

HOW TO READ CAR COUNTRY WITHOUT CRASHING

Kate Wersan, University of Wisconsin-Madison

You need to read *Car Country* in two weeks (half by next week, half the week after), since we'll discuss it in section and it's vital to your first paper. It's a long book, so here are some suggestions for how to read efficiently while still enjoying it and getting what you need.

Remember, there are two reasons you were assigned this book at the very beginning of the class, and those reasons should inform your reading. **First**, you are reading it as an illustration of an environmental historian “reading a landscape,” an approach you’ll be asked to use in your own Place Paper; the interpretations in this book are likely to be very helpful to you for that semester-long project. **Second**, you are reading this book to help you prepare to write a brief essay in which you’ll be asked to read a Madison landscape using historic photographs. (See the syllabus for details on both assignments). Keeping those two purposes in mind, here are some suggestions:

1. **Don't read *Car Country* like a textbook.** You should not read this book as though you were studying for a high school history exam. No one is going to quiz you on obscure dates and names. Instead, read with an eye towards the one or two big arguments Wells makes in each chapter. Ask yourself: what does Wells want me to see differently once I finish reading this book? What changed and why? Read for the BIG ideas and the details that illustrate those ideas most memorably for you. Don't get lost in minutiae. Wells has a wry sense of humor, so enjoy what he writes.
2. **Don't read *Car Country* like a novel, either.** Reading historical monographs is also not like reading a novel because it is not always efficient to read them sequentially from beginning to end. Historians often present their big ideas in introductions and conclusions, so when reading this book, try reading those first (and Bill's foreword as well). Pre-read them very carefully to orient yourself. Then read the rest of the chapters in order, but start with the introduction and conclusion before reading the rest of each chapter. It might help to take notes on the one big argument for each chapter and identify a few key examples Wells uses to support that argument. In each chapter ask: What changed, for whom, and why? Once you have a sense of the big arguments and some key examples, read the rest of the chapter more quickly and keep track of the “cool stuff,” the vivid examples that change the way you think about the automobile-dominated world we live in.
3. **Study the pictures.** After reading the intro and conclusion, look at all the pictures and read their captions. The images are a vivid roadmap for the book's big ideas.
4. **Keep track of what seems really cool or surprising to you.** You don't need to remember every example Wells describes. Instead, try making a short list of the really memorable examples or illustrations—what feel like the “ah ha!” moments for you. (As you prepare for writing your first paper, you might ask yourself why these examples worked so well for you as a reader, and see if you can write that way too.)
5. **Look up.** Chris Wells wants to help you see the world differently. So, one of the best ways to understand this book is to read for a while, then close the book, go outside, and test out your new historical goggles. What do you see? What layers of history can you read now that you couldn't before? Can you start to draw connections between the landscape you see around you and the book you just read?

Finally, while reading his book, it might be useful for you to hear what Chris Wells has to say about his approach to writing. In addition to the video about *Car Country* at <http://cwwells.net/carcountry>, here is a brief video in which Wells outlines his ideas about how to write well: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0afX3nQvvnY>.