

How to think aloud

For the first few weeks of our class, you'll be doing a "think-aloud," an assignment I adapted from psychologists who study reading and cognition. In addition to helping us understand how people thought about things in the past, they will also help us examine how *we* think when we read a historical document, and how to change how we think and make it more productive.

Essentially, what this assignment captures is the flow of thoughts and questions that go through your mind as you read, and is due every time we have a primary source discussion. Begin by printing the document out, and then, as you read it, record the thoughts and questions you have as you go along. At the end, take a moment for a "Final Thought" – a few general questions or reflections. **These must be typed on a separate sheet of paper, either double-spaced or with an extra return between each thought.**

Here are some of the things you might include, though this isn't an exhaustive list.

- Paraphrasing part of a text (do this most of the time, especially when struggling)
- Doubting the text (from a historical perspective)
- Predicting where the text will go next
- Substantiating or revising predictions
- Retracting a prediction (but never erasing it!)
- Passages you don't understand and what *exactly* you don't understand about them
- Words you don't understand and the definition you found in the OED
- Contextualizing and relating to material from class or other documents we've read
- Questions of author, audience, form, argument, and reception

These are just suggestions to help you get an idea of what we're doing. Remember: historians don't approach documents from the past knowing all of the answers; if they did, what would be the point? As we go along, I hope you'll find that you can get inside the text more and more.

Try not to censor yourself when you do these; the only way to refine historical thinking skills is to take stock of our usual approach to reading and then adjust it accordingly. As you read, remember that historians don't look for who is telling the "Truth" about the past, or who is "right" about it. Instead, we're thinking about perspectives and interpretations – yours, those of your peers, and those of people in the past.

Grading

These assignments will be graded on a scale of 1 to 7. A student who produces an excellent think aloud will:

- read closely and carefully
- stop to look up unfamiliar words
- play both the gullible and skeptical reader, paraphrasing *and* doubting
- skim rarely, and note when they have done so
- recognize their own errors when presented with further evidence in the text
- seek to understand the document on its own terms, rather than applying contemporary standards