4

# GATHERING INFORMATION

n n n

All writing is hard work if it is done well, and writing history has some special problems. It is sometimes easy to assume that simply being familiar with life—or some particular aspect of human interactions—is sufficient. George F. Kennan, the American diplomat and historian, confessed to making this assumption when he accepted the 1957 National Book Award for his *Russia Leaves the War:*

> I am afraid that I took up the historian's task somewhat casually, never doubting that it would be easier to tell about diplomacy than to conduct it—and not nearly so great a responsibility. But as this work gradually wrought its discipline upon me, I was both surprised and sobered to realize not only how difficult but also how important it was.[1]

Few people will be as honored for writing history as Kennan, but most can learn to do it successfully—and thereby learn to do other writing well, too. The problems of gathering evidence, analyzing it, organizing it, and presenting it in a readable form are part of many writing tasks in the world of business, government, and the professions that include law, engineering, and others. So you should expect to use your skills developed in writing history essays in whatever your future career may be.

All writers use some sort of process—a series of steps that lead them from discovering and refining a subject to writing a final draft. Different writers work according to different rituals.

The two of us developed somewhat different ways of approaching our own writing. And we certainly recognize that in the nearly two decades since this *Short Guide* first appeared changes in the academic world—most especially in the areas of electronic technologies—have brought about changes in our writing habits. Many of those changes have made aspects of the work somewhat easier. But we are also convinced these changes have, as well, made some writing tasks more difficult. Overall, we remain convinced that good writing is hard work, involves some long-standing principles, and, above all, requires patience and practice.

Eventually you will find your own way of doing things. In this and the next chapter, we will walk you through some common stages of the work writers of history must undertake on their way to creating essays or books. At the outset, though, we want to make clear this is seldom a linear process—one step following categorically after another—leading directly to a written product. One step may instead take you back to reexamine what you have previously done; only then will you be able to finish the task at hand. Even after you have gathered, analyzed, and organized your information, writing the complete essay will likely take you back to those steps as well. The following suggestions may help you by showing how others write, but in the end you must develop the writing process that suits you best.

## Focusing on Your Topic

Most history essays begin with an assignment. In college courses your assignments will usually be outlined in the syllabus the instructor passes out at the beginning of the course or in the questions asked on essay examinations. You should always read each assignment with great care, looking for an indication of the kind of topic your instructor wants you to write about, the evidence she wants you to use, and the length the paper should be. Follow those instructions carefully. The topic may be general within the limits of the course: "You will write a ten-page

paper on a topic agreed on by you and the instructor." Or the topic may be explicit: "Write a ten-page paper on the reasons for the appeal of Lenin's 'April Theses' in 1917 during the Russian Revolution." In some courses you might be required to write an essay with more of a historiographic focus: "Alfred Crosby, Daniel Headrick, and Edward Said have all written books about imperialism. Write a ten-page paper exploring the differences in their attitudes toward modern imperialism."

Many college courses may instead—or in addition—require that you write shorter essays, either on topics written outside of class or in essay examinations. Often these shorter essays are on quite specific topics, and you should read the assignments carefully to be certain you understand them; we have some additional advice concerning such essays in Appendix B. But many assignments in history courses—even on essay tests and for short essays—are more general. For many students, finding a topic in such circumstances is an ordeal. Professional historians frequently have the same problem, so don't be discouraged in your search. The ability to find your own topic reflects both how well you know the material and how you think about it. Defining your own topic is good discipline. A liberal arts education—including education in history—should teach you to ask questions and ponder meanings in every text and topic you encounter in life. Asking questions, and then still more questions, is an essential part of all your historical writing.

You should be curious about people, events, documents, or problems considered in your courses. This curiosity should cause you to pose some questions naturally, and especially about topics related in some way to what you are studying. For example, in one course you might study the Russian Revolution of 1917, in another the American obsession with the dangers of Communism and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, while in a third the music of Sergey

Prokofiev. In studying and reading about any of these subjects your curiosity might well lead you to thinking about the half century history of the Soviet Union and its collapse in just a matter of months, something unforeseen (if sometimes hoped for!) by very few responsible persons. That amazing event should stimulate multitudes of questions you might ask to satisfy your curiosity about how such a thing could happen. And any number of those questions could well lead to an excellent topic for a history essay.

As you read and attend class, you can help yourself by keeping notes in which you not only jot down what you learn, but also the questions that occur to you, including—and perhaps especially—those without obvious answers. Keep a systematic record of all these questions, perhaps in a separate section of your class notebook. Or you might even keep a small, separate notebook—or a special computer file—entirely for these ideas and questions; a collection of such questions will have lots of potential paper topics in it.

And never be afraid to consider a well-worn topic. Why did the Confederate army under Robert E. Lee lose at Gettysburg? What qualities of Christianity made it attractive to people in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries after Christ? What was humanism in the Renaissance? At first glance you may think that everything has been said that can be said. Indeed, many things have been written on all these topics. But when you look at the sources, you may discover that you have an insight that is new or at least different and worth exploring. That possibility is especially good if you study a few primary source documents carefully and use them as windows to open onto the age or the event that produced them.

