An historiographical paper is a focused study on a particular theme, problem or issue from a specific era and field of history. In essence, you will identify a particular theme and assess the secondary literature on this problem. In some cases, the professor may encourage you to assess primary sources as well. One important thing to remember: This is not a bibliographic essay -- you are not expected to assess all the literature on a given topic. Rather, you need to extrapolate arguments from the various authors which prove relevant to the theme of your essay. For example, looking at secondary literature on the French system of justice in the reign of Louis XIV would constitute a bibliographic essay. Assessing the role of the law courts in promoting absolutism in the reign of Louis XIV (your chosen theme) is a historiographical theme.

Some Helpful Hints

It is critical that you frame your topic clearly. Make sure that your topic does not become too broad. Unlike bibliographical essays where you summarize and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a given historical work, in an historiographical paper, there is room for you to present your own argument -- do not be afraid of inserting your own voice throughout the paper.

Be careful not to stray from the original theme. For example, it may be tempting to assess a seminal work on the system of ancien regime justice even though the discussion in this book bears little or no relevance to the theme of your essay. If you do make such an assessment, your essay will once again stray into the "other world" of critical bibliographies.

Nevertheless, many professors will ask you to include a critical bibliography at the end of your essay. Such a bibliography will do more than provide publication information, but will include a critical assessment of each book: it will describe each book’s thesis and ways in which the author supports that thesis; the position and role of the work vis-a-vis the historiographical debate on the subject it addresses; and the relevance of the work to the particular theme of your historiographical essay.

Obviously, in an ideal world, you will fully read all the works available on a given topic related to your essay’s theme. Because graduate school is often in fact the antithesis of an ideal world, here are some suggestions on how to avoid the reading overload:

Briefly skim the introduction and conclusion to assess the thesis of the book and whether it is relevant to your own argument. (Keep in mind that chapters outlining the author’s methodology might come after the introduction.) If the source is relevant, you may then benefit from a closer reading of the book. Look at the chapters and identify relevant sections of the book. If you are focusing on a very specific topic, there is nothing wrong with exploiting the author’s index. For example, if you are analyzing the political role of judges in ancien regime France, check in the index to see if there is a section on the French judiciary. However, be wary of relying too heavily on the index: In many cases, the index may be very general and specific personae, events etc., may not be identified even though the author does in fact discuss them in the text itself.

If you are going to use the book, make sure that you take excellent notes, replete with page number references. There is nothing more frustrating than having to return to a book you already analyzed in detail because you need page numbers for footnoting. Moreover, remember that you may later include this book in your thesis, dissertation, or comprehensive examinations. You do not want to have to reread a number of works, and these notes will prove invaluable in your historical research.

An even faster way of identifying general themes and arguments from specific works comes from reading book reviews. In many cases, a large number of these reviews are now online. At the very least, an electronic search can help you identify the journal citation from which the review came. As with any secondary source, you must carefully avoid any hint of plagiarism: Read the review to ascertain whether the book in question may prove
relevant to your own essay topic; then analyze the book yourself. You may incorporate the reviewers’ comments, but of course be sure to cite them carefully.

Aside from "pure" reviews, in many cases, you can try a subject search using the following databases, American History and Life (for US history) and Historical Abstracts (all other history). Often, typing in the name of the author or the general topic of the work in the subject box will provide a slew of essays and works on the same or a similar subject. Critical historiographical essays sometimes incorporate the given authors’ works and can be employed in your own essay.

In designing or constructing your essay, it may be useful to write a "Table of Contents," using one sentence per paragraph in order to have a sense of where the "story" is going. If you choose to use this method, don’t forget to remove the "Table of Contents" before you submit the paper to your professor. This guide does not directly address electronic research; however, we strongly recommend that you take advantage of the research librarians at the Honnold Mudd Library, who have a wealth of information on research techniques. In particular, ask for Adam Rosenkrantz, who specializes in the humanities -- a wonderfully knowledgeable and very accessible librarian.