

Examining Primary Sources

Primary sources are the most direct and most powerful way to connect with people and events of the past. But primary sources must be interpreted, because every source originates from a certain point of view and is intended for a certain audience, and therefore tells only part of the story. Our job is to figure out what part is being told, how it relates to what else we know, and what's being left out. Putting all that together is the key to bringing the past to life.

You should ask yourself these questions each time you have a primary source.

1. Who wrote this document, when, and where?

In this class you will usually be provided this information in the headnote to the source. The who, when, and where provides the context you need to get beyond the document's face value.

2. What type of document is this?

Primary sources come in all types, and which type tells us something about what was going through the author's mind when he or she wrote it. For example, a newspaper article would normally be written to be a concise and informative communication to many readers, while a private diary entry is probably more candid and informal, intended to be seen by few or none, or perhaps intended to be read by the writer's family or descendants. (Although this discussion is framed largely in terms of written documents, all primary sources – artifacts, recordings, graffiti, and so on – can be treated with these same analytical steps.)

3. Who is the intended audience of the document?

Most documents are intended to communicate ideas and viewpoints to a person or a group. Authors tailor their arguments to their target audience, sometimes without realizing it, using their knowledge of the target to elicit the best response. Also, there may be more than one audience: a general writing a military dispatch, for example, might be thinking both of his superiors at headquarters and the general public.

4. What are the main points of the document?

Boil it all down. What is the author ultimately trying to get the audience to understand?

5. Why was this document written?

What do we know about the impetus for this document? What prompted the author to write it?

6. What does it reveal about the society and time period in which it was created?

Bring together what you know from all of the above and try to get at the real meat of what this document tells us – not just about the author, but also about the author's society and his or her relationship to it (was she a part of the mainstream, or a rebel?). One way of looking at this would be to ask yourself whether the same document could have been written 10 years before, or 10 years after. Why not – what changed?

7. What's missing?

What point of view is left out? Was it intentional? How would that change the picture presented by the author?

8. What passage stands out the most?

Which sentence or passage did you react most strongly to – out of admiration, revulsion, or strong agreement or disagreement? Think about what caused that reaction: Was it the content alone, or were you affected by the differences between the author's cultural values and your own?