

A Guide for Students of "History of European Civilization"

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Introduction

The course for which I have written this guide deals with the history of European civilization from antiquity to the contemporary world. Like other courses of this type, it is founded on the belief that there is such a thing as European civilization and that its history is worth studying. Unlike the vast majority of those courses, however, it relies almost exclusively on reading a few selected primary sources in English translations. That is its chief characteristic.

In most courses on the history of European civilization or the history of Western civilization, as they are more commonly called and as it used to be called at the University of Chicago, too, teachers assign a textbook or a historical survey of some kind. They may of course also assign primary sources, and they often do, but they mostly limit themselves to using the primary sources as a means of illustrating the lessons of the textbook, of deepening students' understanding of the past, or of improving their ability to grasp documents from a different time and place. The textbooks may vary in all sorts of ways. Some consist of a single volume. More commonly, they are divided into two or three volumes. Some start with the ancient Near East, some with classical Greece, and some start with the Renaissance. Some use Renaissance and Reformation as their main chronological dividing line; others use the French Revolution. They may emphasize intellectual history, or political history, or social history, or gender, or the expansion of Europe, or globalization. But whatever the differences between them, they serve as the backbone of the course.

Not so in this course. I usually do not assign a textbook at all, and when I do, it plays a decidedly secondary role, as a supplement to the primary sources. Though this has long been typical of the way the course has been taught at the University of Chicago, it is quite unusual. You will not find many other schools where history is taught like that. It therefore requires some explanation.

History, Memory, and the Past

Memory is both the beginning and the foundation of all historical study. If we had no memory—if we were not able to remember anything, and if we did not know what it means to remember something—we would lack the very concept of the past. We could not even begin to imagine what it would mean to speak about the past, let alone study it. We would live in a one-dimensional present. Anything we saw, heard, smelled, or touched would disappear from our consciousness just as soon as we saw, heard, smelled, or touched something else. We could never perceive anything except whatever happened to be right in front of us right at that very moment. We would not be able to tell the difference between earlier and later. We would not know what to do with a word like "history" or "the past" or "remember when?" Perhaps we might not be able to imagine a future either. And our very concept of what it means to perceive something, or what it means to have had an experience, would change and might even vanish altogether.

But we do have a memory. We are able to remember things that are no longer present. We are able to distinguish earlier from later. And therefore we do have a concept of the past. The past consists of things that were once present, but are no longer present now. We can remember them, or at least some of them. We know that they are past.

This is worth stressing. Historians sometimes forget that, when you come right down to it, all history is grounded in memory—in our ability to remember. That ability is not to be taken for granted. It is a precious gift. How precious it is you only begin to appreciate when you start losing it. Discovering that your memory is wrong, that it has played you a trick, that whatever it is you seem to remember as clearly as the light of day is merely a fact of your imagination because your memory failed you is a peculiarly human experience. It is also peculiarly painful. For just as soon as you recognize that your memory has failed you in an instance in which you were sure you remembered correctly, you can no longer trust the rest of your memory. When your memory fails, all bets are off.

History can therefore never be a substitute for memory. History presupposes memory. And it is important to understand that history does not merely presuppose memory in a practical sense, as if the point were simply that it would be difficult to study history without the ability to remember anything. Nor does history presuppose memory merely in a temporal sense, as if the point were simply that memory comes first and history comes later. The point is that history presupposes memory in a logical or conceptual sense: without memory, history would not merely be difficult to practice, but quite literally inconceivable, impossible to imagine, an empty word without a meaning, the name for the perceptions of a sense we do not have.

Yet this is not a course about memory. This course is about history. And the reason for that is simple. Memory is limited and memory can go wrong. You can remember only what you yourself have seen, or heard, or touched, or smelled, or been told, or read, and so on. You cannot remember what others have seen unless they first tell you what they have seen. Nor can you always trust your memory. Sometimes you misremember, sometimes you forget, and sometimes you do not even notice what you might otherwise be able to remember, so that it passes you by without ever entering your memory. Memory is the foundation and the beginning of all history. But just as you cannot substitute history for memory, so you cannot substitute memory for history either.

History compensates both for the limits of memory and for its occasional failures. History builds on memory by extending your knowledge of the past to things you cannot possibly know from memory because they happened at a time long before you were born, or in a place that you have never visited. History can also correct your memory when your memory goes wrong.

That does not mean that our knowledge of history is unlimited or that history cannot go wrong. History has its limits, too, and it can easily go wrong.¹ But the limits of history are different from the limits of memory, and the errors of history are something different from forgetting or misremembering.

¹ I have tried to explain what I believe these limits are in a book called *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

History and Evidence

In order to extend the limits of memory and make up for its shortcomings, historians can obviously not rely on memory itself. Memory is what it is. It can of course change. It can also be trained and improved. But in the end it is what it is. What you remember is simply what you remember. There is no way to correct what you remember by relying on your memory. If you tried, you would be trying to correct what you remember by remembering it again. It would be as if you rolled the dice a second time in order to make sure that you rolled them correctly the first time, or as if you bought a second copy of today's paper in order to make sure that the first copy is telling the truth.² If you wish to correct your memory, you need something other than your memory to serve as a yardstick or a measure or a source of new information that exists independently from your memory. That something consists of historical evidence.

What I mean by "evidence" is what historians use to study the past in their efforts to improve on memory. There are other words you can use instead of "evidence." "Primary sources," for example, or just plain "sources," or "primary readings," or "primary literature," or "original documents." "Sources" is a favorite term because historians like to think of knowledge of the past as something that flows from the evidence as water flows from a spring. "Primary literature" helps to distinguish the evidence from the "secondary literature," meaning, the books that historians write about the past on the basis of the evidence. Both primary and secondary literature can be called sources because knowledge of the past flows from both of them. What makes the one primary and the other secondary is that knowledge of the past flows directly from the evidence and only indirectly from the secondary literature.

Terms like "literature" and "documents" point to the fact that historians most frequently rely on written evidence. But whether or not the evidence is written is an entirely subordinate question. Evidence can consist of all sorts of things. Ruins, paintings, coins, stones, clothes, weapons, paper, tracks, bones, mummies, trees, and so on are all perfectly good pieces of evidence. Evidence can even consist of the words in which other people tell us about the past. There is a whole branch of history called "oral history" because it devotes itself to recording the words of certain people about the past and then studies what they have said. What makes something evidence, in other words, has nothing to do with the material from which the evidence is made or with the durability of that material. What makes it evidence is that it did not merely exist *in* the past, but that it has also survived *from* the past into the present and that we can therefore learn from it *about* the past. We can study the evidence only because it exists right here and now, in the *present*. That is the fundamental point. That is the reason why we can use it to improve memory. Evidence exists separately from memory. It does not need to be remembered, because it exists in the present. It can be consulted right here and now. That is why it can serve as the basis of all historical work.

Most people think historians study the past. But nothing could be further from the truth. The past is gone. You cannot see it, you cannot touch it, you cannot smell it, and you can

² The example of the paper is taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), § 265. The example of the dice can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), § 230.

certainly not study it: it's simply gone. You can of course remember it. But since the point of history is to improve on memory, history cannot rely on memory. It must rely on something that can be trusted to be independent of memory because it need not be remembered.

Historians do not study the past. They study what remains *from* the past: books, ruins, paintings, stones, clothes, weapons—evidence. Evidence is the one and only means we have to extend the limits of memory and to make up for its shortcomings.

