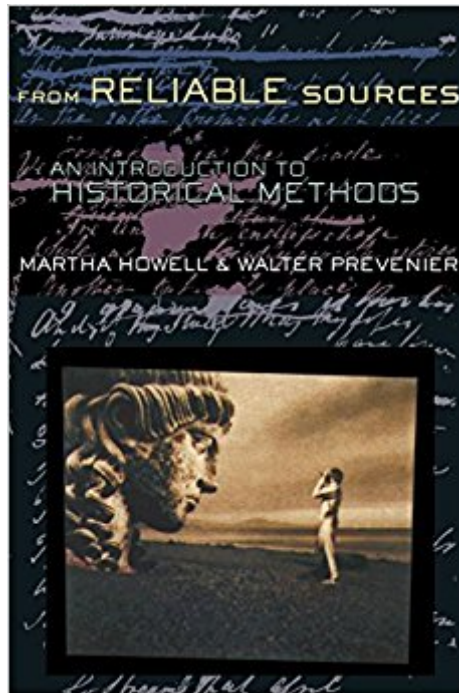




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# From Reliable Sources: An Introduction To Historical Methods



## 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

"Among the books designed to teach aspiring historians proper procedures for their work, this volume ranks high. . . . Readers will especially appreciate the care taken to show the link between methodological innovations and the historical contexts in which they occurred." •Choice, January

2002, Vol. 39, No. 5 "If the best historians, beginning with Thucydides, have been skeptical of metaphysical absolutes, they have also been reluctant to immerse themselves in antiquarianism. The present book draws strength from this tension." • Charles Sullivan, *Common Knowledge*, 2003 "Historians generally have had to work out for themselves the different ways to read and use sources, the issue of how much we actually can learn from the past, the different ways that historical questions have been asked, and the uses to which history can be put. *From Reliable Sources* makes this process easier by laying out the principal elements of historiography and source criticism. No one, after reading this book, will be able to think again of sources as unproblematic conveyors of simple facts." • Constance Brittain Bouchard, University of Akron "Both learned and informative, *From Reliable Sources* is clearly the outcome of extensive archival and critical experience. With its accessible balance of exposition and example, it is also a pleasure to read. There is nothing else like this in English." • Isabel V. Hull, Cornell University

Walter Prevenier is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Ghent (Belgium) and the author or coauthor of numerous books, including *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, also from Cornell, and *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries Under Burgundian Rule, 1369–1530*.

It was a good introduction, and that was what I was looking for, but I really could have used a more advanced book. I have done grad school work in sociology, so much of what was covered was old hat. But if you had no background in any sort of social science, this would be fine. It would actually be nice to give at least part of this as an assignment in an advanced high school history course, to give students a better understanding of what they are getting when they read history: an informed argument.

While Howell and Prevenier may be experts in their respective narrow fields of study, namely various aspects of the Low Countries, but when it comes to explicating the skills of historical methodologies to the nascent historian they don't have a clue. The book is written in a confusing and cumbersome style which often overshadows the main criteria they are attempting to explain. Further confusing the issue there is very little in the way of elucidating examples or evidence to back up their presentation of criteria. For example the typology breakdown offered as a mainstay in historical research may be founded on the development of historical research, but they do not say so, in fact the typologies as presented to the amateur audience appear to be little more than random elements

of much more sophisticated typology tools that are available. Same thing with their rendering of source evaluation criteria. The common CRAAP test is easier to understand and much more comprehensive in scope. They simply fail to explain in any cogent manner why the various criteria and skills they present are the ones to use for the historian. There are a few hidden gems in here but the reader has to slog through a lot of poor writing to spot them. The best part is - it is a slim volume.

Well, I am sure that they are wonderful people in person. If I had the opportunity to go on a picnic with either of these writers I would leap at the chance. However, my doctor has directed me to not read books like this because they are bad for the circulation in my feet. For me, I tend to lean towards writers who cite very specific examples and apply principles right in front of you to demonstrate concepts. This book is titled "From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods." Now, while I was in Middle School, it might have helped to have someone tell me that there was a field, for example, called codicology, talk a little bit about it, and then just move on to the next action-packed, academic adventure. However, for a book that is being used as an undergraduate or graduate school textbook that has "From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods," as a title, personally, I would expect to see examples of methodology. It does, after all, say it is an "Introduction to Methods." In other words, demonstrate methods that a codicologist might use to ascertain which of two or three manuscripts were more authentic over the others. The techniques are very specific. If a writer is going to introduce the subject of methods for weighing resource reliability, a person might consider actually demonstrating one. I know; I am dreaming. Still to me, this book reads like a Sherlock Holmes novel where there is no murder, no crime scene, and no evidence. It is more of a list of subjects and categories. It is like visiting Sherlock Holmes' house to talk with him about a case he is working on right now to then hear him read a list of cases he has heard about. This book put my feet to sleep, yet my doctor told me to keep those toes wiggling. A book that has this title that does not offer specific codicology methodology as a fundamental, quantitative example to kick-start the topic of Source Analysis is missing a major academic bolt.

This book is intended primarily for serious students of history. It discusses the foundations of historical research--what kinds of questions do historians ask, what constitutes evidence, what makes a source reliable, and the epistemology that underguards historical inquiry. The language is somewhat dense at times and examples are frequently pulled from European history, a not always felicitous choice for students of American history. Still, the reader leaves the book with an arsenal of

questions that he can use in tackling his own research questions or in critiquing the work of others. I am still searching for the brief handbook that will provide the amateur historian with a guide towards writing honest, vital, and accurate local histories. To the best of my knowledge, it does not exist.

Dry, dry, dry... not something I would buy for my own enjoyment, but I needed it for school. With that said... it does have great insights into the proper methods of researching source documents and how to evaluate their worth. So all in all, as a historian, this book is extremely valuable. However, it falls into the pitfall that I think discourages most people from history... it is dry.

Fast shipping! Received as Described

This was fun to read.

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