Cita Cook

READING SECONDARY SOURCES

1. First, skim the whole work to get a general overview. How is it divided and what seems to be the purpose of each section? Which sections may require extra work to evaluate?
2. Always separate interpretations and generalizations from fairly certain factual material. Determine what prior assumptions the author seems to take for granted.
3. Do not get so bogged down in the details that you lose sight of the broader picture being presented.
4. After considering the above issues, read carefully each section and the work as a whole and consider the questions listed below.
5. What are the author's stated and implied purposes?
6. How is the work organized? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach? Are there other organizational approaches that might have served the purpose as well or better?
7. What are the author's stated and implied main thesis and secondary conclusions?
8. What are the basic arguments for each major point?
9. What sources are used to support each argument? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
10. What are the logical steps of each arguments? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
11. Are there any contradictions in the book? Are there any possible ways to resolve them?
12. What have you learned from the work? What are your own interpretations of the material presented?
13. What contributions does the book make to the field of history?
14. What questions do you have after reading the work?
15. What is your basic evaluation of the work as a whole?

READING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

1. What kind of document is it? (letter, newspaper article, memoir, song, etc.) What are the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of document?
2. What do you know about the author(s)? What can you logically assume about him or her from the document? What, if anything, should be researched about the author to be able to use the document most effectively? Are any of the following aspects of the author's life relevant to evaluating the article: age, year/decade born, sex, class, race/ethnicity, geographical origins, marital status, religion, education, work, political perspective, organization affiliations, anything else?
3. When, where, and in what circumstances was the document written (or created)? What appears to have been the author's primary purpose in writing it? What can you tell and/or assume about the projected audience for the document? How might the purpose and/or the nature of the audience have affected what was written?
4. What, if anything, can be assumed from the document's language, vocabulary, tone, structure, style, etc.? What assumptions does the author seem to have made?
5. What kind of information does the document give? What questions does it stimulate?
6. How do you think this document could be used most effectively by a historian? What are its strengths and weaknesses as a way to learn about history.