Perhaps the best word to designate the basis on which all historical understanding rests, as opposed to the memory that history presupposes, is "data." "Data" is the word that scientists use to designate the material with which they work, on which their theories rest, and which those theories are designed to explain. The data are given (*data*, "things given," from the Latin *dare*, "to give"). You cannot change them at will. You can change your theories and explanations, but the data are just what they are. You may not have all the data; you may go looking for new data; the data may change under your very eyes in unexpected ways; the data may turn out to be entirely different from what you expected; and you may never be able to make sense of the data with which you are confronted. But whatever they are, that's what they are, even when they are changing, and even when they make no sense. You must account for them as they are without ignoring or changing them. Otherwise you're defeating the entire purpose of collecting data, which is to serve as a check on your imagination, your memory, and your wishful thinking. If you have no respect for the data as they are, you're not practicing science or scholarship but fraud.

That's just how evidence works in history. It doesn't really matter what you call it. "Evidence," "primary sources," "primary readings," "sources," "data," "original documents," "remainders from the past," and so on are all perfectly serviceable terms. The point is not what you call it. The point is that you know what you're talking about. The point is that you remember *why* you're collecting evidence in the first place. The point is that evidence is the present means on which historians rely to learn things about the past that lie beyond the limits of memory. The point is that evidence is the foundation of historical study, the means by which history, even while it continues to presuppose memory, can emancipate itself to some degree from its dependence upon memory. You may not have as much evidence as you would like, and you may have to go searching for more. You may, on the contrary, have so much of it that it turns out to be overwhelming and you don't know how to deal with it. You may discover that it is not exactly what it seems to be. And you may never know exactly what it means. But whatever the evidence is, and whatever it may mean, one thing is certain: if you ignore it or change it at will, you might just as well never have begun to collect it in the first place.

History and Facts

Evidence (or data) must be distinguished from facts. "Facts," of course, is a loaded word. People have all sorts of ideas about facts. Some think there are no facts. Some think facts don't matter. Some think facts are the same as data. Some think that facts are reality itself, as if reality consisted of facts. That makes for a bewildering array of opinions, and for considerable confusion. But facts do matter, and they are neither to be confused with things nor with data.

The first and single most important thing to note about facts is that they consist of statements. They are expressed in words. A fact is anything that can be preceded by the sentence "It is a fact that ...". Whatever follows the "that" has to be some kind of sentence. And a sentence is not the same as a thing, or an object, or a piece of reality. A piece of butter on the table isn't a fact. It's a piece of butter. But the statement "that's a piece of butter on the table" is a fact. Or rather, it's a fact if there actually is a piece of butter on the table. If there is no piece of butter on the table, it's a lie, or a mistake, or an illusion, or some such kind of untruth. But certainly not a fact. Facts, in other words, aren't just plain statements. They are true statements. And historical facts are true statements about the past. Facts consist of words, and the words amount to the claim that something is "in fact" the case. That something that is in fact the case does not itself consist of words. (The piece of butter consists of butter, not of words.) But the fact *that* it is the case always consists of words. (The fact *that* the piece of butter consists of butter, that fact consists of words).

Facts are therefore just about as far removed from data as you could imagine. The evidence is never true. It's the raw material of truth. It's just there. Facts, on the other hand, aren't just there. They consist of claims. They always presuppose some sort of understanding, and therefore they always embody some kind of theory. You never find naked or brute facts, no matter how often people call the facts naked or brute. There is no such thing. Facts are always clothed in some set of assumptions.

Perhaps the easiest way to clarify the difference between facts (theory) and evidence (data) is to point to the relationship between them. That relationship is reciprocal. The facts (historical theory) consist of true statements *about* the past and the evidence (historical data) consists of remainders *from* the past. They are complementary to each other. The facts are based on the evidence, and the evidence supports the facts. The job of historians is to make sure that this relationship works properly. They study the evidence in order to derive as many facts from it as possible; they dismiss statements that turn out not to be facts because they conflict with the evidence (the data); and they connect facts to each other in order to construct a coherent image of the past—the sorts of images you acquire from reading historical books.

It's worth pointing out that you can acquire images of the past in other ways than by studying the evidence. I have already mentioned memory. Memory is an abundant source of images of the past. But so are movies and novels. These images do not differ at all in their appearance from the images that historians produce. That is why the relationship between history, memory, literature, and movies is so close as to make it very difficult sometimes to tell them apart. But though the images furnished by history, memory, literature, and movies do not really differ from each other in appearance, they differ fundamentally in the way in which they are produced. Why? Because memory, movies, and novels are not bound by the rules of evidence. History is. Moviemakers and novelists care about such things as the beauty, coherence, or emotional power of the images they produce, and memory cares about the relationship between your image of the past and your sense of who you are. How those images are related to the evidence concerns them only secondarily. They are perfectly willing to ignore data that doesn't fit the story they would like to tell. They even invent things for which there are no data at all. And they have every right to do so. After all, they aren't historians. They do not claim to tell the truth about the past.

That's not at all to say they merely want to entertain. They usually want to convey some sort of truth and often do. But whatever truth that is, it is not historical truth. It's more like the kind of truth that Sue Grafton, a well-known writer of detective stories, reports having learned from her father: "I know it must be true because I made it up myself" (Sue Grafton, *O is for Outlaw*, [Pan Books, 1999], xiv). That's a lovely definition of poetic truth. But there's a difference between poetry and history. The difference is that poets need not obey the data. Historians must. That's often painful and rarely poetic. The data are usually recalcitrant. They often conflict with memory. They force you to acknowledge truths that you would rather ignore, and they hardly ever allow you to say what you would most like to say. But that is precisely what makes them the data. And respect for the data is the only thing that sets historians apart from everybody else who talks about the past.

You may have heard about the Hippocratic oath. It's an oath that medical doctors swear when they are formally inducted into the guild of physicians. It can be found in many different versions. But the core of it is simple: physicians swear to devote themselves to the health of their patients and will never use their knowledge of medicine for any other purpose.

You might imagine a historical equivalent to the Hippocratic oath. If there were such a thing, it would require students of history to devote themselves to finding out the truth about the past and never to use their mastery of the sources for any other purpose, like this: "You do solemnly swear, each by whatever he or she holds most sacred, that you will be loyal to the profession of history and just and generous to its members; that you will lead your lives and practice your art in uprightness and honor; that into whatsoever library you shall enter, it shall be with respect for the evidence, to the utmost of your power, you holding yourselves far aloof from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice; that you will exercise your art solely for the sake of understanding the past and will act for no other purpose, even if solicited, far less suggest it; that whatsoever you shall learn from the data, you will not keep secret, whether it is fitting to be spoken or not. These things do you swear."³

Can Facts be Distinguished From Data?

Distinguishing facts from data is more easily said than done. The moment you begin to work on concrete issues, the difference can lose all of the clarity it seems to have so long as you remain within the abstract realm of logic.

The most obvious cause of that confusion is that some historical data don't only come *from* the past, but also consist of statements *about* the past. Take Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, for example. This is historical evidence. It comes *from* the past. It allows us to learn something *about* the past. But as it happens, this particular piece of evidence, though more than two thousand years old, is a book, and in that book you find statements *about* the past that were made by Thucydides himself. So what should we call these statements? Are

³ I have made this up by modifying the version of the Hippocratic oath that can be found in the *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. William D. Harris and Judith S. Levey, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 1246.

they facts or are they data? Well, they are most definitely data. But if those data state something that actually was the case, then they are facts as well. It follows that data are sometimes impossible to separate from facts.

