

Sources for Essays

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

What sources we use as historians has an impact on the types of history we write, and on the types of history essays (or papers) you produce. As a university student, you need to show that you can draw on existing scholarship, and later in your studies, you will also be expected to engage with a range of primary sources. Evaluating the usefulness of the works you read is an important skill. However, recommending books, chapters and scholarly articles to help you think critically about the sources you can use in essays is no easy task. This brief introduction suggests some types of works you could consult, and provides some examples to help with your searches. The reading lists for your own university modules will also contain relevant items.

This annotated bibliography is not a guide to works on particular sources to use in your essay. Any such guide would be a book in itself given the depth, breadth and vibrancy of historical topics and fields. Rather, it outlines some key resources to help you think critically about the decisions you make about the sources you use.

Abstracts and peer review

Melinda Baldwin, 'Peer Review', *Encyclopedia of the History of Science*, March 2019, <https://doi.org/10.34758/7s4y-5f50> (accessed on 28 July 2025).

Peer review, the process through which all monographs and articles are reviewed by experts in the field, is an essential part of scholarly publishing. The textbooks, books, chapters and articles on your reading lists will all be

peer-reviewed. But peer review has a history itself. This history can tell us much about the evolution of academic publishing and the impact of peer review on what gets published and where. In her contribution to the online *Encyclopedia of the History of Science*, Melinda Baldwin explores that history, challenging the idea that peer review emerged in the seventeenth century with the scientific revolution. She shows how the referee system did not exist before the nineteenth century and how the system was almost entirely a British and American practice, acting as a form of gatekeeping. It was not until the late twentieth century that the term ‘peer review’ was used, a move driven by the American scientific community but gradually embraced more widely. Nor was the system of review at first designed to ensure scientific legitimacy: this expectation only emerged during the Cold War. Reading Baldwin’s entry will help you understand how the referee system and then peer review has evolved and worked over time. It will help you understand its importance, how peer review has come to shape ideas of credibility, and how review practices have informed what is published and why works that have gone through the peer review process have been subject to a form of academic quality control.

Historical Abstracts: <https://www-ebSCO-com.abc> (subscription only)

Rather than using Google or Google Scholar to find works that might be relevant to your essays, you can use Historical Abstracts instead. Although a subscription service, and hence not available at all institutions, Historical Abstracts is regarded as the definitive index of journal articles on world history from 1450 to the present. The database does not cover the United States or Canada – you will need to access *America: History and Life* for those countries – but Historical Abstracts is packed with annotated references to content in more than 2,000 peer-reviewed historical journals in over 40 languages dating back to 1955. Covering scholarship from over 90 countries, the database includes articles, book citations, dissertations and theses, while its coverage extends to related disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, English literature and sociology that are relevant to historians. The database allows you to discover works that may be relevant to your essay. While there are other excellent databases, no other history research tool matches Historical Abstracts for its breadth. However, you need to be aware that, unlike on JSTOR, when you search Historical Abstracts, you will not immediately have access to full-text articles. Historical Abstracts is an indexing and abstracting database that provides citations and an abstract that describes the content of an article (or book). This can itself be invaluable for harder-to-access non-Anglophone content, giving you insights into work you might otherwise not be able to read or access. There is a full-text version – Historical Abstracts with Full Text – which has over 800,000 records and access to the full text of more than 349 journals and more than 120 books. Whichever version you have access to, if you are looking for a peer-reviewed article on world history, then Historical Abstracts is an excellent tool for identifying works.

Overviews of a field

Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method: <https://www.bloomsburyhistorytheorymethod.com/home> (subscription only)

Numerous publishers, including Bloomsbury and Routledge, publish textbooks on historical theory and methods, as well as guides to particular sources. Such resources will help you understand the different approaches historians take in the books and articles you are reading for your essays, as well as introduce you to key thinkers and historical works. *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method* is an excellent educational resource dedicated to historiography and historical approach, which was noted as one of the best databases of 2022 by *Library Journal*. Currently it has over 200 articles by authors as well as access to over 80 e-books from the Bloomsbury catalogue. Themes, concepts and thinkers are at the heart of the resource. You can explore by topic, people, or types of history, with new content being added regularly. Essays introduce you to different types of history from the history of African American women and medicine or the history of human rights to popular history or urban history, though the list is not exhaustive. There are articles on key topics as well as learning aids on primary sources. These essays present a diverse range of voices and offer global coverage to challenge a Western-centric approach. Pages adjust to your device and browsing is intuitive, with navigation that allows you to quickly drill down.

The key barrier is that your institution will need a subscription for you to access this database, but you can find other good resources through your institution's library.

Oxford Handbooks

Oxford Handbooks are designed to offer up-to-date surveys of original research in a particular subject area. There are over 300 handbooks covering key historical themes or periods. Each handbook includes commissioned, peer-reviewed essays, often from leading figures in a field. The aim of each handbook is to provide compelling new perspectives, with many of the essays challenging traditional narratives and offering new insights. Each essay offers a critical examination of key debates and is a good way into understanding the key issues in a field, even if some essays may be limited in their geographical focus. In examining the state of the field or scholarship on a topic, many of the essays also provide suggestions for new avenues of inquiry, even for well-covered areas such as the Second World War. Such suggestions will potentially provide you with useful avenues to explore, particularly for assignments such as dissertations that require more independent research. Although each handbook is expensive, your institution may also have access to Oxford Handbooks online via <https://academic.oup.com/oxford-handbooks-online>.

