What are academic monographs and why do they matter?

- **Academic monographs** are book-length, specialized studies written by an academic, published by a university press, and sold primarily to libraries.
- Academic prose can be challenging; it is at times dense, dry, dull, and jargon-laden. Nevertheless, monographs play a large role in faculty hiring and tenure decisions and as such, these books contain scholars’ major research endeavors.
- **This handout will cover three approaches for reading a monograph:**
  1. Reading the entire book.
  2. Reading for research.
  3. Reading for a class assignment.

**Reading the Entire Book**

Never read from cover to cover. If you *must* read the entire book, here is one approach.

- Begin by determining the book’s relevance to you based on the title, table of contents, index, and publication information.
- Next, read the *introduction or preface* carefully.
  - This section is where the author explains what prompted their interest in the book’s topic, lays out their thesis (if they have one) and major arguments, and critiques tendencies in the literature.
  - Take note of the author’s research questions and main arguments, particularly the book’s thesis.
- Read the *conclusion* next.
  - In this section, the author further elaborates on the book’s overall purpose, points ways forward in the specific research field, and explains his or her work’s significance to the larger field.
  - It should be re-visited after reading the body.
- Look at any *appendices or other backmatter* to get a better sense of the material covered as well as the evidence the author uses to support their ideas.
  - Skimming the *footnotes or endnotes* may also prove useful to this end.
- Read the body.

**Reading for Research**

- Focus in on the sections which apply to your project and help you answer your research question(s).
- During less relevant sections, you may wish to skim at least the topic sentences and search for key words to ensure you are not missing useful material.

**Reading for a Class Assignment**

- Bear in mind the topics covered in class and review your syllabus and lecture notes to decide what topics within the book should be your focus.
- If only one chapter or section is assigned, read it more thoroughly than you might if a larger section or the entire book was assigned.
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Strategies for Identifying Relevant Information

- Keep in mind the question(s) you are trying to answer. Even if you aren’t reading the book for research, it’s helpful to frame your reading in terms of questions.
- Read the chapter titles and subheadings within the chapters to decide if you should explore further.
- Come up with a list of key words which are central to the questions you’re trying to answer. Scan the text for these key words, focusing back in when they pop up frequently. Look the words up in the index to see if you missed useful material.

Questions to ask yourself as you read, regardless of your purpose:

- Don’t take what the author says at face value—question all claims and interpretations.
  - Are there enough citations present to support the argument?
  - Is the author relying too heavily on too few sources? Is there enough primary source research to support claims?
  - What is the quality of evidence being used? Are the sources used somewhat dated or otherwise lacking in scholarly rigor?
  - What does the author leave out or avoid addressing?
  - How does the author’s perspective shape their arguments? Objectivity in the humanities and social sciences is impossible to achieve, so you should not ask if the text is biased, but what that bias is.
  - Are you convinced by the author’s arguments? Why or why not?
  - How do the author’s arguments compare with those of other scholars in the field?

Taking Notes

- Taking notes coded to page number helps you understand and remember the material and is absolutely essential if you intend to use the book as a source in a paper, as well as if you want to be prepared for class discussion. Find the method that works best for you.
- **Taking class notes:**
  - In your notebook, or on sticky notes in your book, write down questions and comments which you think will help you be more articulate in discussion.
  - If you own the book, *annotate*!
    - Underline key statements.
    - Write in the margins—points of disagreement, connections to other sources, short summaries of the material covered for easier reference, unanswered questions.
    - Asterisk significant passages, particularly sections you want to revisit.
- **Taking research notes:**
  - Using *index cards* organized by topic allows for your notes to become more flexible as you move into the writing process.
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How to Read a Monograph

- Include full bibliographical information on the back of the card and write a header at the top of the card with the author’s name, abbreviated title of the source, and a title for your notes.
  - Using a word document or notepad allows you to keep track of the structure of the book more easily, but may prove less malleable to your writing needs.
  - Make a table with either significant themes/concepts or chapter titles in one column and corresponding notes on the text in the other column. If you organize the table by theme, you can include additional columns for notes from other sources for easier comparison and contrast.
  - Keeping a separate set of notes with your opinions on the reading is helpful, since you do not want to mistake the author’s ideas with your own, or vice-versa.

Additional Advice

- When you stumble on to unfamiliar language, look it up.
  - The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is the gold standard.
  - When dealing with critical vocabulary, you will likely have to use other resources like encyclopedias (specialized and otherwise) and university webpages.
- Pay attention to argument structure—doing so will help you decide if the author’s claims are reasonable.

Brian Delay’s *War of a Thousand Deserts* is a monograph which contains a revisionist account of the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848. Delay focuses on the role played by the Comanche and other tribes from what is today the American southwest, but prior to the war was the northern Mexican frontier.

A) Rank the following research questions in terms of relevance to Delay’s book:

1) What were the attitudes held by Anglo-Americans towards Latin Americans during the age of Manifest Destiny? What were the consequences of these attitudes?

2) How did American race attitudes influence the Mexican-American war?
3) What role did indigenous people play in determining the outcome of the Mexican-American War?

B) Match the following topic sentences to the above research question each one best corresponds to.

Note:
- If you were actually reading Delay’s book, a topic sentence relevant to your research question would encourage you to read the corresponding paragraph more thoroughly.
- Some of these matches are better than others. While the book is helpful for answering each of the above research questions, it would benefit from a more thorough read based on which question you were pursuing.

a) p. 77: “The Hois war leaders Potsanaquahip, Saviah, and Pia Kusa led minor retaliatory raids and patrolled the eastern section of la comanchería against hostile Texan parties, but it was obvious that Texans and Mexicans could not be fought at the same time, at least not profitably.”

b) p. 205: “Racist Indian hating helped Americans and Texans do things that Northern Mexicans dearly wanted to do. If all of Mexico’s indigenous enemies could have been homogenized as an uncomplicated racial other, the project of drawing clear boundaries, overcoming internal divisions, and focusing energy and malice cooperatively would have been simpler.”

c) p. 299: “The second thing that article 11 stands for is the paradox of Anglo-American racial confidence, which both facilitated U.S. expansion and blinded it to the limitations of its own power.”

Key A (in order from most to least relevant): 3, 2, 1

- For the first research question, dealing with US perceptions of Latin Americans and Manifest Destiny, only some sections of the book would be immediately relevant. To figure out where in the book the relevant sections are, review the table of contents and index. If you still can’t figure out where to look, go back to the preface and see if Delay explains the structure of his book.
- The second research question is similar to the first, but with a more narrow focus since it deals directly with the Mexican-American War. Delay would prove even more useful for this question. You would likely find insights by looking at the broader context of the war, though you would still want to focus on sections dealing specifically with American racism.
- The third research question is fairly similar to the questions Delay attempts to answer in his book. Delay’s work would likely be a major secondary source in your research.

Key B

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Works Cited

