

Getting 11-18 history students to read

Jon Rosebank

Every history teacher knows how hard it is to get students to read. They take every research project exclusively to the web and it leaves them with little experience of extended argument or feeling for deep scholarship. They also get into the habit of believing everything online. Using books, even as a secondary resource, has become a major objective for teaching and learning.

There is no magic formula, but some strategies can help. First, distinguish clearly which research tasks are to be done online and which through books. If we set a group to write a newspaper about women in 1920s USA, then do it online, where there is a mass of colourful material and pictures they can download. With a shortlist of recommended sites, a good class can get it done in a lesson. If we set the same American history class to analyse the problems created by Prohibition, then the web will give them endless vivid anecdotes but little reliable analysis. This is one for the books. Explain the problem. Challenge the students to research this one differently. Then ban the web.

Second, set out from where they are. Many students do read. The problem is that they do not read the dense historical stuff we want to set them. No surprise. So, give them a mixture. Some in our American history group may well already be reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But add Bill Bryson's *Made in America* or Lucy Moore's wonderful *Anything Goes*, and they are tackling highly readable, informative, and well-argued historical text.¹ Mix it up.

Third, persuade our librarian to shift some of the history books into our history classrooms. Now we can build using a library into our lessons. We can set them to borrow and use library books for personal study. Fourth – and in my experience most successfully of all – create teaching and learning units in each year (especially in KS3) that are studied *in the library*, exclusively using library books. You need a sympathetic librarian who does not mind noisy activities (not to mention scissors and glue). I have had classes building cardboard castles in the library, or making presentations about design, fashion, or sport. Give the librarian plenty of notice so that there will be a sufficient range of books and they are not out on loan when we need them. Study the Tudor court, aspects of Empire or women or medicine in history. Wars are always well covered. Think also about using the art of the period we are studying. Transfer examination classes to the library while they are researching coursework. Getting students enjoying time in the library (no – they really do!) is an important psychological hurdle to get over.

Getting years 12-13 to dip into academic history texts is a rewarding challenge. It can be done. Set them short (2-5 page) extracts from a small selection of books each time you set an essay. If the budget allows, photocopy the extracts and hand them out as a booklet. Expect the texts to be quoted in the answers. I find it helpful to spend some time early on convincing them that all

¹ Bill Bryson, *Made In America: An Informal History of American English* (2016); Lucy Moore, *Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties* (2009)

historians (including me) are *wrong*. Of course, that is an exaggeration – but it contains an important grain of truth and students get the joke. It stops them from becoming blocked and overawed when they read professional historians’ work. Now they are looking for their own angle.



Prateek Katyal, *Historic books*

Above all, teach them to make good, concise, and usable book notes, with page references, bold paragraph headings and short but coherent summaries of each section. Tell them (because it is true) that it is a skill that will be invaluable to them in university lectures and later in business meetings. When I worked in TV, my company achieved a serious competitive advantage over others, just because I took extensive and coherent notes in meetings with commissioners. It was a skill I had mastered at university and have used throughout my working life.

There will always be students who are reluctant (or for various reasons unable) to read. The web is a wonderful resource. But reading books adds essential depth and is a valuable life skill. Construct fun tasks with an obvious purpose and our students surprise both themselves and us. It will not be long before every department in the school is scheduling library units and expecting well-constructed student notes. Make sure you get the credit.

Dr Jon Rosebank is Fellow of New College, Oxford; Executive Producer BBC Documentaries and History; Head of History 11-18; writer (but not more than one of these at any time.) Now writer and presenter of [History Café](#), revisiting historical episodes and making scholarship accessible on all podcast platforms.

References and Resources:

Bill Bryson, *Made In America: An Informal History of American English* (2016)

Lucy Moore, *Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties* (2009)

[Teaching for beginners / Historical Association \(history.org.uk\)](https://www.history.org.uk/teaching-for-beginners)