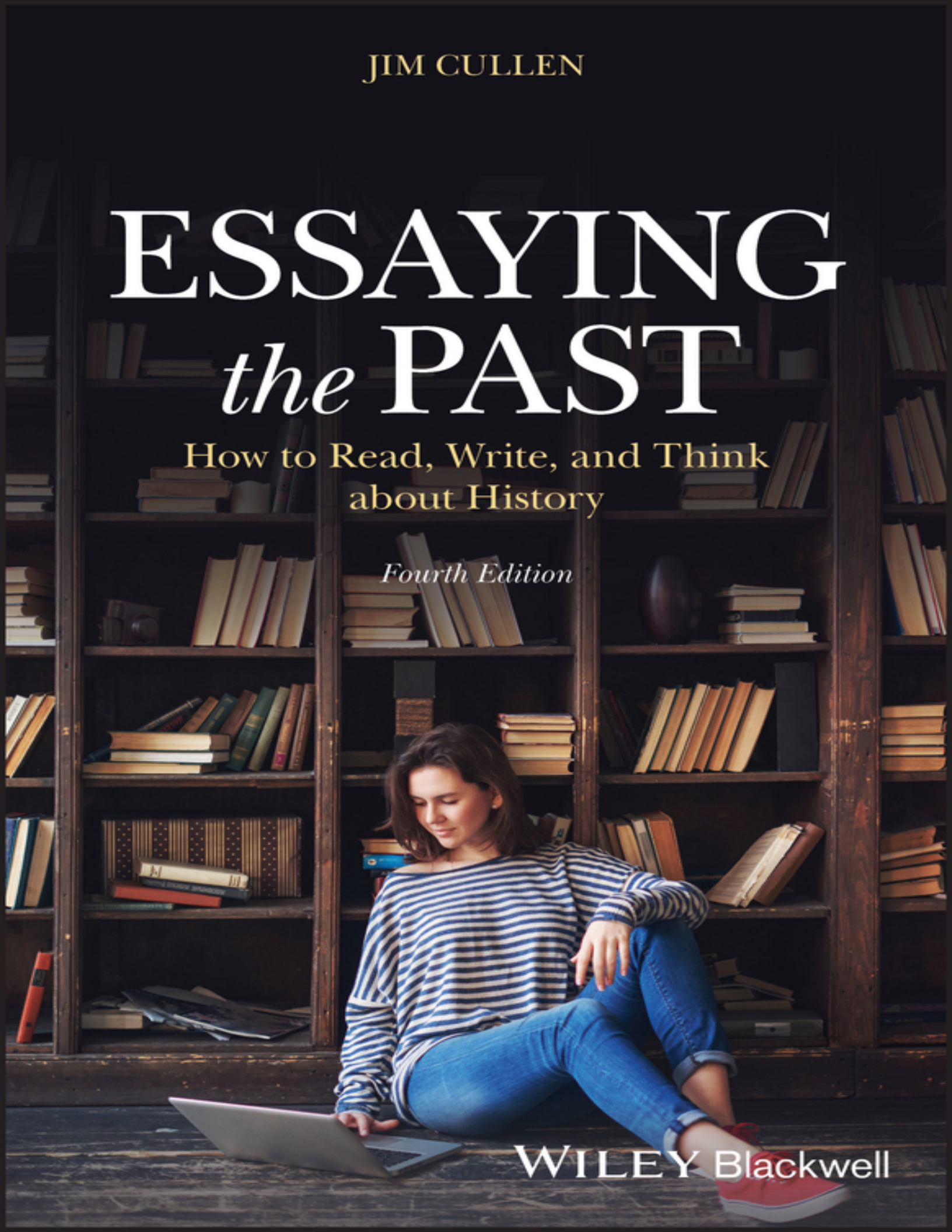
JIM CULLEN

ESSAYING *the* PAST

How to Read, Write, and Think about History

Fourth Edition



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Essaying the Past

How to Read, Write, and Think about History

Jim Cullen

Fourth Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

The fundamentals of good writing don't change all that much from decade to decade, much less from year to year. Yet in re-reading *Essaying the Past* for the first time since its first publication in 2009, I'm surprised by the small but revealing ways it has already become dated. I say "surprised," not so much because a great deal has happened – writing-intensive innovations like social networking, blogging, e-books, and the like were established realities at that point, and I myself had been using them – but because I had not fully absorbed such developments into my consciousness. As is so often the case, culture is slower to change than technology.