Sometimes you can find interesting topics in history by staying attuned to your own interests and experiences. If you are a religious person, you may naturally try to understand religious influences in the past. Do not use a history paper to convert someone to your own

religious point of view. But religion is one of the most important continuing forces in world affairs, and it sometimes strikes us as odd that students do not think to apply their religious interest to exploring how religion has influenced historical events. The same is true of interests such as sports, food, fashion, and other elements of life. We have both sometimes wondered when the French love affair with dogs began and what historical significance it may have. History is a much more open discipline than it once was, and with a little searching you may be able to translate one of your own consuming interests or particular personal circumstances into a good research paper. One of our students wondered how she might answer questions from her children about the bananas they frequently ate for breakfast. So she did some reading, thought about the problem, and posed a number of questions; the final result was an excellent history essay on how bananas became such a popular food in the United States although almost none are actually grown commercially here.

We must, however, repeat an important axiom: Yours must be an *informed* interest. You have to know something before you write anything about history. Do not write an opinionated essay merely off the top of your head; your argument needs to be more than a restatement of your prejudices. Good historians read, ask questions of their reading, read again, and try to get things right. They try to think through their initial questions, examining the many facets of the problem and focusing on a narrower topic, one manageable within the limits of the essay they expect to write. You should do the same.

In our experience the most common flaw in student essays is the topics are so broad that the essays have no focus; their writers have not tried to refine the topics and cannot therefore develop an original idea based on the evidence. You cannot write an interesting and original paper entitled “Woodrow Wilson” or “Mahatma Ghandi” or “Susan B. Anthony.” In 2,000 or

even 6,000 words, you can only do a summary of a person's life—suitable perhaps for an encyclopedia but not for a thoughtful essay that tries to argue a special point. Very similar difficulties would apply should you decide to write on "The Causes of World War Two," or even "The Reasons for the Renaissance"; both topics are so broad as to defy any meaningful analysis in an essay of ten pages or so. If you can choose your own topic, pick a limited issue with available texts or other evidence that you can study in depth and write about within the assigned space.

Even if your instructor assigns a specific topic as the basis of your essay, it is almost always appropriate to limit, or at least focus, the topic further. Consider the topic we mentioned above: "Alfred Crosby, Daniel Headrick, and Edward Said have all written books about imperialism. Write a ten-page paper exploring the differences in their attitude toward modern imperialism." You will, of course, need to read the books of the three authors and determine the thesis each presents. Then you will need to compare the three views, analyzing how they are similar and different. These comparisons should lead you to a conclusion, and with it a specific argument for your essay "exploring the differences" in the theories about the causes and consequences of imperialism.

Whatever your writing assignment, or the general topic you first identify, there are usually ways to limit your topic either by narrowing its scope or adjusting your angle of vision. The scope of a broad topic such as imperialism, for example, might be reduced by focusing on the colonial ambitions of a single country. Even the scope of French imperialism could be further limited by considering French imperialism in the Caribbean, or even the island of Martinique alone. The geographic scope of your topic can frequently be reduced by also considering elements of time. You might consider limiting your consideration of imperialism to the period

before—or after—the Napoleanic wars, for example. Or you might wish to consider the impact of twentieth century developments—such as the League of Nations or the United Nations—on French imperialism in the Western Hemisphere.

But in addition to limiting the scope of your topic, you might also consider changing your angle of vision. As we have previously noted, historians in this new century have successfully explored a much broader range of questions about the past. In this environment you have many more choices about how to refocus your topic. Years ago the usual concerns regarding colonialism were of grand politics or perhaps the details of colonial administration. You might also find occasional biographies of the key leaders. But with the changes taking place in the way historians observe the past there are many more angles you might pursue to narrow your topic.

You might ask questions not just about individuals, but about groups of people. How did French imperialism impact the various social classes in France itself? What were the effects of French imperial practice on the indigenous inhabitants of Martinique? Did French education policies in its Caribbean colonies increase the educational level of women as well as men? There are many other such questions which might well occur to you. In short, allow your curiosity to open new avenues of questioning as you consider your topic. Surely you will find several ways you might further narrow that topic so that you can craft an interesting essay with a new argument.

In the process of making your essay more focused, however, you also need to keep in mind that your topic must be defined according to the sources available. In some cases your assignment will do this for you; on essay examinations in particular, you are likely limited by the assigned materials you have read or heard about and discussed in class. But often you will need to determine what sources you might consult before completing your essay. We find it sad when

students take this advice as a signal to limit their search for information. Instead we encourage them to search more widely and find whatever sources they can. And in the academic environment emerging with new electronic resources, there are almost always more sources available than you would imagine. Thus your challenge in refining and narrowing your topic should be simultaneously to expand your quest for useable information.

## CONSIDERING POTENTIAL SOURCES

There was a time when our sole advice to students seeking potential sources for their essays was to go to the library. Of course that has become much too limiting an approach as the field of "library science" has itself grown to become "information science." Yet we affirm the advice in earlier editions of this book, that smart students and smart professors should learn to talk to reference librarians about sources of information. And it transcends matters of books and encyclopedias to encompass electronic search techniques and information retrieval and the evaluation of sources.