It's not difficult to see that the reverse is true of the secondary literature. Whatever facts happen to be reported in the secondary literature may also be viewed as data. Take any recent book of history. Assume it gives you facts. But is that all it does? Of course not. It doesn't merely consist of statements *about* the past. It also comes *from* the past. Admittedly it comes from a relatively recent past. But that still makes it evidence. Evidence for what? For the life of the historian who wrote it; the interests of the audience who bought it; the kind of paper manufactured at the time; the artwork produced by book designers; and so on.

The study of history makes it particularly difficult to distinguish clearly between facts and data, or theory and observation, because so much historical data consists of statements claiming to be facts. But it is important to realize that the same basic difficulty affects all forms of scholarship and science, regardless of the kind of data on which they rely. For in reality we only wish the data were given. In fact, no one gives them to us. We have to go out and get them first. True, they are "there." But "there" is not just anywhere. It is usually a very special place, like a laboratory, a museum, a library, an old box of letters, a mountain top, a planetarium, a tropical rain forest, and so on. Unless we go "there" to look for the data we want, the data will not come to us of their own accord. How do we know where to go? Not because of any data. We haven't gotten any data yet. We only know where to go because we have been told. We have certain desires to go in certain directions, and we have certain expectations of what we are going to find. We have something we want to know, some question we want answered. We have heard from others where we could go, and then we choose where to go and what to do when we get there. We do that on the basis of our desires and our expectations. The data we actually gather are therefore closely shaped by the beliefs, hopes, fears, and even the facts that happen to be on our minds and on the minds of our parents, teachers, and friends from whom we learned them. These frame our decision to search in one place rather than another, or not to search at all. It's not the data.

The only data that may be considered to be truly "given" are those no one has "taken." Data that anyone has taken are no longer pure. In the very process of collection they are being fed by our expectations and assumptions about the things that we don't know but would like to find out. That may seem paradoxical. It seems to mean that the only real data are those no one has actually analyzed. But that's of course not the point. The point is that pure data are an unusable figment of the logical imagination, and that useable data—the data we actually encounter as opposed to the data we imagine—are never as pure as we would like. It should be obvious that this makes the task of using data to correct memory rather more difficult than might seem to be the case at first sight.

Are Facts Real?

There is another problem: how do you actually recognize a fact? How do you tell a fact apart from an untruth? How do you know that the thing you've been told is really the case?

It is much harder to distinguish facts from falsehoods than may seem to be the case at first sight. The main reason for that is that there is no obvious difference between facts and

falsehoods. Both consist of statements that claim to be true, and the falsehoods are often more believable than the facts. "Elvis is dead."--"Elvis is alive."--"Kennedy was shot by Oswald."--"Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy involving the highest reaches of government."--"Western civilization gave science, liberty, and progress to the world."--"Western civilization is responsible for colonialism, imperialism, terrorism, and ecological disaster."--"The earth moves around the sun."--"The sun moves around the earth."--"The world was created out of nothing."--"The world was created out of something." All of these are perfectly good statements. But which of them are facts? Which aren't? How do you know? Not easy to decide. Not easy to decide at all.

Some people would therefore prefer not to talk about facts at all. Isn't the world much too complex, they say, to be grasped by the difference between true and false? Isn't there a sliding scale from relatively true to relatively false? Are any statements ever completely false or completely true? Maybe that works in logic or mathematics. But here we are dealing with the real world. And in the real world things are more complicated than that. Even such a simple statement as "that's a piece of butter on the table" is subject to considerable doubt. What, after all, is butter? Fat derived from milk? Which milk? Cow's milk? Sheep's milk? Dog's milk? Could be a piece of Parkay ("I can't believe it's not butter!"). How do you know that so-called piece of butter isn't made from certain non-dairy solids favored by an unscrupulous manufacturer? And come to think of it, doesn't a piece of butter mostly consist of empty spaces between protons, neutrons, and electrons anyway? "That's a piece of butter on the table." What kind of fact is that? From those thoughts it is a short step to the conclusion that there are no facts at all—or perhaps that facts do not consist of anything that people say, but of reality itself.

There is a certain logic to that conclusion. Facts, after all, must reflect reality. And if they reflect reality, it's easy to overlook the difference between statements and reality. Let's take the statement "a lot of people died from the plague in 1348." If this statement is true, then it is a fact. What makes it a fact? That there once really were a lot of people, real living human beings who actually died from the plague in 1348. So why not lump the true statement *about* those people (the fact) and the people *themselves* (the real people who really died in 1348) together? If a lot real people really did die from the plague in 1348, then it's a fact that they died from the plague in 1348. And if they did not die, then it's not a fact. There are no facts without the corresponding reality. That, after all, is precisely the point of calling them facts: that there is a corresponding reality. So why not call the corresponding reality itself the fact? Why insist on a pointless distinction between statements *about* reality and reality *itself*? Aren't the reality and the fact the same thing?

Well, no. Quite the contrary. As Kant put it in a famous argument, there is no difference between the hundred dollars you imagine to have in your pocket and the hundred dollars you actually have in your pocket, except that the former exist and the latter don't. Otherwise they are exactly the same. Existence isn't a characteristic. You can't describe it. It just "is." But that doesn't make the difference between real dollars and imaginary dollars any less important. Quite the contrary.

The same applies to statements *about* reality and reality *itself*. If you don't keep that in mind, you may fall into the error of believing that having an idea of a perfect being proves that there exists a perfect being, because a perfect being wouldn't be perfect if it didn't exist. If

you have an idea of it, it must exist. That's the short version of Descartes' so-called ontological proof of the existence of God. And that's the proof Kant reduced to absurdity with his example of the hundred dollars that exist and the hundred dollars that don't. And that is why statements *about* reality, whether they are true or not, deserve to be distinguished from reality *itself*.

Dismissing the possibility of historical facts (true statements about the past) and restricting the meaning of facts to actually existing things has two unhappy consequences. The first is that you become defenseless in the face of lies about the past. No matter how difficult it may be to discover facts about the past, people do in fact lie about the past. No matter how difficult it may be to distinguish lies from honest mistakes, we can't do without the distinction. If you lose faith in the possibility of true statements about the past, you merely open the door to lies—or you open it to bullshit, and bullshit, as Harry Frankfurt pointed out in a very funny little book with a very serious message, may well be more dangerous than lies.⁴ That's an absolutely crucial reason to insist on the historian's obligation to determine facts.

The second consequence of dismissing facts is to underestimate the difficulty historians face by a whole order of magnitude. This manifests itself in nothing more clearly than in the contemporary fascination with historical theory. Now, there are good reasons to focus on historical theory. Historians spend a lot of intellectual effort on activities that are seemingly different from establishing facts. Those are the kinds of activities that most people have in mind when they speak of historical theory. Theory tells you, for example, whether the most important truths about history are economic, or political, or intellectual, or social, or cultural; it tells you how these truths are related to each other; it tells you about the logic of narrative, about the difference between synchronic and diachronic approaches, whether it is possible to discover any laws of historical development, and so on. Those are all important issues, and they deserve the name "theory." But only so long as it is recognized that facts are theory too.

If "historical theory" is used in opposition to "facts," as though there were any facts that could be established in isolation from theory, that is fundamentally misleading. To believe that there is no theory in facts is nothing less than to belittle the complexity of history and theory alike. It is to assume that there is some part of history that can be taken for granted, as though there were some shortcut to the past, at least for those seemingly uncomplicated truths that we call facts. But just as there is no free lunch, there is no shortcut to the past. Theory cannot be restricted to the supposedly higher realms of supposedly more complicated issues. Theory goes all the way down to the bottom of the simplest statements about the past. The problems of "theory" understood in the limited sense are secondary. The fundamental problems turn on facts: true statements about the past. "A lot of people died from the plague in 1348." That's not reality. That's not a "mere" fact. That's historical theory at its most fundamental.

⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

The reasoning behind the rejection of "facts" (on the specious grounds that there neither are nor can be true statements about the past) and the complementary confusion of "facts" with reality itself (on the equally specious grounds that the important thing is the reality and not the words we use to speak about it, as if words were an optional accessory to truth) is not to be dismissed lightly. It is powerful and to the point, a salutary reminder not to accept any statements at face value, merely because they are declared to be facts. To accept any statement as fact is a dangerous thing indeed. It's better to exercise caution. There are too many untruths that pass for facts to permit such complacency to anyone who wants to get to the bottom of things. But it is one thing to exercise caution in the face of facts that may be spurious. It is quite another thing to abandon the distinction between facts and untruths altogether. And it is certainly no reason to conclude that the facts consist of reality itself. Quite the contrary, it is a reason to look harder, and to distinguish facts even more carefully from the reality they claim to describe.

European Civilization

The only proper conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that the extent of your knowledge of the past depends to a considerable extent on your familiarity with the relationship between memory, history, evidence, theory, fact, and knowledge. There is nothing wrong with taking certain claims about the past on faith, just so long as you know that you are taking them on faith. No human being could be reasonably expected to subject every lesson taught in school to critical analysis. Children cannot very well subject lessons to analysis until after they have learned the lessons, and they learn many more lessons than they will ever be able to subject to criticism. It makes very little sense to doubt the truth of the proposition that a Civil War took place in the United States in the nineteenth century, or that Franklin Roosevelt was one of the presidents of the United States unless you have a specific reason to doubt it. There is a great deal of common knowledge that we never subject to critical examination. We have learned it from our elders, friends, and teachers, from watching TV and reading the news, and we count that common knowledge as a kind of given. But taking common knowledge on faith does not mean that you need to lose sight of the difference between taking it on faith and checking it out for yourself. It is always possible to check it out for yourself, and sometimes it is necessary. That's as true of whatever you may have been told about the past as it is of anything else.

That is the reason why this course seeks to give you first-hand experience with the relationship between evidence, theory, and facts. It aims only secondarily at furnishing you with information *about* the past. Primarily it is designed to introduce you to the past by giving you hands-on experience of what it means to study evidence *from* the past, because studying evidence *from* the past allows you to sidestep all secondary accounts *of* the past and brings you face to face with the basis on which those accounts rest. That is an invaluable experience. How would you feel about studying science without ever being shown any data? Would you think that is enough? Same here.

Only a serious effort to understand the evidence is capable of yielding a fundamental insight: you cannot derive any facts from any evidence without exercising your judgment. The evidence never tells you whether you can trust it or not—and if it does tell you, that is all the more reason to be skeptical. It may be wrong, confused, misleading, and incomplete without telling you; it may have been forged in order to deceive you; it may be silent (how do you

derive statements about the past from a ruin?); and even if it contains abundant information, you will still not be able to determine what that information really means without exercising your judgment. But your judgment, like everybody else's, is fallible. It follows that there is no book and no authority of any kind to which you can turn for absolutely reliable information about history, or for that matter about anything else. It follows, indeed, that you can never be absolutely sure of any facts. All facts are supposed to be true. Whether they are actually true is another question altogether.

That may be frustrating for those who had hoped that the extent of our knowledge would be greater. It prevents you from taking anything for granted, as though it could never change. If you want to know something for sure, you need to find out for yourself. And even then you will have to reckon with the possibility that things may change. Your mind, for example, may change. But the knowledge that everything can change and that even the most fundamental pieces of common knowledge may turn out to have been built on sand is also liberating, because it casts doubt on all authority—especially the authority of common knowledge. Just as it underlines the limits of your knowledge, it underlines those of everybody else's, too. It demonstrates that there is no one to whom you may be asked to submit without question. Quite the opposite, it puts you in the position of a jury. Like a jury, you have to determine the facts of a case you did not witness yourself. Like a jury, you have to suspect that the witnesses on whose testimony your judgment is founded may not be telling the whole truth. Like a jury you need not pass a sentence. That is the job of the judge. And you are not the judge. Your obligation is to figure out the facts of the historical case, and then to render your verdict on the basis of the evidence you have at your disposal. That entails no small responsibility, especially since in the case of history the people you are judging have usually passed away a long time ago and can no longer exercise their right to be told of the charges against them, to confront their accuser, and to defend themselves. But there is only one alternative to assuming this responsibility, and that is to surrender to arbitrary authority.

Anyone who prefers knowledge to opinion is therefore well-advised to find out how to check the truth of opinions by means of evidence. You can do this only if you check what you want to know and do not consider anything as certain knowledge that you have been unable to verify. It does not matter all that much whether your knowledge is particularly significant or not. What matters is that it is really knowledge. Certainty of the precise meaning of a word can provide exactly the same kind of satisfaction as does understanding the course of world history, except that the latter provides more. But because little things are easier to know than big ones, and because the knowledge of big ones presupposes that of little ones, it is better to begin with little ones.

This course aims to teach you what history is, why it matters, and how it can be understood. It seeks to give you the wherewithal you need in order to be able to deal intelligently with historical change. It does so by asking you to exercise your judgment on a few pieces of evidence from the history of European civilization. That will strengthen your judgment and equip you with the critical habits of mind you need in order to avoid having the wool pulled over your eyes. It will also allow you to understand certain characteristics of European civilization more deeply and more firmly than you could ever understand them by reading any amount of secondary literature. Not the least of those characteristics is respect for facts and data. A course that may at first sight seem to focus only on historical methodology may

therefore actually be the most effective way of all to introduce you to the reality of European civilization.

Class Preparation: Reading and Thinking

There are three questions about the primary readings that you should keep in mind when you prepare yourself for class:

1. What does it actually say?
2. What can you learn from it about the past or, more specifically, about the history of European civilization, even if it does not tell you directly?
3. To what extent can you trust it or, put differently, what can you *not* expect it to tell you?

The first question is: what does it actually say? This is the easiest of the three because it deals with the subject of the text—what the author wanted you to know. Example 1: Gregory VII's letter to Herman of Metz tells you why Gregory VII thought popes could depose emperors—the subject about which he was writing to Herman of Metz. Example 2: Aristotle's *Politics* tells you why Aristotle believes that no human being can lead a good life outside a *polis*.

This question can be answered pretty completely by reading the text carefully. The emphasis, however, is on "carefully". Coming from a different place and time, the evidence presupposes a knowledge of details and implies agreement to assumptions of which you may be unaware. In order to be able to talk intelligently about the meaning of the evidence, more is therefore necessary than simply to have read it once and quickly. You must also remember the main points it makes—and thus you must have noticed what the main points are. That requires close attention and a good bit of thinking in addition to reading.

It goes without saying that you cannot hope to understand what you are reading if you do not know the meaning of the words you are reading. If you encounter an unfamiliar word, look it up. Most of the texts we are going to read have been translated from another language into English. This in itself makes it difficult to understand them because the language of a source has a profound impact on the information it contains. Different words denote different things. The words of the English language cannot, for example, convey the meaning of terms such as the Greek *areté*, the Latin *res publica*, or the Italian *virtù* as clearly as one would like. Moreover, outright mistranslations are far more frequent than you probably imagine. Because you are forced to rely on translations, it is all the more necessary for you to keep in mind that your answer even to the elementary question what the evidence says is not as certain as it would be if you could read it in the original language.