A small illustration of the point: In the last version of the chapter "Search Engines, Research Ingenuity," I asserted, "Anybody can do research. And just about everybody does – looking up a number in a phone book or checking to see how a movie has been reviewed is nothing if not research." Now, phone directories are still being published in book form in some places. But most of the people who read this book, born in the Internet Age, are barely likely to recognize, much less use, what were once called "the yellow pages," a staple of twentieth-century life. Of course, one reason young people would not use the yellow pages today is because they barely make phone calls any more. (They barely send e-mails any more, either.) And while young people are still watching movies and checking out sites like *Rotten Tomatoes* to see how they've been reviewed, I'll confess that when I wrote that sentence, I visualized people trying to decide what to see at a multiplex. Movie theaters haven't gone away (yet). But likely as not, a movie is something to be streamed, not

rented at a video store, bought on DVD, or seen at a theater. Similarly, in the last edition of my chapter “The Sources of History,” I referred to reading about the results of a baseball game in the sports section of a newspaper. But most of the people who read this book would now get such results from a website, not a paper.

These are trivial examples (though ones that engender historical consciousness, very much part of the agenda here). More relevant for your purposes is the steady growth of electronic publishing as a fact of academic life. Students and scholars have been citing web sources for about two decades now. In some cases, doing so has gotten simpler: you don’t need to provide a seemingly endless URL for something you got from *The New York Times* (or, for that matter, YouTube), since an interested party can find it pretty quickly from the home page of such sites. Less obvious are citations involving e-books, particularly since they don’t (yet?) usually have page numbers, though searching for key terms or strings of words can be a real asset. But citing things like blogs, or even comments from blogs, which barely existed a decade ago, requires a little more knowledge and savvy. These are all matters addressed in the updated appendix on bibliographies and footnotes.

Other revisions to this edition are less technology-driven. In some cases, they’re a matter of freshening the book with more contemporary illustrations – a former reference to Avril Levigne has been replaced with one to Taylor Swift (who, in my humble opinion, is a teen idol whose work is likely to last awhile). I’ve also added more recent examples of student work to illustrate some of the points I’m trying to make about problems, and solutions, in the writing process.

Still other changes represent evolutions in my thinking about the pedagogy of writing instruction. In Chapter 6, "How to Read a Book without Ever Getting to Chapter One," I talk about the importance of the table of contents in terms of getting clues about what really matters for a writer's agenda. It's in that spirit that I've revised the table of contents for this edition. Last time, I tried to divide the main body of the text into two evenly divided parts, "Reading to Get Writing," and "Writing to be Read." This time, I made the former smaller and the latter larger. I also changed the names of Part I and Part II, which are now "Thinking and Reading about History" and "Writing about History" respectively. Just looking at the table of contents now makes more clear that Part I is really more preliminary, and that Part II is the heart of the book.

Finally, I've added a new chapter and a substantially augmented appendix to *Essaying the Past*. The first, "Scaling the Summit" (Chapter 14), deals with common situations that arise in writing essays that can seem like problems when in fact they're often important steps in the transition from a rough first draft to a polished final one. The revised appendix on essay assignments has been given a more prominent place and adds a new section on comparative essays, which are among the more common kind students are asked to write.

For their work on this edition, I would like to again extend my thanks to Peter Coveney of Wiley-Blackwell, as well as editorial assistant Allison Medoff. I am also indebted to production manager Janet Moth for her cheerful competence in shepherding the book back into print.

I'm grateful that thousands of readers have flipped through the pages of *Essaying the Past* since the publication of the first edition. I hope that this edition will provide additional

help in the often vexing, but also often rewarding, process of writing about history.

February 2012
J.C.

Preface to the Third Edition

I'll confess to some trepidation when I embarked on preparing this third edition of *Essaying the Past* because I believed I'd pretty much said everything I knew how to say about how to write history. But I was surprised – and pleased – to discover that I had some new ideas: in my ongoing work with students, I've realized that there are aspects of the writing process that I hadn't fully understood or expressed. That's why there's new material on these pages about the nature of sources, more specific explanation of the varieties of evidence, and a new section on a key concept – credibility – that I wanted to identify and define more precisely.