Several years ago when one of us was engaged in research about American westward expansion in the 1850s, a reference librarian at the University of Tennessee supplied the answer to a perplexing question: How might someone have amputated an injured arm on the Western plains at that time? In a wink she produced a little book called *Gunn's Domestic Medicine,* published in 1831. It provided complete and optimistic instructions which, as it turned out, found their way into a historical novel wherein one of the characters followed those very directions. Several doctors, on reading that account, have expressed cautious astonishment that a historian and mere writer knew so much about amputating arms. Perhaps the author flunked out of medical school? No, simply credit a good reference librarian!

Of course, putting the information from the source to use was the writer's achievement. But

that was made possible by the intervention, in this case directly, by a person who pointed the writer to a potential source. It is up to you to seek out such resources and to ask for assistance when you need it. However, if you were to ask a reference librarian every single question that occurred to you about your topic, it is unlikely the results would be nearly so satisfactory. There is much you can and should do to find information before seeking help in your search.

Your questions will take on greater seriousness if you have already made some effort to find at least a few of the basic materials that seem relevant to your topic. There are a variety of means you should use to begin seeking potential sources. Increasingly these are found in various electronic formats, while others are still available in more traditional print forms. Even as we encourage students to make full use of electronic searches and information retrieval, we have often been disappointed that they treat such efforts as the full extent of possible sources of information. Historians, especially, should be aware that materials written decades ago—and frequently not yet available online or in CD-ROM compilations—are often quite valuable in print formats, though they sometimes can be difficult to locate. Search for those that might be important to your essay.

By all means, you should read encyclopedia articles and other reference materials to get a broad overview of your topic. If you look up the same subject in many different reference works, essential facts about your topic will be stamped in your memory. And don't forget that old reference books are valuable for providing widely held beliefs about topics when those books were published and some—such as the eleventh edition of the *Britannica,* published in 1911—are justly famous for the quality of their entries. Your library reference room will have standard, multivolume general encyclopedias and single-volume reference works such as *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (one of our favorites). Many encyclopedias are also available in digital

formats through electronic networks in your library and on the Internet, as is the *Britannica* eleventh edition, at http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/.

Beware of the temptations offered by some online encyclopedias and Web sites parading as democratic reference sources. Among these, Wikipedia, at www.wikipedia.org, is well known for having more than a million separate entries in English and hundreds of thousands in other languages. Anyone can contribute—and edit—any entry, an effort to open scholarship on a "democratic" basis. Understandably, this approach has opened up the possibility for cases of incorrect (and even libelous) entries made and altered on this Web site. While a small army of volunteers checks many of the entries for accuracy and removes the most egregious, you can never depend on Wikipedia for consistent information. As with some other open-source sites, the entries may change from one day to the next. While you may find Wikipedia an interesting place to begin your research, you should look for more consistently verifiable sources of evidence for your essays.

Also look for reference materials that specifically address your field of inquiry, both on the World Wide Web and in encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference books available in your library. Not only broad fields of study such as art or music, but also historical specialties such as colonialism or even the history of peace and peace-making are considered in valuable reference works. One we consult often is the seven-volume *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* which provides information about ideas you intend to discuss in your history essays. (The original five-volume *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* published in the 1970s but now out of print, is available at http://etext.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html). Likewise, we often consult *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable,* available in many editions since 1870 (the 1898 American edition is available online at http://www.bartleby.com/81/), and the much more recent *Dictionary*

*of Historical Allusions and Eponyms,* compiled by Dorothy Auchter, as a starting point for thinking and writing about all sorts of historical questions.

If you choose a topic related to religion, you might consult *The New Catholic Encyclopedia,* a fifteen-volume reference that contains a treasury of information on religious figures and religious movements of all sorts. (The original *Catholic Encyclopedia,* published in 1915, is online at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/). *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* provides a similar source for the history of the Jewish people and Judaism. (The earlier *Jewish Encyclopedia,* published between 1901 and 1906, is available at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com). There are many other reference works devoted to a wide variety of topics and many more are published each year. It is the job of reference librarians to be familiar with many of these; take advantage of their knowledge (and that of your instructors) and follow their suggestions about reference resources that may be available for your use.

If your topic involves prominent individuals, you should consult one of the many biographical directories created for both broad and more narrow subjects of study. The *Dictionary of National Biography* is indispensable for any work on British history. *The Dictionary of American Biography* is inferior and sometimes disappointing, but you can find there interesting information about important Americans who may be subjects of historical research. Many librarians have old nineteenth-century biographical encyclopedias, and these are not to be scorned although the articles are nearly always laudatory, and it seems as if the people—nearly all of them men—paid in some way to have their names included, perhaps by buying the books.

Do not hesitate to use reference works in foreign languages. Even if you do not read the language or don't read it well, you may locate illustrations, maps or other useful materials. If you

have had a year or two of study in the language, you may discover that you can read the articles far better than you suspected. That discovery may draw you into further use of the language, an advantage to any student of history and essential to advanced work in most historical fields. Some of the articles you find—as is true of many reference works in English—will have brief bibliographies at the end listing standard works where you can find more detailed information on a subject.