The second question is: what can you learn from this evidence about the history of European civilization? This question goes beyond the immediate subject of the text to whatever additional information may be derived from it indirectly, regardless of whether or not the author meant to tell you about it. Example 1: One of the things you can learn from Gregory VII's letter to Herman of Metz is that popes sometimes made important statements of principle by writing letters, and that some of these letters have been preserved until today. That's not what Gregory VII meant to tell you, but it is something you can learn from his letter, and it does tell you something about the history of European civilization. Example 2:

One of the things you can learn from Aristotle's *Politics* is that Aristotle's concept of nature was entirely different from the concept of nature in modern physics. That's something Aristotle did not mean to tell you. In fact, he could not have meant to tell you about it, because modern physics had not yet been invented when Aristotle was writing. But, provided you know something about modern physics, it is something you can learn from reading the *Politics*.

This question is harder to answer than the first because it demands a certain degree of imagination and some knowledge of the historical context. There is a great deal that you can learn from the evidence merely by looking at it very closely. But that way you can never learn what happened before it was written; what happened after it was written; what was happening in the area where it was written; or what was happening in areas of historical life from which your evidence is far removed—and hence you cannot learn how it relates to any of these. A treatise on theology may tell you nothing about the incidence of plague and famine during the years when it was written, and a poem may tell you nothing about the diplomatic negotiations taking place in the court at which it was composed, and yet such information may be absolutely essential to appreciate the meaning of both. There is a lot you can learn about the Renaissance by reading Leon Battista Alberti's dialogue *On the Family*—but there are certain things you may never understand unless you know that Alberti had studied canon law and completed his dialogue while he was serving as an employee of the Pope at the council of Florence. There is a lot you can learn about the difference between basic concepts of ancient and modern thinking if you read Aristotle's *Politics*—but not unless you know what those modern concepts are.

The third question is: to what extent can you trust the evidence? Or, put differently, what can you *not* expect the evidence to tell you? This is the question of source-criticism. Its purpose is to determine the limits to which you may go in using the evidence as a source of information about the past. If the first question deals with information *directly* taken from the evidence, and the second question deals with information *indirectly* taken from the evidence, this question deals with information that *cannot* be taken from the evidence. (Example 1: in his letter to Herman of Metz Gregory VII quotes from a letter of Pope Gelasius I, but he leaves out a crucial passage, presumably because it conflicts with his views. So you cannot use Gregory VII's letter as a reliable source of information about the views of Pope Gelasius I. Example 2: in his *Politics* Aristotle says some unflattering things to say about the people he calls "barbarians." Aristotle was well-educated and not at all badly informed about those "barbarians." But he also absorbed the prejudices that came with his education. You would therefore be well advised not to take his account of barbarians at face value.)

Some of the most famous historical documents, like the so-called *Donation of Constantine*, are outright forgeries that went undetected for centuries. Others, like Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, stand in such an intricate relationship to the historical reality they claim to portray that it is extremely difficult to distinguish clearly between fact and fiction. Determining the reliability of any particular piece of evidence with precision requires far more technical sophistication than is possible in this course. You are hardly going to discover forgeries that have not already been discovered, and in the main you have to take it on faith that the assigned readings are genuine, as opposed to forgeries concocted by some duplicitous writer in his spare time. It is possible that *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli's younger sister. It is also possible that Elvis is alive. Very unlikely, but at least conceivable. Perhaps you really cannot

know for sure. You can, however, know beyond a reasonable doubt. And you can think about three basic and related issues each of which will cast considerable light on the extent to which you can trust the evidence to give you reliable information about the past.

The first of these is the author. When you are reading a primary source—in fact, when you are reading anything at all and want to read it as an historian—you should always ask yourself: who was the author? Was it a man or a woman? Old or young? Powerful or poor? An oddball or an ordinary person? Where and when did s/he live? What did s/he do besides writing this particular piece of evidence? Why would s/he have made these particular statements? Did s/he perhaps have any reason to conceal important information from his/her readers, and consequently from you? What moved her? What bothered him? An author always has some kind of agenda. If you can figure out what the agenda is, especially if you keep in mind that the agenda may not always be exactly clear to the author, you will get a much better grasp on what to expect from the evidence. Example: the experiences Luther had as a child must almost certainly have helped to shape his theology in some fashion. Yet it is unreasonable to expect much information about his childhood from his treatise on *Christian Liberty*.

The second issue is the audience to whom the text was addressed. Who were the members of that audience? Were they learned or poorly educated? Did they have a particular interest in the issue or did they need to be persuaded that it mattered? What would they have expected the author to say? What, on the contrary, would they have expected the author not to say? What would they have liked to hear? And what might have made them angry if they had heard it? Good writers usually make sure to tell the audience only what they want the audience to know. No more, no less. In modern parlance, this is called "spin," and it has a negative connotation. But there is a positive equivalent to spin: a good writer won't burden the audience with extraneous material or distract them with unnecessary asides. It would be unreasonable to expect the letters from a Renaissance mother to her sons to include a history of the Crusades.

The third issue is the nature of the evidence. Is it a verbatim transcript of something that was actually spoken or is it a literary composition? Is it a letter or a poem? Is it complete, or an excerpt? Was it written to communicate information or to prohibit some kind of misconduct? Does it deal with the world of the imagination or with the world of fact? Is it meant to explore certain theoretical questions, or is it meant to be applied in practice? In short, what *kind* of evidence are you dealing with? What is its *genre*?

What's great about this question is that you can answer it without having to read much else. Usually you just need to look at the document in question. Thus the *Rule of Saint Benedict* itself tells you that it is a set of rules according to which monks are *supposed* to behave. That's all you need to know in order to recognize that you can *not* expect this document to tell you how monks *actually* behaved. You can only use the *Rule* as a source of information about the actual behavior of monks if you make certain assumptions, for example, the assumption that there is no point to writing down a rule unless you expect that at least some monks would behave differently if there were no such rules (so that you can use the rules Benedict wrote down as a guide to the sorts of issues on which monks were likely not to behave the way he wanted), or the assumption that you are only going to write rules about those things that

matter most to you (so that you can use the rules Benedict wrote down as a guide to the things monks like him regarded as especially important).

It's similar with letters, poems, demands, theoretical treatises, and so on. Each of these kinds of documents is designed to convey a certain kind of information. That's the kind of information that it can reasonably be expected to convey. You cannot reasonably expect it to convey other kinds of information unless you make certain assumptions. Those assumptions may be quite valid, but their validity cannot simply be taken for granted. It needs to be established.

By considering these questions and others like them you can go a long way towards placing the evidence in its historical context and assessing its reliability, even without reading anything in addition to the evidence. If you keep in mind that Boniface VIII published *Unam sanctam* at a time when he was locked in a bitter conflict with the king of France, you will read it differently than if it had been written by Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council. You can find very similar statements in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, but you will read them very differently if you know that the former was published by a constitutive assembly of the French people whereas the latter was written by one philosopher. A theologian who is concerned to establish a certain doctrine of faith is not going to write the same things as a mother who is writing letters to her sons; legal texts have other things to say than poetry; texts which are meant to persuade differ from texts which are meant to record facts; and letters are not the same as treatises. All of this is essential information for anyone trying to develop an understanding of the history of European civilization by reading specific pieces of primary evidence.

