Scientists form hypotheses and then run experiments. And then they run experiments, and more experiments, and more experiments. If all of the tests produce the same result, then the hypothesis is true. To believe otherwise, as Eisenstein famously observed, was the definition of insanity.

Historians have no laboratories and we can’t test the past in a beaker. To sort the brilliant from the insane, the true from the false, we rely on a vigorous exchange of ideas and rigorous debate. Sometimes those debates take place in print, but more often than not they take place in classrooms and seminar rooms, at conferences and in the blogosphere, where verbal acuity is paramount. Our laboratory is the conference table, and our proof is the recognition by the larger historical community that our argument makes sense.

At the core of every historical hypothesis is an argument based on an interpretation of the past. How do we know that a particular interpretation is correct (for unlike in the novel, where the author is allowed great leeway in creating a fictive world, historians seek to be objective and true)? We debate it, we discuss it, we critique it, we pull apart the logic, and rebuild the facts into arguments over and over and over again. A scientist believes something is true because he has proven it to be true; a historian believes something is true because most historians agree with him. Argumentative speech is the bedrock of historical scholarship.

Historical debate is not just about asserting a truth and sticking to it. It is also a part of the intellectual and creative process. We debate so that we will learn; we listen as often as we speak. The good historian offers his best argument to the community, solicits comments, and then adjusts the argument to reflect the new ideas and greater insight that the community provides. Speaking is about listening and learning and in the end it is an essential part of the creative process that transforms a dry record of facts into a powerful argument about why the world is as it is.

Thus, the good historian understands the value of precise language and clear outlines. She knows that to convince others that she is right and they are wrong, she will need to demonstrate that a cause led to an effect which in turn led to other effects. She will come prepared to defend each and everyone one of those arguments from critics who do not share her world view, her confidence in the sources, or her understanding of human nature. Often times she will concede a small point to make the greater one. Other times, she will demonstrate that her ideas are well ordered, her knowledge is deep, and her logic is flawless by responding to the most cutting of critiques with a well-reasoned response. In the end, if she can make others understand the past as she sees it, her theory will become part of the canon. If she fails, she will take the advice she has received and begin the arduous task of reworking her ideas in order to present them anew.

Historians tend to be pragmatic about how the argument is presented. A fast-speaking cliometrician (someone who studies history through statistics) with PowerPoint slides and fancy formulas will be as likely to get a fair hearing as a slow-speaking cultural historian with a well-woven tale of symbolic meanings supported by quotes, and quips. Yet there are some rules.

1. **Know Your Audience:** Historians sometimes read papers and sometimes summarize papers. The first is very formal, the second is very informal, and oftentimes you are expected to do something in between. Know what is expected before you present.

2. **Present Your Evidence:** Historians always include samples of their evidence in their presentation. You might do that by showing visual evidence, by quoting your sources, or by carefully describing the sources. Just remember that it is difficult for listeners to follow long quotes. Keep your evidence short. It is appropriate to say, “Sam Smithers was one of dozens of shoemakers who be-
lieved that capitalism had ruined their lives. At a protest gathering in Boston in 1840, he told a newspaper reporter . . .”

3. **Don’t Let Visuals Detract:** Unless you study material culture or art history, visual materials should support your verbal presentation, not dominate it. Write your narrative and then use images to illustrate key points. Do not include much, if any, text on your visuals since it will keep people from listening to what you are saying. (However, every rule can be broken. A good presenter will often have one image or chart that requires extra explanation and they will break away from their speech to discuss the slide.)

4. **Organize:** To communicate a complex argument, you will have to be organized and you have to make your organization transparent. Whether reading a formal paper or summarizing an argument, follow a strict outline: introduce your topic and explain what it is you will argue; discuss a series of discrete arguments or narrate a story of change that proves your thesis; summarize your overall conclusions, making sure you explain their significance, and concede any points you can not prove. However, it is not enough to have an organization in a verbal presentation, you also need to communicate it to your audience so they know what to expect.

5. **Repeat:** Every once and a while, it helps to repeat a key point. Right after you read a key bit of evidence, take the time to summarize its main points. Right after you make a central argument, rephrase and repeat it. It’s hard to listen. Give everyone a chance to follow what you are saying.

6. **Follow The Rules, But Not Slavishly:** Historians generally follow all of the rules that govern professional speaking. They articulate; they gesture (but not excessively); they speak slowly; they make eye contact; they use expression to communicate derision, wonder, and excitement; and they don’t spit in public. But there is no rule that can't be broken if you feel you can do it to good effect. You want to squeeze in some extra material and you feel your audience is smart enough to follow along, speak twice as quickly as you usually would, but make sure you articulate every syllable and repeat key points. Need to emphasize a point, speak softly to force your audience to lean in and listen, then repeat it loudly. Rules are there to be broken.

7. **Be Prepared For Questions:** The whole point of presenting your work is to get feedback. Be prepared to be asked questions and to have listeners present you with hostile and conflicting interpretations. (And watch out for the question which is really just a hostile interpretation in disguise.) Don’t panic and don’t merely repeat what you have already said. Listen carefully, take notes, and then offer new evidence or a more simply phrased restatement of your argument. Address as many counterarguments as you can, and admit—occasionally—that you don’t have answers to every question (but you “will take the point seriously and will certainly address it in a future work.”)

The stakes are high, but the rewards are great. Tested by public opinion (whether it be other historians or your classmates), your ideas will become part of the historical record of events, a lasting contribution to understanding who we are and how we got here.