Among the most important reference resources for historians are bibliographies on a huge variety of topics, some compiled by scholars specifically as reference works and others included by historians in their books and articles. Often you will find numerous bibliographies in library reference collections, and you may frequently locate others using library catalogs by looking for or adding the subcategory "bibliography" to the subjects you are searching for. There are a number of valuable general bibliographies as well. Be sure, for example, you consult the widely available *American Historical Association Guide to Historical Literature,* now in its third edition, edited by Mary Beth Norton and Pamela Gerardi. These two large volumes are a rich mine of information about books and articles on every aspect of history throughout the world. You may also find some specialized bibliographic references on the World Wide Web. A few bibliographies are annotated—that is, the compiler offers a brief comment on the books, articles, and other materials cited. It is possible the writer may judge some sources too harshly, some too generously. But such a bibliography usually provides worthwhile information about the contents of books and articles.

In addition to the bibliographies prepared by scholars, you should also consult a variety of indexing materials to build your own list of potential sources. Among the most valuable are indexes which will help you locate articles in magazines and scholarly journals. Most of these

have their origins in the venerable *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature,* which has been regularly published since 1900. Updates appear throughout the year, and at the end of each year a large, comprehensive edition is published. The *Readers' Guide* surveys only magazines intended for a general audience. Don't scorn this purpose. Although you will not find articles published in the specialized journals intended for professional historians, you may find interesting, well-written articles by important specialists by consulting the *Readers' Guide.*

In recent years many such indexes have moved to electronic formats. This has been a boon to writers, as often a single search, using well-chosen keywords, may yield a large number of entries for scrutiny. It is likely your library has arranged for access to several such databases. Yet few of those electronic indexes include more than just a few years of index results; most do not include materials published prior to the 1980s. So you will want to ascertain the chronological limitations of a particular electronic index and then consult the bound volumes of previous years, if they are available. Only then can you be confident you have made a thorough search for potential information.

In a few cases these electronic databases may also permit you to locate the text of entire articles. One that often produces quick results is JSTOR, The Scholarly Journal Archive. You can search the full text of more than 150 specialized journals in history and other fields, covering the full run of issues up to five years before the present for most titles. And you can receive electronically copies of individual articles you wish to read for your research. (These will be sent as portable document files, usually known as PDFs; to read them you will need to have the Adobe Acrobat Reader installed on the computer you are using. This is available free at http://www. adobe.com.) JSTOR is available only through libraries that subscribe to its service; there are over 1,500 U.S. institutions (mostly colleges and universities) that currently do so, as

well as nearly 1,300 others worldwide. Listings of subscribing institutions can be found at http://www.jstor.org. Without doubt, JSTOR is a valuable research resource, and you should inquire if it is available through your library.

Some libraries may also, or alternatively, subscribe to Project Muse, a service offering access to about 300 academic journals, in a diverse array of fields, available electronically. Its database is also fully searchable throughout the full text of all available articles. And if your library subscribes you can receive electronic copies of articles from journals selected by your institution for your research. As of this writing, though, Project Muse emphasizes access to contemporary issues of journals. For most of its holdings, it does have some back issues available, at least to the date when a particular journal was first available through Project Muse. But for most journals the database does not include all of the back issues, unlike JSTOR which has extensive holdings of back issues (for example, issues of *The American Historical Review* in the JSTOR database go back to its first publication in the nineteenth century!).

Many other electronic databases have thoughtful abstracts prepared by expert readers. Often using such abstracts can save you time, but you should be cautious in assuming they will always provide clear and complete indications of an article's content. Two such indexes are especially important for historians. Particularly strong for its coverage of world and European subjects, *Historical Abstracts* has appeared each year for many decades and in electronic formats since 1981. It pages, disks, and now World Wide Web files contain thousands of abstracts of books and articles indexed according to author, subject, period, and place. You can browse the abstracts for materials related to almost any historical topic. *America: History and Life,* updated annually, includes article abstracts and citations focusing on American history, and also an index to book reviews. It goes back to 1964 and, like *Historical Abstracts,* is a fabulous resource. Both of these

are widely available in most college and university libraries; you should consult with a reference librarian about how to access them in your library. It may be that you will need to peruse bound volumes for earlier years of some such indexes and perhaps for all the years of other indexes. Don't be put off by this eventuality, for ignoring such valuable resources will do little to enhance your essays; bypassing them can only keep you from finding potentially valuable sources.

Of course, you should also make use of the catalog in your local library. In many ways this is one of your best guides to material on your topic even though it is usually limited to the books and other media actually available to you in a particular library. In some ways that is an advantage, as those materials have been specifically selected for inclusion in the collections. You can therefore have some assurance that they have been included not on a whim but with a particular purpose in mind. So if you have not already done so, early in your quest for material on your topic you will want to learn how to use your local library catalog. Although there are a variety of systems in use by libraries to present their catalogs for use, most have similar features which allow you to search for materials by *author* and *title* as well as by *subject* or *keyword*. Keep in mind that for a library catalog, the *subject* usually refers to a uniform set of subject headings created by the Library of Congress, so using *keyword* searches may, at least initially, prove more fruitful.