Other revisions for this edition include new examples of student work, additional terms for the glossary, updated references and bibliographic entries, and corrections to previous editions. The book isn't perfect, and I have limitations of space no less than talent, but I believe I've built on the strengths of the first two editions of this book, and hope that it will continue to be of assistance to students and teachers inside, as well as outside, of classrooms.

August 2016
J.C.

Preface to the Fourth Edition

Books about history are also always historical documents in their own right: In the very act of talking about other times and places, they also reveal things about the moment of their creation. This is not something likely to be at the front of your mind when reading a little volume about how to write an essay. But there have been some trends which, discernible when the first edition of this book was published, seem to have become more evident, even insistent, in the years since. And since those trends bear directly on the very work you happen to be embarked on as a student at this very moment, it may be worth saying a few words about them at the outset.

All books have an intended audience, and the audience for this one is reasonably clear: people who are on the road toward completing a liberal arts education. It's worth remembering that this is a minority enterprise; most Americans in fact do not hold a college degree at all, and many of those who do major in subjects with a professional orientation (like accounting, nursing, or communications) rather than classic disciplines in the arts and sciences. Whatever their level or kind of education, young adults hope to arrive at a place where their backgrounds will culminate in the ability to earn a good living, variously understood. That living will not necessarily require mastery of the abilities that are foregrounded in this book, which are usually referred to as critical thinking skills, whose components include facility with marshaling evidence, considering counterarguments, and analyzing documents. But it generally *has* been understood that entry into positions of power and influence *has* required such skills, which, while more general and harder to master than more

technical routines, are potentially more powerful in their flexibility. If you can read, write, and think well, the argument goes, you can apply your powers widely across a variety of situations and environments. Over the course of the still-young twenty-first century, however, it's become less obvious that such critical thinking skills really *are* the coin of the realm of the American elite. In her 2008 book *The Age of American Unreason* (published just as *Essaying the Past* was first going to press), Susan Jacoby lamented not simply the widespread ignorance in American society – a society in which fewer than half of Americans had read a book of any kind in the previous year – but the elevation of anti-intellectualism as a principle in its own right, a strain she traced back to deeper roots in American history. For former vice president Al Gore, author of the 2007 book *The Assault on Reason*, a big part of the problem was television, which he believed eroded the critical faculties necessary for a healthy democracy. A decade later, Michiko Kakutani, the former chief book critic of the *New York Times* – whose dazzling mastery of the skills discussed here made her among the most respected (and feared) figures in American letters – published *The Death of Truth*, citing the concept of "truth decay" to describe "the diminishing role of facts and analysis" in our national life and its replacement with "fake news" and "alternative facts."[1]

Kakutani wrote her book in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016, and many of Trump's critics pointed to the reality that Trump was truly extraordinary in his level of ignorance, impulsivity, and resistance to reasoned advice.[2] But as Kakutani made clear, many of these troubling trends were apparent – and in some cases originated – not only on the American right, but also on the American left, especially in the nation's colleges and universities, where a new emphasis on subjective experience, personal testimony, and a desire to dismantle

all traditional sources of authority have placed certain kinds of analysis under unprecedented levels of suspicion.[3] The restlessness with the Enlightenment traditions that were so central to the nation's founding was now viewed as a problem, not a solution, to the ills of national life.

This is obviously not the place to explore such questions in any great detail. But it does seem appropriate to note that you are in some sense navigating against a headwind as you read a book like this, take a course like the kind you're apparently taking, and writing essays of the kind this handbook is meant to help you write. And, in fact, there's no guarantee that the values, methods, and products that are being foregrounded here will pay off in any literal or figurative sense. But the odds remain good. Loud voices, arbitrary standards, and ethical laxity may well result in success: they always have. But clarity, deliberation and fair-mindedness have never been without utility either, and in the long run there is satisfaction to be found – in multiple senses of that term – by developing them and sticking to them. This assertion may amount to little more than faith. But sometimes keeping the faith is the most reasonable way to proceed.

Changes to this edition include corrections, updated references, and more detail on the importance of defining terms and the role of context as an important source of evidence. I've also added more examples of student writing, and would like to take this opportunity to thank all my students from Harvard University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the Ethical Culture Fieldston School from the last 25 years who have consented to allow me to quote their excellent work as an example and inspiration to others. I would also like to thank my editor Jennifer Manias at Wiley, her assistant Skyler Van Valkenburgh, and project editor Ajith Kumar. It's wonderful to get (another) new lease on life.

