

Ignorant but interested

By [David Heim](#)

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If Americans of a certain age know anything about Puritanism, it is probably because they read something by the (atheist) historian Edmund S. Morgan, [the great Yale scholar who died July 8](#). His book [The Puritan Dilemma](#)—which used the life of John Winthrop to describe the Puritans' religious and political project in America—was widely assigned in high schools and colleges.

I had the good fortune decades ago to take a graduate class from Morgan on American colonial history. At the time, humanities professors were dazzling people with their theoretical vocabulary—Marxist, Freudian or deconstructionist—and Morgan seemed quite old-fashioned in his methods, patiently wading through primary texts and asking straightforward questions.

A historian's job, Morgan showed, is to ask questions about primary sources that are 1) interesting and 2) answerable on the basis of the primary sources. This is a lot harder than it sounds—or at least it was hard for me. Morgan was a genius at it. He was also a brilliantly clear writer.

In fact, one of the chief things I took from the class was Morgan's instructions on writing. When you sit down to write up your research, Morgan told us, imagine that your reader is extremely intelligent and interested in everything, but knows nothing of your subject. This means that you will have to explain everything clearly—and never descend into jargon or theoretical language—but if you do this, the reader will follow you anywhere.

This too is a lot harder than it sounds. One can dip into any of Morgan's books, essays or reviews to see how it's done.