



Familiar Arguments in Review Essays

- **Scenario #1:** Scholars have disagreed about my topic, and my paper explains why one party in the debate has been more convincing than the other(s).
- **Scenario #2:** Scholars have disagreed about my topic, and my paper demonstrates why the entire debate needs to be recast in a more meaningful direction.
- **Scenario #3:** Scholars have (more or less) agreed about my topic, and my paper argues for a different, better, or more nuanced interpretation.

Familiar Arguments in Research Papers

- **Scenario #1:** No one has written about my topic. Despite this scholarly neglect, my paper explains the significance of my research topic and offers a provisional interpretation of this new material.
- **Scenario #2:** A few scholars have written about my topic, but gaps and deficiencies in the literature still exist. My paper examines new or different evidence to correct these shortcomings.
- **Scenario #3:** Many scholars have written about my topic. Despite this attention, my paper calls for a reassessment of the existing literature based on recent findings, new methodologies, or original questions.

If the prospect of making your own selections and defending your own interpretations sounds daunting, how do you position yourself to enter the conversation? Here are some tried-and-true strategies that historians often employ:

- **Unscramble your assignment.** Has your instructor already selected the salient documents or narrowed the field of possibilities? Build off this initial foundation as you develop an original argument. (For additional guidance, see the helpful handout by the Harvard Writing Center on “How to Read an Assignment.”)