Hastings on Hudson, NY
Summer 2020
J.C.

Notes

1 Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: The Free Press, 2008); Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin, 2007); Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 13.

2 For a sobering chronicle of Trump's difficulties with critical thinking, see Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

3 See especially Kakutani, Chapter 3 (61–77).

Acknowledgments

It came as something of a surprise to me when I began working on this book that I've been a teacher of writing for two decades. Like a lot of people, I ended up with expertise in something I never expected and never quite actively sought. But I am lucky to have had the experiences I've had, and would like to take a moment to trace the origins of this project so that I can thank some of the people involved.

I date its beginnings to the fall of 1988, when, as required by my doctoral program in American Civilization at Brown University, I enrolled in a class in the English Department on writing instruction. Brown at the time was at the vanguard of universities that were beginning to realize that knowing something and teaching something at the college level were two very different things, and I'm grateful to have received some formal training. I'm also grateful to the still-vibrant Center for Teaching and Learning founded by (and now named for) the late Harriet Sheridan at Brown.

But the truly decisive moment in my academic career came in 1994, when, as a freshly minted PhD, I was hired to teach in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard by director Nancy Sommers. "Expos," as it is known, founded in 1872, was in a transitional period, evolving from a somewhat eclectic mix of scholars and writers into a more professional program with a rigorous pedagogy advanced by Nancy and her lieutenant at the time, Gordon Harvey. These gifted teachers and administrators created a vibrant program that serves as an intellectual pillar of Harvard College (some form of expository writing is the only course required of every undergraduate). I am proud to be an alumnus, as it were, of Expos, and privileged to have worked with the gifted students who enrolled in my classes

there and in the university's Committee on Degrees in History and Literature, where I taught from 1994 to 1997.

In 2001, I left Harvard to join the faculty of the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, truly one of the formative experiences of my life. Here I have had the benefit of working with a brilliant array of colleagues, including some kind enough to read parts of the manuscript. In particular, I'd like to thank Andy Meyers, my colleague in the History Department, as well as Principal John Love and Dean of Faculty Hugo Mahabir, who allowed my work to circulate. I'd also like to thank the many Fieldston students who showed up for my classes and show up in these pages.

For many years now, my academic home away from home has been Sarah Lawrence College. Undergraduates as well as graduate students there read all or parts of the book and gave me valuable feedback. Alexandra Soiseth, Assistant Director of the MFA Writing Program at Sarah Lawrence, and my wife, Professor Lyde Cullen Sizer, were instrumental in these exchanges. Thanks also to my mother-in-law, Nancy Faust Sizer, a veteran history teacher and author in her own right, who read the manuscript with sensitivity and insight.

This book was acquired for Blackwell Publishers by Peter Coveney. He first approached me with the idea years before I realized that it truly was something I wanted to do, and once I did was exceptionally generous in allowing me to stumble my way into the fold. Once there, he routinely gave me excellent advice with a light touch. I'm indebted as well to his former assistant Deirdre Ilkson, as well as project editor Galen Smith, copy-editor Louise Spencely, and the production team at Wiley-Blackwell.

For reasons I don't entirely understand, my agent, Alice Martell, has graced me with kindness I will literally never be able to repay. When I wandered obliviously into legally

dicey territory, she stepped in and righted my course, smoothing the way for me to complete the book with the people and in a way I hoped I could. I still can’t quite believe my good fortune.

My greatest blessings are my wife and children. For many years now they have tolerated an endlessly distracted husband and father who has nevertheless always been grateful for the relief, comic and otherwise, they routinely afford him. With the passage of time I have gradually come to realize that the pleasure of their company and the collaborative dimensions of rearing children outstrip any book as sources of joy and accomplishment. They are sources of stories I will never tire of hearing.

Hastings-on-Hudson, NY
Jim Cullen

Introduction to the Student: Why Would You Look at a Book Like This?

Reading, writing, thinking: That's what your education is about. That's all your education has *ever* been about. In elementary school, it was a matter of preparing you to acquire these crucial skills. Later, you took classes in various subjects, but while the specific content may have varied – lab reports, equations, poems about the Middle Ages – it all came down to reading, writing, and thinking.

