

How to Read a Text

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Texts are not simply "there" to be read, but have been "put there" to influence how other people understand the world. They are not perfect mirrors of reality or of the author's mind. Think of them as incomplete artifacts manufactured to project meanings and produce effects. They do not simply appear, after all, but have to be produced, and the writer produces them to influence readers, at the time and in the future. No time and place being the same as any other, the circumstances in which a text is written shape the text according to the audience it seeks to persuade. No text ever tells the same story; every text adds something new or hides something away. The task of the historian is to understand both what is said and what is suppressed, and from that to reconstruct some piece of the past where the text was written. Here are some questions that might help you figure out what a text "says," though note that not all will apply to every text:

(i) mechanics:

Who wrote it?

When was it written?

When was it published, if ever; and if not, why not? How did it survive?

What language was it written in? What language was it published in?

Is it translated, and if so, by whom and for what purpose?

If you are not reading it in the original language, does that matter?

When was it read?

Who might have read it? Are you one of its intended readers?

(ii) meanings:

What does the author say? Is what s/he writes internally contradictory in any way?

In what ways does the author say it? Does that affect what s/he is saying?

What is its genre (biography, novel, diary, memoir, essay, legal judgment, joke)?

How does the genre determine what gets said?

Is the author aware of competing points of view? If you are, what are they?

Is there any tension between the author says and what s/he avoids saying?

(iii) effects:

What is the author's point of view (what does the author *think* s/he is saying)?

Why does the author hold that point of view?

What effects does the author seek to produce in readers?

What effects has this text produced since the time it was written?

Has the text had consequences in the real world, and if it has, why?

How does the text deepen or change your understanding of the world in which it was made?