intriguing ideas. But together they point to our collective ignorance, to the fact that we know little about changing students' beliefs about history.<sup>54</sup> Our efforts to do so, however, will surely founder if we wait until high school to teach students to ask a short story one set of questions and their history book a different set; they must learn to ask such questions when they first encounter claims about the past. In fact, when we put our assumptions about children's capabilities to the test, we find that, under the right conditions, even third graders can grasp something of history's indeterminate nature and thereby arrive at sophisticated interpretations of the past.<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the early thirties, the eminent historian Carl Becker wrote a paper entitled "Everyman His Own Historian," in which he claimed that, like

it or not, we are all historians.<sup>56</sup> What he meant was that we are all called on to engage in historical thinking—called on to see human motive in the texts we read; called on to mine truth from the quicksand of innuendo, half-truth, and falsehood that seeks to engulf us each day; called on to brave the fact that certainty, at least in understanding the social world, remains elusive and beyond our grasp. If Becker was right, then school history possesses great potential for teaching students to think and reason in sophisticated ways. Whether we exploit this potential, however, is another story.

The view of text described here is not limited to history.<sup>57</sup> Language is not a garden tool for acting on inanimate objects but a medium for swaying minds and changing opinions, for rousing passions or allaying them. This is a crucial understanding for reading the newspaper, for listening to the radio, for evaluating campaign promises, or for making a decision to drink a Nutrasweet product based on research conducted by the Searle Company. If students never learn to see the difference between the "contras" and the "freedom fighters," between "Star Wars" and the "Strategic Defense Initiative," between "terrorists" and "members of the PLO," if they think of these terms as neutral appellations rather than charged symbols tapping different meaning systems, they become easy marks for snake-oil vendors of all persuasions. We need to search our memories no farther back than the Bush-Dukakis presidential campaign, when "Willie Horton," a black man convicted of raping a white woman, became a household name. It took nearly five months for the subtext of this advertisement to become an issue of public debate—a more powerful indicator of national critical thinking skills than any NAEP item yet devised.

An advertisement for a new book on teaching thinking claims that we can do so with little effort—indeed, it claims that we can "teach thinking skills across the curriculum without changing lesson plans."<sup>58</sup> I'm not so sure. If we want students to read historical texts differently from their driver's education manuals, if we want them to comprehend both text and subtext, I think we will have to change our lesson plans—not to mention our textbooks. If nothing else, we will have to reexamine our notions of what it means to acquire knowledge from text. The traditional view, in which knowledge goes from the page of the text to the head of the reader, is inadequate. But the metacognitive view, in which knowledge is constructed by students questioning themselves about a fixed and friendly text, is equally inadequate. We could do no better than to heed the words

of Robert Scholes: "If wisdom, or some less grandiose notion such as heightened awareness, is to be the end of our endeavors, we shall have to see it not as something transmitted from the text to the student but as something developed in the student by questioning the text."<sup>59</sup>

## NOTES

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A great deal of work has come out in recent years on students' reading of documents. An overview of recent developments is the review by James F. Voss, "Issues in the Learning of History," *Issues in Education: Contributions from Educational Psychology* 4 (1998), 163–209. For a provocative view of the future of teaching with primary documents on the Web, see B. Tally, "History Goes Digital: Teaching When the Web Is in the Classroom," *D-Lib Magazine* (September 1996), online: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/september96/09tally.html>.

1. William B. Willcox, "An Historian Looks at Social Change," in A. S. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Craft of American History* (New York, 1966), 25.

2. For a sampling of "how to" books in history, see Henry Steele Commager, *The Nature and Study of History* (Columbus, Ohio, 1966); Wood Gray, *Historian's Handbook: A Key to the Study and Writing of History* (Boston, 1959); Allan Nevins, *Gateway to History* (Chicago, 1962); or R. J. Shafer, *A Guide to Historical Method* (Homewood, Ill., 1969). Gray waxes mystical when he says that the reading of primary sources relies on a "sort of sixth sense that will alert [historians] to the tell-tale signs" (p. 36). Two notable exceptions to this trend are J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York, 1971), and James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York, 1982).

3. For a detailed discussion of the think-aloud methodology and its rationale, see K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). See as well the very useful book by Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, *Verbal Reports of Reading: The Nature of Constructively Responsive Reading* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1995).

4. Of the eight historians I studied, six held the Ph.D. and two were doctoral candidates. Four historians considered themselves to be Americanists (and had taught American history), and four did not. In terms of doctoral training, the following institutions were represented: Wisconsin (3), Stanford (2), Berkeley (2), and Harvard (1).

5. For the full text of these documents, as well as a detailed description of the

methods and procedures followed, see Samuel S. Wineburg, "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of the Cognitive Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83 (1991), 73–87.

6. Warren's cover letter can be found in Peter S. Bennett, *What Happened on Lexington Green?* (Menlo Park, Calif., 1970), 20. Warren's skills as a propagandist are detailed in Arthur B. Tourtellot, *Lexington and Concord: The Beginning of the War of the American Revolution* (New York, 1963), 212–36.