In the early stages of your quest you will want to discover as many potential sources as possible, and all of these efforts will have led you to a large number of other possibilities—books, articles, Web sites, and other types of materials, including collections of primary sources. Take care to keep your *own* bibliography from the start of your research, even when you are merely looking for potential sources. By starting early, you will save yourself much grief. All too often students have come to us as they are completing the final version of a history essay asking

for additional bibliographic information, including—on more than one occasion—the title of "that little green book" on their topic, or some other reference to a less than helpful description by which they have remembered a particular source.

Your research bibliography should include complete information about the books, articles, Web sites, reference materials, and other sources you locate as well as recommendations for further reading in the bibliographies appended to these sources. You may wish to jot down the information in a notebook or on small index cards. The value of cards—that they may be easily reorganized or added to as the numbers of your references grow—has been superseded by the capacity to do the same using a computer word processing or note-taking program. Remember, though, the hazards of fire and theft (as well as other threats to the results of your research and writing) do not respect either electronic disks or paper note cards more than the other. It is always wise to keep back-up copies of all your work and store them in alternative places. Keeping all the copies of your work in your car or dormitory room is an invitation to unexpected disaster.

Even at this stage, you have not done all the preliminary work necessary to help in creating your essay. You must still tap into the best of these sources to find the material that will provide your essay with the information that will give it substance. Now you must actually do the research! But remember our earlier advice. You may suppose that historians invariably follow these steps neatly one after the other. Not so! In practice, things seldom run so smoothly. Historians may begin with one topic, discover another when they do research, and change their minds again when they start writing. As they write, they may redefine their topic, and as they redefine the topic they do more research. Writing down such thoughts often reveals gaps in your knowledge. So you go back to your research to fill in these gaps. And as you do research you

will find suggestions of other mat-erials in what you read. Source citations supplied by historians in books and articles may suggest other bibliographic possibilities, and the names and details you find in what you read in the text of your sources may spark other ideas for research possibilities. You will then have to examine and analyze these newfound sources.

## DOING RESEARCH

As you move from gathering information about potential sources to analyzing those sources, you must also evaluate them. Your first touchstone, of course, will be to see if they actually relate to the topic you have chosen. If you have carefully crafted questions about your topic, you should be able to dismiss some potential sources relatively quickly. In fact, you may discard some even as you are continuing to locate others. At this stage, the information you gleaned from reading encyclopedias and similar sources will be especially valuable in making those decisions.

If you are fortunate to have access to a large and comprehensive library, you may find many of the books and articles you have come upon are readily available. Some you may need to view in microform editions. Although these are not as convenient—nor as comforting to some researchers—as printed paper or even electronic versions, they do offer a form of access welcome to a patient historian. If you have not often used a microfilm, microfiche, or microcard reader, learn to do so. In many libraries it is essential if you wish to read at least some of the materials you have located. You may also have the option of requesting interlibrary loan privileges to obtain a book or article not available in your library. You may find that a good interlibrary loan librarian is just as helpful in your research as a friendly reference librarian. It has certainly been true in our experience.

Even as you move back and forth between gathering, analyzing, organizing, and presenting the information for your essay, you need to keep the evaluation principles of the historian's

critical method in mind. First you must establish that all your sources are *plausible* and *trustworthy* and then if they are *accurate* and can be *corroborated*. These same principles apply if you are using information from historical journals, books from your library, newspapers, or even information you may locate on the World Wide Web. For some of your sources, using these standards may be easier than for others, but you will need to make that effort for all of the sources you intend to use in writing your essay.

### *Secondary Sources*

Secondary sources, created from an analysis of primary sources by others, will be an important part of the information you will use to write a history essay. They are the work of historians, and others, who set out to explain the past based on what they have learned from examining materials created at the time, often by participants in the events. Those secondary sources you will be most likely to use in your research will generally be of two sorts—articles and books—although some may only be available in electronic form. Applying the historian's critical method is somewhat different in each case. For example, the articles you locate in major professional journals will have, for the most part, passed through a process of peer review. Other historians will have read the articles before they were published, applying the essential elements of critical method. Their judgments will be a good start to making your own.

This is particularly fortunate because literally hundreds of such periodicals deal with history. Some journals publish articles about particular facets of history—the Middle Ages, military affairs, science, art, women—or the history of particular parts of the world—France, Africa, the Middle East, Kentucky. Others, such as *The American Historical Review* and the *Journal of World History,* have a scope as wide as the discipline itself. An hour or two spent consulting the annual indexes of periodicals in their printed form or using the full text electronic

search capacities of a database such as JSTOR can open your eyes to many issues that touch on your subject. And since the essays you write in a history course are more like journal articles than books, the journals will provide models of writing and thinking that you can imitate.

