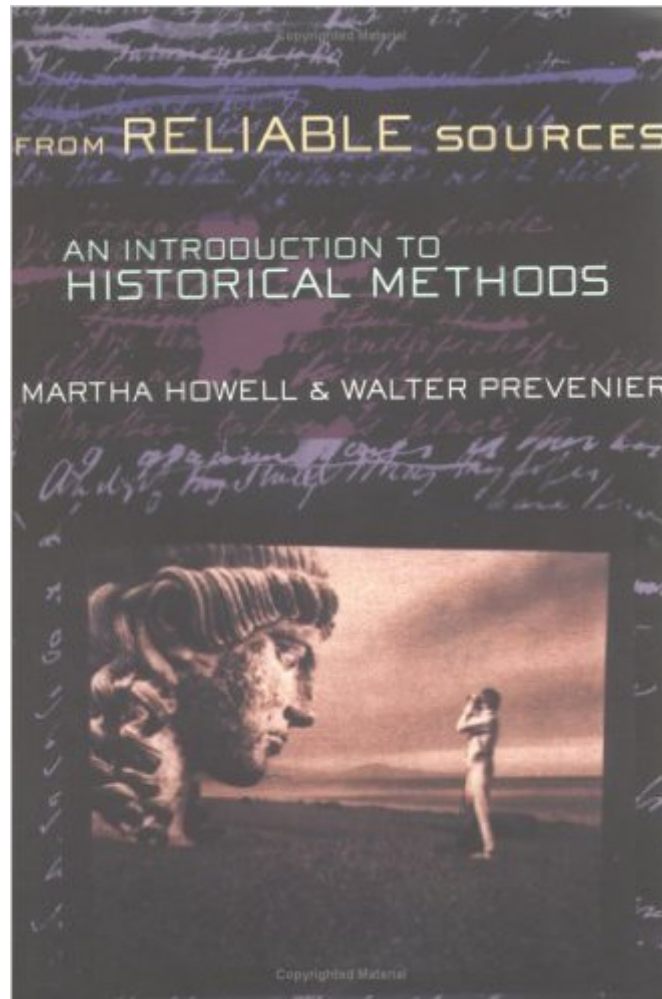


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# From Reliable Sources: An Introduction To Historical Methods



## Synopsis

From Reliable Sources is a lively introduction to historical methodology, an overview of the techniques historians must master in order to reconstruct the past. Its focus on the basics of source criticism, rather than on how to find references or on the process of writing, makes it an invaluable guide for all students of history and for anyone who must extract meaning from written and unwritten sources. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier explore the methods employed by historians to establish the reliability of materials; how they choose, authenticate, decode, compare, and, finally, interpret those sources. Illustrating their discussion with examples from the distant past as well as more contemporary events, they pay particular attention to recent information media, such as television, film, and videotape. The authors do not subscribe to the positivist belief that the historian can attain objective and total knowledge of the past. Instead, they argue that each generation of historians develops its own perspective, and that our understanding of the past is constantly reshaped by the historian and the world he or she inhabits. A substantially revised and updated edition of Prevenier's *Uit goede bron*, originally published in Belgium and now in its seventh edition, *From Reliable Sources* also provides a survey of western historiography and an extensive research bibliography.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

History used to be a subject that one could view as somewhat ancillary, as an interesting subject but one that was not really needed to function in the modern world. One could dispense with studying history and still maintain a proper perspective of world events. Any inaccuracies in the reporting of

world events were the responsibility of reporters, and historians were viewed in general as occupiers of an ivory tower. They were held to be trustworthy because not much weight was assigned to their scholarly activities. In general, this attitude about history and historians is now considered to be a mistake. Because of some very volatile and dangerous events in the early twenty-first century, the study of history should be viewed now as one of the most important, if not the most important scholarly activity. One can easily observe the enormous weight that is placed on events of the past, due in part to the ideological agendas that are deeply embedded in contemporary politics. And some historians have chosen to use historical analysis to justify a political agenda, or have acted as sycophants for the institutions that host them. It would be fair to say that some historians are now viewed with extreme skepticism, and many are therefore looking into the historical record and seeking answers on their own. These historical auto-didactics are hungry for tools of analysis in which to study and interpret past events. This short book gives an introduction to these tools, and any reader, whether of the afore-mentioned type or not, will gain a lot from its perusal. It gives much insight into how historians view and find sources, and is primarily written for non-experts (such as this reviewer) in historical analysis. Philosophers and economists will also discover how the study of history also intersects to a large degree with their own fields. There is a wealth of information in the book, and many questions are answered as well as raised. Some of these include:

1. What is the nature of historical interpretation? Can historians put themselves in a position where an historical source can be read without giving attention to the historical context that give it meaning?
2. How can an historical source be characterized?
3. Are historians ethically responsible for the content of their works, and if so, to what degree?
4. Is there any value in oral records for historical analysis? In interviewing?
5. What impact has information technology had on historical analysis?
6. How are archives useful for the historian, and does a given archive, taken to be reliable, expand or shrink with time?
7. Will the advent of software to analyze historical texts eventually result in the automation of historical analysis?
8. How do historians assess the accuracy or authenticity of sources?
9. Does the interpretation of an historical document always involve the determination of its intended meaning?
10. Should "firsthand" reports of events always be taken as true?
11. How do historians compare different sources relating to the same historical event?
12. The authors refer to 'reasoning by interpolation' or 'by analogy'. What exactly is the nature of this kind of reasoning?
13. When can a historian claim that his analysis is correct? Is there a way of quantifying the point at which enough evidence has been collected?
14. Can participants in events claim any special insight into these events over and above what can be obtained by an observer (an historian) who is not, or has not, participated in these events?
15. Can historians view

events and documents from an apodictic point of view, i.e. free from bias and any implicit assumptions?16. Should historians focus on what people did in the past rather than what they thought or felt?17. Should historians concentrate on deducing the motives of the people in history from their visible actions?18. The authors point to the use of fields such as psychology to study the "feelings in history." Could the relatively new field of cognitive neuroscience be used to do the same, or even more generally to study the motives, decisions, and mental limitations of people in history? One could view this use as a kind of "historical neurocriticism" and its use could possibly shed considerable light on how people, through their cultures, construct meanings of their experiences and make history.19. The authors refer to human life as being "too complex" to be analyzed with historical models. What notion of complexity is being used here, and given current methods for dealing with complexity in model-building, would these be of any assistance in the study of history, especially those that attempt to understand to what extent events are caused by human actions?20. Should historians focus more on studies of "popular culture" and not on "learned culture", i.e. should they analyze historical events in terms of what has recently been called "people's history?"21. What is the difference between a 'linear' theory of history and a 'cyclical theory', and is the former always more optimistic than the latter?22. Can technological innovations and development be used as a reference of time for historical change, i.e. as a kind of clock or calendar in which historians are to delineate events? Such a calendar would not necessarily be a linear ordering of events like the ones that are currently used. In periods of rapid technological development, time will be more compressed than in periods of slow technological development. History could thus be viewed as moving more quickly in the former than in the latter.

Finding the right sources for a book, article, paper, or project is much more difficult than it seems. Every subject generally has a large list of material available for use. But in order to generate a significant contribution to this field, historians need to sort out the reliable sources that fit their topic. From Reliable Sources helps this process by producing a "guideline" to finding the best material and how it can be put to use. This book is a useful guide to the various techniques professional historians have devised for analyzing sources. It gets across the point of finding the best sources in order to produce quality historical scholarship. The critical analysis of a source is the first step to this process. What follows is whether or not the historian believes that the source is reliable. An important message conveyed by the authors is that no source is perfectly reliable. This leads to the limitations faced by historians today, such as change and causality, and how they deal with them. Its significance to historical writing is vital because historians today use different methodologies than

their predecessors. Historiography is a daily changing profession where scholars and historians continually struggle with finding the right sources.

Overall, the material presented in the book is quite excellent. One particularly good section was that on modern storage techniques for information and data. However. Every point is backed up with examples - multiple examples. For each and every point. In some areas, these points are repeated again, where techniques and concepts overlap from previous areas and perspectives. This made the text feel VERY repetitive. Almost to the point of being unreadable. The book could certainly have utilized a more frugal editing prior to publication.

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