And that's what it will continue to be about even after you finish taking the last class of your academic career. A radiologist poring over a magnetic resonance image (MRI); a government accountant preparing an annual budget; a sales representative sizing up a prospective customer on a golf course: for all these people, reading, writing, and thinking are the essence of their jobs (even if what they're reading, writing, or thinking about happens to be numbers or faces rather than words). At any given moment one of these skills may matter more than the other, and any given person may be better at one than the others. But every educated person in modern society is going to have to be able to do all three. Indeed, that's precisely what it *means* to be educated in modern society. The faster and more gracefully you do these things in your chosen field, the more likely you are to reap the rewards it has to offer – and in some fields, the rewards are impressive indeed.

History, the subject of this book, is not one of those fields. Very few people get rich doing it. Certainly, lots of people, myself among them, have been seduced by its charms. For some, it's a vocation, a lifelong commitment. For others, it's an avocation – not a livelihood, but treasured for that very

reason, a source of pleasure affording relaxation and wisdom in an otherwise crowded and stressful life. Of the seemingly inexhaustible list of things human beings do for fun – passions other human beings regard as curious, if not downright bizarre – history is a single star in a crowded night sky.

Writing essays, the vehicle through which this book explores the subject of history, has a lot less intrinsic appeal. No one gets rich writing essays (on just about any subject – the most commonly read variety are those published on the op-ed pages of newspapers). And almost no one regards producing an essay as a relaxing experience, though there are people, admittedly not many, who do enjoy reading them. Under such circumstances, you may well wonder why so many teachers in so many schools ask you to produce them over and over again in more courses than you can count. It would be easy and understandable to conclude that the practice is at best a matter of marginal relevance, and at worst a waste of your time.

Understandable, but wrong. Actually, there are few better pedagogical tools for an educator than a well-conceived essay assignment. The chief reason for that is the chief premise of this book: There is no better way to simultaneously intensify and fuse the experiences of reading, writing, and thinking than producing an essay. As I hope the ensuing pages will show, to really write well, you need to read well (and history, so rooted in sources, makes a special demand for reading). To do both, you really need to think hard – a habit, like physical exercise, that is both demanding and rewarding. Conversely, the experience of *having* read and written strengthens thinking, specifically a kind of thinking so central to the life of the mind: analysis.

Analysis is the keystone of this intellectual arch (and the topic of the keystone chapter of this book). It bridges reading, writing, and thinking, and is in effect the essence of what we typically call intelligence. It is a tremendous human achievement that takes manifold forms. Analytic talent is difficult to attain – and maddeningly difficult to teach. Despite countless attempts to quantify, mass-produce, and distribute a fast and cheap methodology, coaxing analysis out of students remains a highly labor-intensive skill for student and teacher alike. In the humanities, at least, we have yet to find a better tool for seeding fine minds than the traditional college essay.

Teachers may plant the seeds, but it is students who stretch and grow. It is important in this regard to recall that the word "essay" is not only a noun, but also a verb: to *essay* means to try, attempt, test. The best essays have a wonderfully provisional quality, a sense of discovery as propositions are entertained by reader and writer alike. The experience can be difficult and exhausting for both, and yet there are also moments of breaking free, when suddenly a sense of flow is achieved and a genuine joy in learning takes place. That's when all the hard work seems worth it. I suspect that if you're reading this book you've had that experience at some point in your life. It's my sincere wish that you will have it again repeatedly, and that this slim book will aid you in that enterprise.

If it does, I don't assume it will be because you read it straight through from beginning to end. Certainly, you can read it that way; I wrote it in the hope that you would. But I also strived to create multiple entry points, whether in individual chapters, or in the appendices, and point out places where you can jump for more information on particular points. That said, I think of this as less of a manual than a suggestive meditation. My model was novelist and essayist Anne Lamott's arresting little 1994

book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Lamott addresses fiction writers, something I decidedly am not. But she is nevertheless fascinating in her discussion of her craft, and while I would never claim this book is remotely as entertaining as that one, I was nevertheless inspired by her work to try my hand at writing a book about the craft of history.