Books will also be among the secondary sources you have located, and many of those available in your library. Most will also have been subject to some sort of critical evaluation, if not in the publication process then at least in their selection to be a part of the library's collections. That should give you some comfort. But since you will not limit your search simply to books directly about your topic, you will still need to make certain critical judgments. If you are writing about Woodrow Wilson, you will no doubt look for books that deal with his times. You may consult books about World War I, books about the progressive era that he represented, books about people close to Wilson, and books about various issues in which he was involved. In such works you would look up the name "Wilson, Woodrow" in the index and turn to those pages to see how Wilson is mentioned. You will need to satisfy yourself in each of these cases that what is written about Wilson is both *plausible* and *trustworthy* and that it is *accurate* and may be *corroborated*. If you can satisfy yourself on these counts, you may discover yourself on the trail of a valuable insight.

Book reviews may also help you in evaluating some of your sources. Many historical journals contain reviews of books and some indexes to periodical literature—including many that are available in electronic versions—can help you find book reviews. You should also look in *Book Review Digest,* which has provided a guide to published book reviews for nearly a century. In this specialized index you search for reviews by the names of book authors, usually in the years immediately after the book was first published. While the *Digest* includes some academic journals, it also includes more popular reviews for an intelligent reading public. But

these sorts of book reviews may also contain valuable insights about your potential source. A reviewer will tell you whether the book repeats old information, breaks new ground, or contradicts received interpretations, and often whether the book is well written or almost impossible to understand.

While a growing variety of Web sites also offer more book reviews online, H-Net Reviews, which are found at http://www .h-net.org/reviews, are particularly valuable, especially for books published in recent years. Most of the scholarly networks affiliated with H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online commission books reviews, and literally thousands of those reviews are archived on this site. Perhaps more significant, the entire database can be searched using keyword terms or other parameters you select. This electronic review archive is an extraordinary research tool.

Occasionally reviews can be fiercely polemical, displaying historians at their worst. But some books deserve to be attacked because they ignore scholarly evidence or present a one-sided view of their subject. More often, uncivil reviews reveal pettiness and sometimes jealousy, and it is unfortunately often true that historians with radically new insights into a historical problem may be pummeled by old believers who think the truth was discovered long ago and is not subject to change. Still there is hardly any better way to be introduced to the historical profession than by reading lots and lots of book reviews. You should by all means read as many reviews of the same book—especially among your potential sources—as you can, since different scholars will highlight different aspects of a book. You will often pick up information that you would otherwise miss and then be in a better position to evaluate the book as a source.

Increasingly there are other secondary sources besides books and articles—not merely similar materials posted on Internet Web sites—that you may need to consider. You will likely

find others reflecting cinematic and also journalistic interpretations of subjects related to your topic. Historic events and characters have long been the subjects of film, both those meant to document what actually happened and those seeking to entertain by presenting artistic versions of the past. With the increase in the number of television outlets, notably The History Channel, as well as the easy availability of videotapes and compact disks, these cinematic versions of the past have become a much more common source of historical information. Almost all of them are secondary sources since they represent the past as seen and interpreted by filmmakers. Even the best documentary films—such as those about American jazz music, baseball, and the Civil War created by Ken Burns—are not themselves primary sources, but clearly the creation of skilled storytellers and film makers working with primary sources to present an interpretation about events in the past. And many feature films that have historical themes or topics—some fairly recent examples we have seen include *Munich* and *Master and Commander*—are intended to be faithful representations of times past even though historians frequently criticize them for numerous inattentions to historical detail.

In any case, films do provide a dramatic connection to the past, one which may especially satisfy our desires to visualize what we might otherwise know primarily from written texts. Moreover, they offer many people images which have a profound effect on how they read history essays. Thus films on subjects related to your topic can, and often should, be among the sources you consult as you prepare to write an essay. You will need to evaluate them, not judging them on the format through which they reach you, but on the same basis as we have suggested for other sources. Are they *plausible* reconstructions of the past, despite such obvious gaffs as the Green Dragoons in *The Patriot* wearing red uniforms; and is the history they present *trustworthy* even when it is based on discredited sources, as was Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Even

though you may worry about some details, is the film generally *accurate* and, perhaps above all, can it be *corroborated* by other sources. Applying the historians' critical method to films will help you to see how they may, and sometimes may not, help you in writing your historical essay.

You may also look to other popular materials, such as newspapers and magazines, for secondary sources. Occasionally both types of publications will feature the analysis of a particular subject which will include, or may even primarily be, a consideration of the historical background of a particular topic. Perhaps because journalists ask similar questions to those historians use, many of these articles can often be useful in your search for sources. A few major newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London have cumulative indexes to subjects and authors appearing in their columns, and their issues are widely available in microform editions. Others have searchable databases online, although often access may be limited to those who subscribe to the service. But once you have located—and evaluated—such stories, some may be very important to the essay you will write.