Obviously this course will not allow you to answer these questions in detail. Neither the required nor the recommended readings furnish you with enough information for that. You will barely scratch the surface, and in many cases you will not even do that. If that does not satisfy you, you will have to look further. Encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries are a good place to begin. The library is full of good books and the internet is at your fingertips. But you do not need to answer any of these questions with precision. What you do need to do is to recognize their importance and keep them in mind. Merely keeping them in mind will be enough to stop you from jumping to unfounded conclusions, and that is no small gain. If you make a practice of thinking about these questions whenever you prepare yourself for class, you will develop the criteria of historical judgment that make it possible for an educated person to form a well-grounded picture of the world in which we live. Those criteria offer a crucial protection against the temptations of ideology and the arbitrary exercise of authority. They constitute one of the most important fruits of a liberal education.

Class Discussions: Speaking

Class meetings will be devoted to discussing the primary readings. We are going to pay close attention to specific passages. You should therefore always bring the readings of the day to class. I am going to supply background information in the form of brief lectures, but only as the need arises and not according to any pre-established plan.

In principle class discussions will revolve around the three questions I have just mentioned: what does the evidence say directly? What can you learn from it indirectly? And can it be

trusted? But how precisely we are going to proceed will depend on the nature of the document and your reaction to it. Sometimes the question what the document says can be answered fairly quickly, so that more time can be devoted to the question what can be learned from it about the history of the times. The question of source criticism can only rarely be considered in separation from interpreting the source. But it also often happens that it is particularly important, or particularly difficult, to state adequately what the document actually says. The so-called classics often fall into that category. They sometimes make elaborate and complicated arguments that take time to unravel. In that case the content may require more attention than the other two questions. Again, sometimes the students in a given class turn out to have no trouble understanding a document that poses great difficulties to students in another class, and sometimes students in a given class want to concentrate their attention on a document that seems utterly uninteresting to the students of another class. All of these factors affect the progress of class discussions. You should therefore not expect the class to follow a set procedure. But you should expect to be asked one of those three questions every now and then.

In order to promote the smooth functioning of discussions, it may be useful to say something about the factors most likely to prevent it. Lack of knowledge may be one of them, but it is of subordinate importance. What you know is perfectly sufficient to make for lively and instructive discussions. Otherwise you would not be here. Obviously you cannot really participate in class discussions if you don't do the readings. But on the whole I have found that my students do the readings pretty carefully. Besides, if I happen to notice that for some reason someone has not done the readings, I ask him or her kindly to leave the room. This is not meant to humiliate or punish them. I just want to make sure that you and I can both be confident that everybody who is present in class has in fact done the readings, and that there are no free riders in the room who are benefiting from the discussion without having done the work. You are therefore far more likely not to participate in class discussions because you hesitate to tell the class what is actually on your mind.

There are two very different kinds of issues that may be on your mind. The first has to do with the progress, nature, and organization of the class, quite independently of the subject matter being considered. You may, for example, be unhappy with the performance of your class mates; you may be offended that you never get your turn to speak because someone else is monopolizing the discussion; or you may believe that the instructor is not dealing with the issues that matter. You may feel out of your depth or put on the spot. You may think that the discussion is going off on a tangent; you may be frustrated with the attention given to apparently meaningless details; you may be thinking that another student is saying things you find offensive; you may be thinking that the instructor is too demanding and talking way above your head; or the opposite, you may be thinking that the instructor is being dismissive and condescending. And so on.

All of these are common complaints, and there are many more like them. They are, however, only indirectly related to the subject matter of the class, and, what is more, if you express your unhappiness you run the risk of offending someone. You may think that is a reason to keep your dissatisfaction to yourself. But it is not. It is a reason to make your point tactfully, but not to leave it unspoken. On the contrary, it is important that you speak your mind. It is almost impossible to conceal one's dissatisfaction altogether. You can be sure it will be noticed in some way. Moreover, if there is something troubling you, there is good reason to

believe that it is troubling someone else as well. If you prefer not to state your case, the effect of your silence will only be to prevent the rest of the class, the instructor included, from understanding and remedying the cause of your dissatisfaction, but not to remove it. It will rather spread a vague feeling of unease: you and whoever else feels the same way will be resentful because your concerns won't go away, and the rest of the class will be resentful because they will suspect that they are being criticized, but they will not know how or why. Nothing has a more stifling effect on discussions than that.

In such cases there is only one reasonable course of action. It is to determine in your own mind whether or not you really do have a grievance. If you decide that you do not or that it does not matter, forget about it. If it won't go away, that's a clear sign that it does matter. Then bring it to the floor. Most of the time you will discover that a number of other students thought exactly the same as you and that the issue can be resolved by a little conversation and a few adjustments. If you don't want to bring it to the floor, tell me in private. I will listen.

The second kind of issue that may interfere with class discussions has to do with questions about the subject matter of the course. Contrary to what one would expect from students who pay a great deal of money to get a good education, such questions are also often left unspoken. The most important reason why that happens is the fear of revealing your ignorance to other students or the instructor. That fear is nurtured by the highly competitive conditions of a first rate college.

That is an utterly misguided point of view. Obviously different students in a single class will find themselves at different levels of preparation, and consequently they will make statements and ask questions reflecting that difference. There is nothing that anyone can or should do about that. The whole point of education, after all, is to make a difference: it is meant to put you in a position to do and say things that other people, including your own former self, cannot do or say. Nonetheless the students of any class, no matter how different their education, are united by a single purpose, namely to learn something. That purpose is only imperfectly achieved if questions that need to be answered are never even asked.

Learning, moreover, has to proceed in a certain order. The questions that occur most naturally to an inquisitive mind are precisely those that must be answered before the process of learning can go on. It is therefore a mistake to hold back on questions that have arisen spontaneously, merely because they seem to be stupid. It is even worse to make a conscious effort to replace them with more intelligent questions. Intelligent questions cannot be invented. They can only occur if one already knows the answers to the simple ones. All questions that are asked in order to acquire a necessary piece of information are intelligent, and all others are stupid.

In other words, no question that has really occurred to you is stupid, and no issue that actually affects the class is irrelevant. Don't compare yourself to others. Think for yourself and ask what you don't understand. Good class participation requires only two things: that you take the trouble to formulate (perhaps with a pencil and a sheet of paper) whatever questions or issues have occurred to you, and that you muster the courage to bring them to the floor. The level of preparation of all students is, in reality, so similar that this procedure will not lead to the kind of question and answer session in which the students ask the

questions and the instructor provides the answers. On the contrary, it will quickly demonstrate that the questions which have occurred to you are not all that different from the questions that have occurred to others, that the opinions you hold are shared by others, too, and that it is possible to engage the students and the instructor in an intelligent conversation of the issues to which the course is devoted. In short, it will enable the class to adopt the conversational style that characterizes the most profitable discussions: those in which your own judgments are the subject of debate. What you learn in such discussions you are going to remember longer than anything you ever memorized for a test.

The Paper: Writing

The best way to introduce this topic is to quote Montaigne (*Readings in Western Civilization*, 5:288): "I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as he knows, not only in this, but in all other subjects; for a man [this was evidently written before the rise of feminism] may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics. From this vice spring many great abuses." Try to remember that.

The purpose of the paper assignment is to teach you how to communicate in writing that you have learned something about the past by studying a certain piece of evidence (that's the special knowledge Montaigne is writing about, except that it's not about a river or a fountain, but about the past). I certainly don't expect you to find out anything that no one ever knew before, but I also don't want you merely to repeat what other people have been saying all along. What I do want you to do is this: read a piece of primary historical literature; do what you can to answer the three basic questions I have outlined above; go on studying until you notice something it tells you about the past that is not obvious and that you did not know before; and then write down what you noticed. That's all there is to it.