That said, I am not going to make a special claim for my adopted discipline in this Introduction. I have the rest of the book to do that, and my goals here are to make a broader pedagogic statement about the role of reading, writing, and thinking generally. I will say, however, that I define history in a broad and humanistic way. Not having been formally trained as a historian – my doctorate is in American Studies – I lack expertise in some methodologies, particularly quantitative ones, that many scholars might well regard as crucial, if not indispensable. If nothing else, I bring a convert's enthusiasm to the subject. My best hope for evangelizing lies in the power of my examples, of showing rather than telling. I hope you'll see that as helpful.

Part I
Thinking and Reading about History

1
History: It’s about Time

So here you are, facing the prospect of writing some history.

I don’t imagine it’s an especially comfortable feeling – if it was, you probably wouldn’t be reading this book. I am, in any case, here to reassure you: this won’t be so bad. Actually, by the time you get your diploma, you have a reasonably good chance of feeling pretty good about your history with History.

I realize that this is not something you regard as a given. That’s not to say you find history to be a boring subject; you may have even chosen the course you’re taking with enthusiasm. But you’re not a professional, and if you don’t find the practices of working historians daunting, you might find them mysterious or even annoying. So however you may be feeling at the moment, it’s worth posing a question at the outset: Why are you doing this?

The obvious answer, of course, is that someone told you to – a parent, an advisor, or, most directly, the teacher who dispenses your assignments and your grades. You didn’t make the rules of the academic game; you’re only trying to play by them as honestly as you can. But if that’s as far as this goes – you’re doing your homework simply because

you've been assigned it, no questions asked – then you've got a problem. If you're not a little curious, restless, or even a little irritated about *why* you're doing it, then you're not paying attention. And you're not getting educated.

Living with the Past

Consider all those history teachers you've had: Why do *they* do it? They no longer need good grades. Chances are it's because they've got mortgages or other bills to pay. But that's almost surely not the original reason they got into this business – there are lots of ways to make money. At some point in their lives, they decided history was fun. Maybe that's still true.

At least initially, it wasn't an active decision. Maybe one of your teachers' mothers got her some books out of the library when she was 7 years old that she liked. Or maybe the uncle of another took him to a museum. Or the teacher of another one of your teachers praised her as a kid in a way she found surprising and pleasing. And so she acquired the habit, the way some people get in the habit of cooking or protecting the environment. Eventually, these people found themselves making a living off that habit, a living that almost certainly includes some writing, along with a lot of reading.

Maybe that idea appeals to you, maybe not. One thing's for sure: If history is nothing more than a paycheck, it's going to be lifeless. Whoever you are, the payoff is going to have to be more satisfying than that if you're going to stay with it.

Plenty of people have decided that History isn't, in fact, worth the trouble. "History is bunk," Henry Ford once reputedly said. Actually, what he really seems to have said, in a 1916 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, is that

“History is more or less bunk. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that’s worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.”[1] (Ford’s attitude lives on in contemporary lingo, where the phrase “that’s history” is meant to connote the irrelevance of the topic in question, like a relationship you consider convenient to forget.) Yet the man whose cars and the assembly line he perfected symbolized modernity a century ago was obsessed by the past. In the 1920s, he built an entire town, Greenfield Village, as a museum of American life as he remembered it from his childhood. It was a pretty good re-creation, and remains a model for living history museums. Nevertheless, Ford’s memory was somewhat selective: it had no bank, no lawyer’s offices, and no bars.[2] Facts, it’s clear, don’t always get in the way of history.

When history isn’t irrelevant, it can be a crushing burden. “History,” says Stephen Dedalus, a character from James Joyce’s famous 1922 novel *Ulysses*, “is a nightmare from which I’m trying to awake.”[3] In the classic socialist anthem “The Internationale,” tradition is a something to be overthrown in the quest to usher in a better world. Maybe Henry Ford was right: Some things – most things? – are better forgotten.

Indeed, you really do have to wonder whether learning about the past can make all that much of a positive difference in a person’s life. Sure, it might be useful to be aware, for example, that you have a family history of alcoholism. But you don’t need a three-credit class for that. Really: Is learning *anything* about, say, the Ming Dynasty likely to make a difference in your future career? For a while, I would open my U.S. history courses by asking my students why, other than to satisfy some tedious distribution requirements, anyone should bother. Invariably, I heard variations on George Santayana’s