### *Primary Sources*

Of course, newspapers may also contain primary sources, especially those accounts of direct observation of events by journalists or other writers. Materials in newspapers also illustrate that sometimes the same document may be used as either a primary or a secondary source, depending on the use a historian makes of the source. For example, an April 8, 2003, article in the *New York Times* by Dexter Filkins reported a "Warm Welcome and Stubborn Resistance" as the U.S. First Marine Division completed its advance into Baghdad, Iraq.2 This article might be a secondary source for an essay on the 2003 American offensive in Iraq; but it might as well be a primary source for an essay on the history of "embedded" journalists, participating in a U.S. Department of Defense experiment with wartime journalism. Understanding newspaper, and other sources, in

this way will help you differentiate between secondary and primary sources for your topic.

Good history essays should *always* refer to primary sources; you can do so as well. Be on the lookout for editions of the works by the various people who may enter your essay. Using texts written by those you write about gives your own work authority. When you use any edition of collected or selected works, check the dates of publication. Sometimes several different editions have been published of the same works. These editions may be of different sorts. The most valuable are editions of the complete works in which every surviving text is collected and indexed, sometimes with other materials from the time the person lived. These can be important to determine the different views of your subject either over time or when addressing different audiences.

Look for collections of speeches or sermons, published diaries, and editions of correspondence, all of which are also fairly common. Also read published (and, if they are available to you, unpublished) autobiographies, but be skeptical of them. Apply the same critical historical standards you would for any other source: Is the account *plausible, trustworthy, accurate,* and can it be *corroborated?* Remem-ber, when anyone writes anything about themselves, they have a natural desire to shape the image of themselves for posterity. Autobiographies and memoirs almost always have a lot of fiction in them. Still, all of them contain some truth—although some are more truthful than others. The recent furor over James Frye's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces,* and his apparent invention of many details has drawn attention to such problems. His defense, that the work contains "the emotional truth," was roundly criticized. Yet the problem is a real one, even for a historian writing a memoir, as Frank F. Mathias understood. In recounting his life as a young soldier in the South Pacific in *GI Jive: An Army Bandsman in World War II,* Mathias later confessed he used "my memory, my letters,

and some imagination to present a true picture."3

Perhaps this is why most historians enjoy reading such sources. Like photographs, they give us a sense of intimacy with bygone times and people we have not known. And like photographs, the speeches, diaries, and letters are frequently datable. You can quickly see that they belong to a certain time and place, and in the eternal flux of things, they seem to make time stand still for a moment. Sermons and speeches can give you a sense of the public image and message someone wanted to convey. Diaries and collections of letters, on the other hand, frequently give us figures in relatively unguarded prose, commenting on daily life without the caution that marks more public utterances. The private persona or personality of the diarist or letter writer may be different from the public image displayed in speeches or writing intended for a large audience. But take note: The historian—rather than the former soldier—Mathias also cautions that in a memoir, just as in photographs, sermons, diaries, speeches, and letters, "imagination must enhance truth,"4

Whenever you are using such primary sources, you will need to apply your standards of historical criticism. Are the claims *plausible* and are there reasons for you to treat them as *trustworthy?* For example, are you reading a copy of the letter saved by the author or one collected by the recipient? Despite the best of intentions, these are not always exactly the same. Keep that in mind, although you may have no choice but to use whatever version is available. Also consider if any claims or assertions made are *accurate*. Can you *corroborate* them from other sources?

Often numerous primary sources relating to a general topic are collected and published in a form that may be readily available. One of the most monumental of these is *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies,*

published in seventy volumes a century ago and now available online at http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa/browse.monographs/waro.html. The original volumes are indexed; however, the search functions in the online edition are cumbersome to use. A new CD-ROM version has better search options and contains additional related material. This vast resource almost seems to contain a transcription of nearly every scrap of paper exchanged within the armies on both sides in the Civil War, and there were many, indeed! The noise of battle during the Civil War was so tremendous that men under fire could not hear each other speak. Therefore written orders carried from place to place on the battlefield were much more common than in earlier wars, and thousands of these were collected by the editors.

We could list literally hundreds of additional examples of primary source collections that can help you in research, and many more of them are becoming available online or in other digital formats. Whatever your topic, check to see if you can locate a collection of documents related to your essay. When you search the library catalog, or use an Internet search engine, in addition to keywords for your topic, look for “sources” or “personal narratives” as an additional parameter; those are the principal terms used in Library of Congress subject headings to indicate primary source materials. Browse through the collections you find even if you do not at first see that they are related to your topic. You may be pleasantly surprised. But remember always to examine critically the primary sources that you do find.

Many museums, large and small, often have collections of historic objects that you might wish to use as sources for your essay as well. In the last few decades the number of such collections has grown tremendously. Many of them already have investigated these elements of material culture that can help you in understanding how they relate to the topic of your essay. But like every source you might wish to use, you need to evaluate them carefully. Not only must

you consider “how people relate to objects,” but also “the nature of the relation among words, images, and things...in particular historical contexts.”5 Rather than letting this dissuade you, consider it a challenge to expand your use of a wide variety of primary sources.

