

Hermeneutic Reverse-Engineering: A Set of Questions to Ask of Authors and Texts¹

Experimental science aims for (or dreams the impossible dream of) reproducibility. The humanities and interpretive social sciences supposedly generally eschew that. But *what if* you did want to reproduce part of a project? While that is not the *goal* of humanistic scholarship, asking that question helps us to read scholarship as work and practice, and thereby learn from it in the development of our own craft.

Below is a list of questions. Not only should you consider answering them as you read scholarship, you should also consider following your answer with an answer to the question “so what?”

1. Construction of the object.

How does the author construct their “object of study”? What’s “inside” it? What’s “outside”? What are its contours and features? What are the central questions being asked? Does the author refuse any specific questions as a detour or problem? Are there “structuring absences”?

2. What is the author’s research practice?

Ethnography? Participant observation? Interviews? Archival research? Textual criticism? Transcription? Data analytics? Archaeology? Re-creation? “Just” going to the library reading books and thinking about them?

Now break it down. What did they actually do in order to collect the primary source materials for their book or essay?

What *kinds* of source materials or sources do they use? Are there genres? Different techniques of acquisition?

What *skills* would you need to develop if you were going to go do this research? What *protocols* did they deploy in “just” reading a text?

3. Epistemology: how does *the author* know what they know? How do *you* know what they know?

They’ve done all this research, but how do they get from “the back of the book” to the front? (“Back of the book” is a metaphor for the citations in the endnotes but it is meant to refer to the whole scholarly apparatus.)

How are details from research converted into claims about the world, or stories, or other kinds of arguments?

Does the author have a set of theories or assumptions about the world that they take as axiological?

Does the author have a set of theories they are trying to demonstrate against others? How do they demonstrate one claim is better than another?

¹ The term is liberally borrowed from Anne Balsamo and Heather Love, then somewhat abused to produce this handout and the attendant exercise.

What do you have to know in order to do the work or understand the work in the first place? What are you not expected to know (or expected not to know) ahead of time?

4. Rhetoric. How does the author convince you of their arguments? How do they present the text as a literary² or persuasive project?

How is the text organized? What choices did they make in terms of the representation and framing of their material as a “project” or “object of study”? What’s the difference between the macro-structure of the book or essay and the micro-structure of chapters or sections? Do you notice anything about the mode of emplotment? What gets reserved for endnotes/footnotes?

What is the relationship between description and narrative in the text? What kinds of tropes, metaphors, and other figurative uses of language recur in the text? To what ends? What are the other distinguishing features of the prose?

How does the author establish their own believability or authority in the text?

Is there some kind of reflexive practice, either explicitly in the text or implicitly “already done” in the research?

5. Import/export. What can you take from the text?³

The usual: Are there particularly good claims, quotable passages, etc., that could be used in your writing? Are there secondary sources you want to go read now?

6. BUT ALSO: What else can you take from their work besides its substantive arguments?

Do any of your answers to the above questions in 1-4 suggest *other* things you can take from reading the text besides its argument and sources? For instance:

Does the author have an especially interesting way of constructing an object of study?

Are there research practices you could borrow?

Does the text suggest a skill you might want to acquire?

Does the book offer any kind of useful epistemological guidance?

Does the author have a way of attending to the world that you could copy?

Are there stylistic elements in the writing, framing or mode of emplotment that you could borrow?

Are there other aspects of scholarly process that you could add to your toolkit?

² In the very loose sense that all academic fields have a sense of style and aesthetics.

³ If you read a text multiple times over a period of years, the answer to this question will change, possibly dramatically.