7. Jack refers here to the monograph by Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginning of National Politics* (New York, 1976).

8. These identification questions were drawn from a leading U.S. history textbook: Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (Orlando, Fla., 1982).

9. These were Fred's words in response to Warren's salutation "Friends and Fellow Subjects."

10. John Searle, "What Is a Speech Act?" in Max Black, ed., *Philosophy in America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965), 221–39.

11. While the goal of the text designer may be to write clear prose, the reality is often quite different. For a critique of history textbooks from the perspective of cognitive psychology, see Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Erika W. Gromoll, "Learning from Social Studies Texts," *Cognition and Instruction* 6 (1989), 99–158.

12. Samuel Steinberg, *The United States: A Story of a Free People* (Boston, 1963), 92. Reprinted in Bennett, *What Happened*, 31.

13. Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report of the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York, 1987), 267–69.

14. This is the student briefly described in Chapter 1.

15. Sometimes prior knowledge got in the way of Derek's understanding of historical events. I explored the downside of prior knowledge in Samuel S. Wineburg, "Probing the Depths of Students' Historical Knowledge," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association* 30 (1992), 20–24.

16. William S. Hall, "Reading Comprehension," *American Psychologist* 44 (1989), 157–61.

17. Annemarie Palincsar and Ann Brown, "Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension-Fostering and Comprehension-Monitoring Activities," *Cognition and Instruction* 1 (1984), 117–75. See also Alan Collins and Edward E. Smith, "Teaching the Process of Reading Comprehension," in Douglas K. Detterman and Robert J. Sternberg, eds., *How and How Much Can Intelligence Be Increased* (Norwood, N.J., 1982), 173–85.

18. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York, 1974). Also see Barthes's provocative paper on the nature of historical texts, "Historical Discourse," in Michael Lane, ed., *Introduction to Structuralism* (New York, 1970), 145–55.

19. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review* 94 (1989), 597.

20. See Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

21. Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," *College English* 11 (1950), 265–69. See also Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale, Ill., 1978), 131–75.

22. This point is from Alan H. Schoenfeld, who recognized a similar phenomenon in his work with expert mathematicians. See his *Mathematical Problem Solving* (Orlando, Fla., 1985), 140–41.

23. Dominick LaCapra says that historians “enter into a ‘conversational’ exchange with the past” and engage in “a dialogue with the dead who are reconstituted through their ‘textualized’ remainders.” See his *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985). This quotation appears on p. 37.

24. F. B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diaries of Ezra Stiles* (New York, 1901).

25. This quotation has been edited slightly for readability.

26. I thank David Madsen for pointing out Tom’s error: Ezra Stiles and Yale were Congregationalist, not Episcopalian.

27. For a related point made in a different context, see Margaret S. Steffensen, Chitra JoagDev, and Richard C. Anderson, “A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Reading Comprehension,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 15 (1979), 10–29.

28. See the discussion of Freeman in Henry Steele Commager’s *Study of History*. Commager summed up his views on the futility of Freeman’s approach this way: “There are many things to be said for accepting our limitations and looking at the past through the eyes of the present, but this is the most persuasive: no matter how hard we try, that is what we do anyway” (p. 59).

29. Carl L. Becker, “What Are Historical Facts?” in Hans Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), 132.

30. This metaphor comes from Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946). Collingwood (p. 249) noted, “As natural science finds its proper method when the scientist, in Bacon’s metaphor, puts Nature to the question . . . so history finds its proper method when the historian puts his authorities in the witness-box, and by cross-questioning extorts from them information which in their original statements they have withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not possess it.” Collingwood follows in the footsteps of Voltaire, who wrote that “when reading history, it is but the only business of a healthy mind to refute it.”

31. Peter Schrag, “Voices in the Classroom: The Emasculated Voice of the Textbook,” *Saturday Review* 21 (January 1967), 74. For a similar view of the history textbook, see Frances FitzGerald’s *America Revised* (New York, 1980), especially pp. 149–218.

32. Avon Crismore, “The Rhetoric of Textbooks: Metadiscourse,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 16 (1984), 295.

33. James L. Lorence, “The Critical Analysis of Documentary Evidence: Basic Skills in the History Classroom,” *History Teaching* 8, no. 2 (1983), 78.

34. See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., “Demystifying Historical Authority: Critical Textual Analysis in the Classroom,” *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association* 26 (February 1988), 13–16.

35. Christina Haas and Linda Flower, “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning,” *College Composition and Communication* 39 (May 1988), 30–47. For an example from the world of reading legal texts, see Elizabeth Fajans and Mary R. Falk, “Against the Tyranny of Paraphrase: Talking Back to Texts,” *Cornell Law Review* 78 (1993), 163–205.