You may also find that your own college library probably has an archive or manuscript department with collections of unpublished letters, diaries, memos, and other materials. Look for them and see if there might be material related to your topic. There’s nothing quite so thrilling as to look at the basic raw materials of history preserved in such sources. Many libraries and archives now also include oral history collections, tapes, and records of people—both well known and obscure—discussing the past and their participation in events. You can sometimes learn something by the tone of voice people use to describe past events, although other interviews may only be available in written transcripts. In either case, interviews are valuable for studies of recent or fairly recent history. If, for example, you write about some aspect of combat in World War II or Korea, you may be able to find veterans willing to tell you of their experiences, giving you a first-hand view of history. The same is true of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Vietnam War, the Great Depression, the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, and many other events within memory of witnesses and participants still alive.

People who participated in great events or lived through particularly interesting times are often eager to talk about them. Don’t be afraid to write or telephone people to ask for an interview, but respect the wish of anyone who wants to remain silent. It is always best, however, to conduct interviews in person. Prepare for the interview by learning all you can about the person and by writing out questions beforehand. But don’t be mechanically bound to your list before the interview begins. Explore each question thoroughly. Listen to your source and be prepared to ask for clarification of details. If possible, record your interview on audio or

videotape; if not, be sure to take extensive notes, clarifying and confirming any exact quotations you wish to record.

Remember, too, that primary sources can also include a wide variety of materials including photographs, material objects, paintings, sculpture, and architecture. Liana Vardi's fine 1996 article, "Imagining the Harvest in Early Modern Europe," considers representations of peasants by artists for three centuries after 1500. She shows that gradually the peasants, the farmers who worked the fields, disappear from paintings of rural landscapes. By comparing paintings with poetry from the time, she argues that city dwellers and aristocrats became afraid of peasants, who frequently rebelled against the harsh conditions of their lives. Then, in the eighteenth century, peasants returned to the paintings, where they appear docile and obedient and happy.6 The paintings, reproduced in black and white throughout the article, serve as essential primary sources for Professor Vardi's conclusions about popular attitudes centuries ago.

You too may find important visual sources for your own essays. Yet do not be lulled into thinking that all images, and especially photographs, can reproduce reality as you might imagine it. Alan Trachtenberg understood and explained this nearly two decades ago in his article, "Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs." The many, some famous, photographs of that war may have shaped subsequent images of the conflict, but they are, Professor Trachtenberg wrote, "vulnerable to exactly the same obscurities of other forms of evidence. The simplest documentary questions of who did what, when, where, and why may be impossible to answer."7 We could not agree more, and once again encourage you to question *all* your sources and evaluate them carefully.

But at the same time, when considering primary sources for your essay, Professor Vardi's article should also remind you not to dismiss the possibilities of literature—poetry, short stories,

and novels—which often capture the tenor and tone of the time in which they were written. While literary sources are sometimes difficult to interpret, particularly given the frequent metaphorical and occasionally personal expressions of the authors, in many cases the connections to a historical topic are clear enough. Consider, for example, this 1899 poem, “Take Up the White Man’s Burden,” by the well-known Anglo-Indian Rudyard Kipling, which he specifically headed “The United States and the Philippine Islands”:

Take up the White Man’s burden—
  Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
  To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness
  On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new caught, sullen peoples,
  Half devil and half child.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Take up the White Man’s burden—
  Ye dare not stoop to less—
Nor call too loud on Freedom
  To cloak your weariness;
By all ye cry or whimper,
  By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
  Shall weigh your Gods and you.8

Were you writing an essay on United States imperialism—or on imperialism and colonialism in general—the importance of this poem as a primary source should be clear. These brief verses capture some essential expressions of the colonial mentality of that era and, if nothing else, could lend an added dimension to your essay on the subject. Frequently you may come across literary works, perhaps some not so well known as Kipling's, which can serve to enliven what you write. You might need to do some additional reading to make certain your interpretation is not too far from the mark. Consider that effort, too, a part of the evaluation process necessary before you use your sources for any history essay, and also as another example of the hard work that is required if you are to write well.

**Writer's Checklist**

- 4 Is my essay clearly focused on the topic?
- 4 Have I refined the topic so that it is manageable?
- 4 Have I looked for all the available reference materials related to the topic?
- 4 Does my working bibliography reflect all the available sources?
- 4 Have I used the citations in my secondary sources to find other available materials?
- 4 What primary sources are related to the topic have I found?
- 4 Have I asked questions about and evaluated all my sources?

1 Quoted in *The National Book Award: Writers on Their Craft and Their World* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1990), 18.



CHAPTER 4 n *Gathering Information*

*Focusing on Your Topic*

CHAPTER 4 n *Gathering Information*

2 Dexter Filkins, “Warm Welcome and Stubborn Resistance for Marines,” *New York Times,* 8 April 2003, A1.



3 Frank F. Mathias, “Writing a Memoir: The Involvement of Art with Craft,” *The History Teacher* 19 (1986): 378.

4 Mathias, 379.



5 Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review,* 110 (2005): 1018.



6 Liana Vardi, “Imagining the Harvest in Early Modern Europe,” *The American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1357–1397.



7 Alan Trachtenberg, “Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs,” *Representations* 9 (1985): 2–3.



8 Rudyard Kipling, “Take Up the White Man’s Burden,” in *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse,* ed. T. S. Eliot (New

York: Anchor Books, 1941), 143–144. There are many editions of Kipling’s poetry available.