

## **Gutting a History Book**

**Naoko Shibusawa, Associate Professor, Department of History, Brown University**

A skill I hope you will learn in this class--if you don't have it already--is how to "gut books." This means getting what you want and/or need from a scholarly book. This is a tremendously useful skill to have for the rest of your college career and beyond. It is not necessary for you to read and understand every single word that's written in the monographs that I have assigned. It is, however, important for you to comprehend--and thus be able to assess--the author's purpose and argument.

Steps to gut a book:

1. Read front & back covers, including flaps, if available. Doing this gives you the basic information about the book, including the book's argument.
2. Read the table of contents. This shows you how the author will go about making the book's argument.
3. Glance at the notes/bibliography: see what sources the author used. This helps you see what evidence the author used to support her argument.
4. Flip through the index. This will give an idea of what topics are covered.
5. Read preface and skim acknowledgements. The preface usually tells you about the purpose of the book—why the author decided to write the book. The acknowledgments tell you who influenced the scholar and helped shape the book's arguments. As you become familiar with more scholars, you will get a better sense of various academic communities—who favors what sorts of arguments, etc. The acknowledgments also give you a sense of what sort of person the scholar is—how is this reflected in the author's book?
6. Read intro & then read conclusion.
  - a. Try to pinpoint the author's thesis statement in the introduction. What overall argument will the author try to prove in the book?
  - b. Get a sense of the author's take-home message in the conclusion. What does the author think is significant about her findings?
7. Read intro/conclusion of each chapter.
  - a. Read to the best of your ability/time what's in between.
    - i. Try reading the first and last sentence of each paragraph.
    - ii. If something strikes you as important or interesting, read more the surrounding text more carefully.

\*\*If you get stuck on a concept--keep forging ahead; don't pause to look it up. You can make a note of it & come back to it if you feel it is necessary.

\*\*Be sure to jot down what you think is particularly striking. This way you'll have the page number handy in case you want to use it later for a paper or take-home exam.

\*\*Don't excessively underline or highlight unless you plan to skim the entire book again.

\*\*If you plan to keep a book—which presumes that you'll read it again someday—go ahead and mark it up. Argue with the author in the margins, etc.