In order to reach that goal, you need to keep a few things in mind. First, you are not going to find anything useful unless you go through two distinct stages. The first is the stage of more or less aimless searching: you are reading, you are learning, you are absorbing. You are also beginning to ask questions, but all of your questions are either so easy to answer that there is no point to wasting any time on them or so difficult that you have no hope of finding the answers unless you go to graduate school and stick with it for the next ten years. Questions are too easy if you can answer them by looking up a reference book (Example: did Machiavelli write anything besides the *Prince* and the *Discourses*?); questions are too difficult if there is no information with which to answer them or if they take too much time to answer. (Example 1: how many relatives of Heloise knew of her affair with Abelard? We don't even know how many relatives she had, let alone what they knew. Example 2: What caused the expansion of Europe? That's impossible to figure out in a ten-week course). What you need to write a good paper is something in between: something that is neither obvious nor impossible to prove on the basis of some relatively short primary readings.

As soon as you have noticed something like that, you enter the second stage. Now you are no longer reading aimlessly. Now you are looking for very specific pieces of information. You are thinking hard where you might find material confirming the point you noticed, you are discarding most of what you read because it isn't pertinent, and you pay close attention

to bits and pieces of two kinds: those that support your point and those that conflict with it. In short, you are no longer simply searching: you are re-searching. At that point it will not take you much longer to find what you are looking for. What you find may not be anything like what you expected to find when you began the process, but it will be something that you did not know before and that you discovered as a result of studying the evidence.

The problem is, of course, that you can go on forever without noticing anything that can transform mere search into re-search (i.e., without being able to find a question that is neither too easy nor too difficult to answer). But there are some very reliable ways to speed up the process. The first is simply to read slowly and to give your mind a chance to wander. Most students believe the best way to read is to do it as quickly as possible, and some even pay money to learn how to do so. Unfortunately they are wrong. You can read too quickly; you can never read too slowly (assuming that the purpose of reading is not to meet a deadline, but to understand something). Read slowly enough for the meaning of the evidence to sink in. Dwell on passages that seem curiously puzzling. Repeat what you have read. Read it out loud. Don't be afraid to let your mind wander wherever it may. If it goes in the wrong direction, you will be the first to notice. But if you do not interfere with its natural sense of direction it can supply you more effectively with interesting insights and make more significant connections to seemingly unrelated issues than if you plan ahead of time where your mind is supposed to go and don't pay the proper respect to its inclinations. Respect your mind! Give it the freedom to lead you where it wants to go. Trust your intellectual instincts. Follow your interests. If you don't have the time to read everything slowly, then read as much as you can at a speed at which the meaning will sink in, scan the rest, and resign yourself to the fact that life is short and you are not going to be able to read everything with the same degree of attention.

A second way is to take notes about everything you read. The most important function of taking notes is to slow you down to a point where your mind has the time it needs to make judgments about what you are reading. The second function of taking notes is to fix those judgments in your memory. It is not enough to highlight or underline important passages. Underlining is like xeroxing: you know *that* the text is important, because you highlighted it. But you do not know *why* it is important, because you never put the reason *why* you underlined it into words. What you have highlighted is simply the passage you regard as important. That passage is of course important; otherwise you would not have highlighted it. But it does not tell you *why* it is important. Only you can tell *why* you highlighted it. And that's what a good note is supposed to do. Taking notes like that helps you to remember both what is important in your reading and why it is important. It is useful simply to copy the most important passages verbatim. But the best notes do not repeat what you read; they state in your own words what you *think about* what you read. In order to learn how to write such notes you should get into the habit of writing every note as though it began with these words: "This passage is important because" That will force you to go beyond mere paraphrase or quotation and put your own thoughts into words.

There are two ideal moments at which to take notes. One is as soon as you notice something. When that happens, stop reading *immediately* and write it down, regardless of what it is: a question, an observation, an idea for a paper. Otherwise you will forget it, even if you wait only a minute or two, and you will never even know just what it was that occurred

to you. That would be a real loss, because the things you notice as you read are the most valuable starting points for research by far.

The other moment at which you should take notes is as soon as you have finished reading. Take a minute or two to reflect on what you have just read, and write down a sentence or two in order to capture your impression of the text as a whole. A sentence or two may not seem like much, because it does not contain much information. But information is not the point; judgment is. And a sentence is enough to express your judgment.

A third way is to look up biographies, histories, dictionaries, lexicons, encyclopedias, and other pieces of secondary literature in order to get as much information about the document and its context as possible. As you are reading the evidence, you may not yet notice anything about the past that isn't obvious anyway, but you will certainly begin to have questions about the meaning and the context of the document. As soon as you have finished reading, start looking for books or articles that may contain some answers. That kind of reading will very quickly put you in a position to start noticing things, provided that here, too, you read slowly and take notes.

A fourth way is to re-read your notes, the evidence, and a draft of your paper, if you already have a draft of your paper. You should not re-read until sufficient time has elapsed for you to have forgotten some of what you read. If you re-read before you have forgotten anything, you will merely be reading what you remember anyway, and that is a waste of time. If you re-read after you have forgotten something, however, you will not only recover your own thoughts at the time when you first read the text, but you will also notice things you had not noticed before and, more important, you will notice *that* you had not noticed these things before. That experience will change your mind, improve your judgment, and allow you to gain a better understanding of the text. It can also be pleasurable: there is nothing quite like being impressed with something you wrote so long ago that you forgot you wrote it.

Some students do not trust themselves to be capable of writing this kind of paper. They believe that anything they can learn from reading the evidence on their own is bound to be trivial. That is not true. What *is* true is that students often lack the courage to try. Instead of doing what I have just said they should do, they start with a certain assumption of what a paper "ought" to be like and then they try to write a paper like that. Instead of trying to write about something they noticed on their own, they copy the answers others have given to questions they never even considered. They go through a routine they learned in high school. They are playing it safe. They are conforming to the rule. Five paragraphs flat, beginning, middle, and end. Bang! The paper is done.

The result is inevitably a paper that fails to meet the requirement of this course. The most common case is a narrative paper telling the reader about a series of events, say, King Louis on crusade: he went on crusade, then lots of things happened, then he went home, and later he died. This is a popular kind of paper because it fits most people's expectation of what history is about: it tells the story of something that happened in the past. In its way it may even be a very good paper: it may be based on the appropriate sections in Joinville's *Life of Saint Louis*, and it may do a very careful job of quoting and annotating. But so long as it merely repeats what you can read in Joinville, even if it rearranges and rephrases his words; so long as it does not deal with the question of whether or not Joinville is trustworthy; and

so long as it does not try to show that there may be something else to be learned besides what Joinville is saying anyway—it does not meet the requirement.