Routledge History Handbooks and Companions

Like Oxford Handbooks, the Routledge companions and history handbooks are designed to introduce you to a wide range of scholarship on a specific time, place or theme, often challenging traditional perspectives. With the number of volumes growing each year, there are handbooks and companions dedicated to particular periods, such as the medieval or Elizabethan period, or to regions, such as the American West or Eastern Europe. Others in the series are thematic in scope, drawing together essays on a particular area, such as the history of slavery, sex and the body, or Indigenous history, or on particular historical approaches, such as the history of emotions. Volumes tend to be chronologically and geographically wide-reaching, offering you comparative insights even if the essays do not cover the exact topic you are researching. Whether you are using a handbook or companion on a particular period, topic or field, each volume includes thought-provoking essays written by experts and provides comprehensive guides to help you navigate topics in a clear and straightforward manner. Essays explore major advances and provide overviews of current research, while the companion series includes introductory articles, biographies and chronologies to provide accessible surveys. Like the Oxford Handbooks, these volumes are expensive, so check whether your institution has copies in the library or access to the e-book version.

Writing History: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/writing-history/>

Writing History is a series of accessible overviews of the key approaches and methods in particular fields in history whether that be the Holocaust, the history of crime, or the history of nationalism, to books on medieval history, early modern history or contemporary history. Each book does not get bogged down in theory. Instead, the authors of each chapter offer a good place to start to understand the historiography of a particular topic or field by succinctly explaining the central concepts to demonstrate the ways in which different approaches and methods have informed historical writing. For example, David Doddington and Enrico Dal Lago's edited collection *Writing the History of Slavery* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) explores the major historiographical, theoretical and methodological approaches that have shaped studies on slavery, while the first book in the series, *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, edited by Stefan Beger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, provides a comprehensive overview of how the study of history is informed by broader intellectual and analytical frameworks. Many of the chapters in each book analyse key historical texts to demonstrate the ways in which key concepts have informed historians' work. Even for complex approaches, in relating theory to practice the authors provide examples so you can see how theory works when it is applied to historical writing. By introducing you to different historical theories and approaches, books in the Writing History series are great introductions for understanding

the historical works you read for your essays, but also provide you with the tools to use different approaches in your work.

Digital history and methods

‘Using the Internet for Historical Research’, Stony Brook University Libraries: https://guides.library.stonybrook.edu/history_internet

With web resources becoming more widely used in essays (and historical writing) this guide by Stony Brook University offers an accessible, easy to navigate introduction to the resources available. The guide is broken down into short informative sections. For writing essays, the most useful are the pages on digital collections, e-books, online tools, and evaluating internet resources. The page on digital collections has short descriptions of key resources, including the Library of Congress, as well as links to other resources including the *Best of History Web Sites* (<https://besthistorysites.net/>). The page on evaluating internet resources has a series of excellent questions you should ask to determine whether the information you find on the internet is appropriate for you to use for your essays. There is also information on how to use Wikipedia as a tool, which contains links to useful academic resources on the site. For anyone wanting to use web-based resources in researching their essays, this guide is an essential starting point.

R. Darrell Meadows and Joshua Sternfeld, ‘Artificial Intelligence and the Practice of History’, *American Historical Review*, 128:3 (2023), pp. 1345–89.

As more historical resources become available digitally, and with artificial intelligence (AI) raising significant questions about the nature, practice and future of history writing, historians have considered how machine-learning algorithms can be a boon or a threat. For anyone curious about how AI is influencing the way we do history and the implications for writing on different historical topics, this forum is a good starting point. It brings together seven academics from within and outside the discipline of history to explore the methodological implications of AI. Where Lauren Tilton considers how AI is forcing new relationships with historical sources, Kate Crawford’s contribution on ‘Archaeologies of Datasets’ is useful for thinking about the biases contained in the datasets AI uses for training and why using AI for your essays may lead you astray. Her article is an important reminder that understanding the history of how datasets were created encourages us to be cautious about how we use AI systems in our work. Crawford highlights how many of these datasets are prone to multiple forms of error and bias. Collectively, the contributions to the forum invite tutors and students to think about what they can and should be thinking about when considering

the challenges AI presents for current and future historical research and writing.

Ian Milligan, *History in the Age of Abundance? How the Web Is Transforming Historical Research* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

Billed at the time as a wakeup call for historians of the twenty-first century (a quote from the back cover of the book), in this accessible book, Milligan provides the reader with an in-depth introduction to the role of the web as an historical source. At the centre of the book is a consideration of the ever-growing volume of information available to us and how these resources have enriched, reshaped and challenged historical inquiry. Mixing concepts with concrete examples, Milligan argues that web-based sources present opportunities as well as numerous technical and ethical challenges for historians. Where the first chapter provides a history of the internet, the remaining five chapters use case studies to consider different approaches, methods, tools and search functions that historians and their students can use. For example, Milligan describes the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>), a centralized hub that downloads webpages at regular intervals. In chapter 4, he demonstrates how to use search engines and national libraries to locate and understand information contained in web archives. He reminds us that the representativeness of preserved digital content is often compromised due to digital divides on the basis of socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, age, etc. As Milligan explains, we need to be aware of these issues but what is missing from the book is a sense of a clear, analytical approach to using such resources.

Additional citations

'Making History', Institute of Historical Research: <https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/index.html>

Peter Claus and John Marriott, 'Archives in the Digital World', in Peter Claus and John Marriott, *History: An Introduction to Theory and Method* (London: Routledge, 2023).

'Generative AI, History and Historians, A Reading Guide', Royal Historical Society, May 2024, <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2024/05/01/generative-ai-history-and-historians-a-reading-guide/>.

Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:1 (2013), pp. 9–23.

Shafquat Towheed, 'Reading in the Digital Archive', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15:1 (2010), pp. 139–43.

'Vetted Resources', *American Historical Association*, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-learning/vetted-resources/>.