36. See Chapter 6 in this volume.

37. See the chapter on “The Rationality of History,” in Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

38. See, for example, a column on “teaching with documents” in *Social Education* in which the authors reprinted a policy statement on the recruitment of nurses during the Civil War. The document included the following statement, “Matronly persons of experience, good conduct or superior education and serious disposition, will always have a preference. Habits of neatness, sobriety, and industry are prerequisites.” In their section on teaching activities, the authors make no reference to the subtext of this document and how students could be taught to decipher it. Instead, such activities as the following are recommended: “Ask your students to discuss what qualifications are necessary for a nurse today” or “Ask students to locate evidence to support or disprove the following: The Civil War was the bloodiest war in American history.” See Wynell Burroughs, Jean Mueller, and Jean Preer, “Teaching with Documents: Surgeon General’s Office,” *Social Education* 66 (January 1988), 66–68.

39. John Seely Brown, Alan Collins, and Paul Duguid, “Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning,” *Educational Researcher* 18 (1989), 32–42.

40. *Ibid.*

41. H. Alan Robinson, *Teaching Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies: The Content Areas* (Boston, 1983), 181.

42. See Gregory G. Colomb, “Cultural Literacy and the Theory of Meaning: or, What Educational Theorists Need to Know About How We Read,” *New Literary History* 20 (1988), 411–50.

43. Louis O. Mink, “Modes of Comprehension and the Unity of Knowledge,” in Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), 36.

44. Some of these criticisms of comprehension tests have been discussed by others. See, for example, Peter Winograd and Peter Johnston, “Considerations for Advancing the Teaching of Reading Comprehension,” *Educational Psychologist* 22 (1987), 219–20. For a fresh approach to comprehension, see Rand J. Spiro, Walter P. Vispoel, John G. Schmitz, Ala Samarapungavan, and A. E. Boerger, “Knowledge Acquisition for Application: Cognitive Flexibility and Transfer in Complex Content Domains,” in Bruce K. Britton and Shawn W. Glynn, eds., *Executive Control Processes in Reading* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1987), especially pp. 184–93.

45. If we looked at others who read for a living—literary critics, to name one group—we would probably arrive at still another image of comprehension.

46. Robert Linn, cited in Mary E. Curtis and Robert Glaser, “Reading Theory and the Assessment of Reading Achievement,” *Journal of Educational Measurement* 20 (Summer 1983), 133–47.

47. See the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools* (Washington, D.C., 1988) along with its fuller statement, *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, ed. Paul A. Gagnon (New York, 1989).

48. Louis R. Harlan, “Social Studies Reform and the Historian,” *Journal of American History* 77 (1990), 801–11. Some of Harlan’s proposals, such as the call for summer institutes in which teachers can “revitalize their teaching by learning of the latest and best historical scholarship” (p. 809), may themselves benefit from the lessons of the past. For a gloomy assessment of the impact of the large-scale history institutes of the 1960s, see Karen B. Wiley and Jeanne Race, *The Status of Pre-college Science, Mathematics, and Social Science Education: 1955–1975*, vol. 3: *Social*

*Science Education* (Boulder, 1977). For an analysis of why these institutes had so little influence, see Richard H. Brown, "History as Discovery: An Interim Report on the Amherst Project," in Edwin Fenton, ed., *Teaching the New Social Studies in Secondary Schools: An Inductive Approach* (New York, 1966), 443–51.

49. James L. Sellers, "Before We Were Members—the MVHA," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 40 (1953), 21.

50. See Suzanne M. Wilson, "The Pedagogy of History: A Recommendation for Research," paper presented at the FIPSE/FIRST Conference, Washington, D.C., 1990.

51. Lee S. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1987), 1–22.

52. Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York, 1990). See also Richard J. Paxton and Sam Wineburg, "History Teaching," in Miriam Ben-Peretz, Sally Brown, and Robert Moon, eds., *Routledge International Companion to Education* (London, 2000).

53. Holt, *Thinking Historically*, 13.

54. A task force of the American Historical Association reached the same conclusion: "Concerning the cognitive abilities of students of college age that equip them to learn history, our knowledge is meager. The task force urges that research on this topic be undertaken. The findings would contribute much to the rethinking of the history major and the manner in which history courses are taught." *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association* 30 (May/June 1990), 18.

55. See Suzanne M. Wilson, "Mastodons, Maps and Michigan: Exploring Uncharted Territory While Teaching Elementary School Social Studies," Elementary Subject Center Series, Technical Report no. 24 (ED 326470), Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University (East Lansing, 1990). See also Martin Booth, "Ages and Concepts: A Critique of the Piagetian Approach to History Teaching," in Christopher Portal, ed., *The History Curriculum for Teachers* (London, 1987), 22–38. See as well my essay review "A Partial History," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 14 (1998), 233–43.

56. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932), 221–36.

57. As Charles Bazerman has argued, even such straightforward texts as research notes on the molecular structure of nucleic acids communicate beliefs about the status of knowledge and the role of the knower. See his artful reading of subtexts in "What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 11 (1981), 361–87. See also Gay Gragson and Jack Selzer, "Fictionalizing the Readers of Scholarly Articles in Biology," *Written Communication* 7 (January 1990), 25–58.

58. Iris M. Tiedt, Jo E. Carlson, Bert D. Howard, and Kathleen S. Oda Wantanable, *Teaching Thinking Skills in K–12 Classrooms* (Needham Heights, Mass., 1989).

59. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven, 1985), 14.