The best way to avoid writing the wrong kind of paper is to keep the purpose of this requirement firmly in mind: to demonstrate that, by reading a certain piece of primary evidence, you have learned something about the history of European civilization that is not obvious and that you did not know before. The best way to achieve that purpose is to make sure that, at the very least, you try to deal with the three questions that I treated above in the context of preparing for class. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with using these questions as a rough structure for your paper: first, you describe what the evidence is and what it says ("In 1520, in his book *On Christian Liberty*, Martin Luther declared that faith was not a virtue"). That might be the thing you noticed. Then you place it in an appropriate context ("At just about the same time Machiavelli wrote in the *Prince* that princes would have to learn how not to be virtuous"). Next you explore a question that struck you as these observations occurred to you ("Could it be that there is a relationship between Luther's and Machiavelli's attitude to virtue?"). At some point you have to consider the question whether you can rely on the evidence to tell you what you need to know ("The *Prince* does not give us a complete picture of Machiavelli's thought, and the same is true about *On Christian Liberty* for Luther"). And finally you state your conclusion—what you have learned about the past by reading the sources ("Yet on the whole it does seem fair to conclude that Luther and Machiavelli placed stricter limits on the ability of human beings to become virtuous than their medieval predecessors did").

In writing the paper you are expected to know three things: (1) the document or documents with which you are dealing in your paper. This includes the meaning of whatever strange or unfamiliar terms the document uses; (2) the results of class discussions up to the time the paper is due; and (3) the contents of this handout, the syllabus, and the paper assignment. You are free to use whatever other sources of information you like, but you do not have to. If you miss any information that cannot be obtained from these three sources your grade will not be affected.

The actual audience of your paper consists of me, the course intern, and perhaps your parents, a friend, or a College writing tutor. It is unlikely that anyone else will ever read your paper. Nonetheless you should write it as though someone would. Write the paper in such a way that you would not have to feel embarrassed if it fell into the hands of someone you never considered when you were writing it. Think of it as if it were an open letter addressed "to whom it may concern." Include all the information potential readers might need in order to understand what you are talking about. If you quote anything, make a footnote to refer your readers to the source of your quotation. If you rely on the ideas of anybody else, give a footnote to refer to the source of those ideas. Give complete and accurate bibliographical references to the primary and secondary literature you are using, so that your readers will know the basis on which you are working. Never make any references that can only be understood by someone who has participated in our class. If you have to use a piece of information you heard in class, find written confirmation in the secondary literature and use that in your footnote. If you cannot find such confirmation, write a note to that effect. If you are bringing up a name or a concept and are not sure whether or not your readers can be expected to understand what you are talking about, make the briefest possible reference to the reason why you are mentioning the name or concept in this context (Ockham, the late

medieval scholastic theologian; Ockham, the famous heretic; Ockham, the great Franciscan; Ockham, the main representative of nominalist philosophy). It is usually better to err by giving too much information than by giving too little. But there is no hard and fast rule how explicit you should be. It depends on how much your potential readers know. That is something you can only learn by experience.

The main difference between speaking and writing is that writing makes it possible to express one's views in a lasting manner. Written versions of one's ideas should be more carefully worked out than oral statements. For this reason I shall pay attention to matters of form as well as substance.

The appearance of your paper is the least important among the various formal qualities of your paper. But it does matter. There should be no handwritten corrections. There should be a title page, and there should be sufficient margins at the top, the bottom, and the sides of each page for me to pencil in comments. Pages should be numbered. If your printer has a minor quirk, that does not matter. But if every page is covered with smudges, it does.

Next come orthography, grammar, and punctuation. If you don't know the spelling of a word, look it up, or else you'll never know. If you think you do, but aren't quite sure, look it up. Chances are you don't. If you are sure you do but really don't, just hope that someone will be kind enough to let you know. Be particularly careful about spelling names. What goes for the rules of spelling goes for the rules of grammar and punctuation: if you are not sure of a particular rule, look it up.

The collective characteristics of the presentation of your subject that go beyond the rules of grammar are referred to as style. The first rule of style is that you must know what you want to say in order to say it well. The second rule of style is that you will say it well if you say it clearly. And the third rule of style is that you will not say it clearly unless you answer the following question: who did what where when how and why? You are not expected to be an artist. Clarity is all the style you need. If you can do more, so much the better, but remember that in matters of style failure to achieve the perfection at which you have aimed may have the effect of making your writing seem ludicrous. There is no point in posing as an Attic orator unless you are sure that you can keep it up, and there is no point in using words of which you do not quite know the meaning. Many students confuse the use of complicated words with artistry because that is all too often what they have been taught in school. But few things are more capable of deflating a good argument than the ridiculous effect achieved by malapropisms.

The most important formal category is logic. Logic is the science of reasoning. The logic of your paper is the chain of reasoning by which the parts of your paper are held together. Such a chain can be rather simple. Sometimes no more logic is required than that the paper has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But merely to work out a good beginning and a good ending is more difficult than you may think. In a paper like this one you will at the very least have to think very carefully about two things: crafting an introduction that will state the point your paper is designed to make; and devising the sequence in which you will present your evidence and your reasoning so as to lead naturally to a convincing conclusion. Given how difficult this is, try to think small, be modest, go step by step, and never be satisfied until you know exactly what you want to say.

In addition to the text of your paper, there should be notes and a bibliography. Your notes should point the reader to the evidence or the secondary literature on which you are relying at any particular point. You can place them at the bottom of the page or at the end of the paper, whichever you prefer. The bibliography is a list of the primary and secondary sources you have consulted, with full bibliographical data. There are many ways of giving those data. It does not really matter which way you choose, provided that you name the author or editor, full title and subtitle, city of publication, publisher, date of publication, and page numbers.

As you are working on your paper you are going to correct some errors, but you are also going to introduce new ones without noticing. You should therefore take the time to proofread the final version of your paper (the version you are going to submit to me) at least once from beginning to end, word for word, line by line, page by page for no other purpose than to correct everything that may still be wrong in terms of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and so on. Using a spell checker is not enough. You have to read it yourself.

Guides to Writing

We are fortunate to have one of the best writing programs in the country on campus. It is known as the Little Red Schoolhouse. Joseph Williams and Larry McEnerney, former and present directors of the Little Red Schoolhouse, have put together a *Short Guide to College Writing* that explains in the most straightforward fashion the problems you confront in writing a paper like the one I am asking you to write. It also presents you with an algorithm for what you need to do, step by step, in order to succeed: first, do this, then do that, next do the following, then do so and so. Whether you are an experienced writer or not, you cannot go wrong by following this guide. I therefore make it a part of the paper requirement that you read it and follow it as closely as you can. You will find it on the web at:

<http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/index.htm>.

There are many other manuals to help you along the way. One of the best by far is Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). This is the most useful account of the problems you have to solve in doing your research and transforming the results into a well-written paper that I have seen. Its greatest value is that it is down to earth. It focuses on giving you practical advice about things that you can actually do. As far as style is concerned, I recommend Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 8th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005). And for the most elementary rules of academic writing, especially with regard to substance, you will do well to consult Charles Lipson, *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

If you are looking for a book that pays special attention to writing a history paper, consider Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, 8th ed. (Boston: Bedford Books/St. Martin's, 2001). This book does not agree with everything I said, but it will tell you what you can do to find the best book on a given subject, how to avoid plagiarism, how to take notes in class, and how to revise a paper; it also includes a useful bibliography.

Finally there are manuals that explain the basic rules of manuscript preparation, including things like spelling, punctuation, capitals, footnoting, handling illustrations, treatment of text in foreign languages, treatment of dates and numbers, page numbering, use of quotations, and so on. The most authoritative is *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). It is long, but it is excellently indexed and easy to use, and it has the added advantage that it is very widely relied upon. If you make it a habit to follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, chances are you will need to spend less time reformatting your work in the future. Kate L. Turabian, *Student's Guide for Writing College Papers* (3rd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) is an old favorite that deals with the same kinds of issues, but written for students rather than professionals. Along the same lines you might also consider the same author's more recently updated *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed. revised by John Grossman and Alice Bennett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).