How do people make sense of historical documents? For over a decade, this question has been central to the research agenda of scholars in the field of history education (e.g., Calder, 2002; Rouet, Favart, Britt, & Perfetti, 1997; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 1991, 2001). The foundational studies in the field have focused primarily on how people analyze historical documents and construct from those texts an understanding of an historical event, an approach that I call historical reading.

Studies of historical reading have been essential for understanding how people decode historical texts, but they have been unable to capture the full range of responses to reading history. For, as James Wertsch (2000) argued, “we have told only part of the story when we assess the cognitive knowledge generated through history instruction.” This is because people are not only historical thinkers who construct an intellectual understanding of the past, but also “historical beings” (Wineburg, 2000), individuals with affiliations to national, religious, political, and cultural groups that embrace particular versions of history.

This “think aloud” study—a detailed look at how a group of American Jewish teenagers read historical documents that addressed what it has meant over time to be American and/or Jewish—expands upon existing research in two ways. First, it includes historical documents that have personal resonance for readers—not distant historical texts, but what I call “proximate texts” that though written long ago continue to tap into contemporary issues that are controversial in the readers’ time. Second, it considers participants’ affective responses to reading historical documents as well as their cognitive reactions.

In this research, I have found that Jewish students generally make five kinds of moves when reading historical texts about U.S., American Jewish, and Israeli history:

1. **Historical**
   
   I call any attempt, even if rudimentary, to analyze a document in order to build an understanding of a historical event *historical reading*.

2. **Descriptive**
Descriptive reading indicates when participants paraphrased or restated information in the text. Most commonly, participants used descriptive reading as a self-monitoring strategy to check that they understood the author’s argument.

3. **Prescriptive**

I call it *prescriptive reading* when participants read into the texts lessons or morals that could not be inferred from the author’s position alone but that were triggered for participants when reading the documents. Participants formulated maxims like “be proud of your country” or “you need to fight for the just cause” even when the document’s author made no such claim.

4. **Interpersonal**

I call it *interpersonal reading* when participants engaged in a dialogue or argument with the text, speaking to the document or its author as if they were able to respond. By establishing an imagined conversation, participants were able to express points of agreement and disagreement with the texts’ authors.

5. **Personal**

When participants responded to a text by telling a story about their lives or their family members, I call this *personal reading*. When this occurred, participants connected the historical milieu to their own family lore.

Students made all five of these kinds of moves when reading historical texts about U.S., American Jewish, and Israeli history. However, the ways that they manifested and the emotional tenor of students’ reading looked very different when students were reading texts about each of these topics. Texts that I call “proximate texts,” those which spoke about issues in the past that continue to be unresolved in the present—and especially texts about Israeli history—elicited much stronger emotional responses, and much more “talking to” or “arguing with” the text than more “distant” texts that spoke about issues that no longer seem controversial to contemporary audiences. This suggests that the subject matter discussed in a historical text—and not only the critical historical decoding skills that students have developed—are important in understanding how students read historical documents.