

How to Analyze a Primary Source

When you analyze a primary source, you are undertaking the most important job of the historian. There is no better way to understand events in the past than by examining the sources--whether journals, newspaper articles, letters, court case records, novels, artworks, music or autobiographies--that people from that period left behind.

Each historian, including you, will approach a source with a different set of experiences and skills, and will therefore interpret the document differently. Remember that there is no one right interpretation. However, if you do not do a careful and thorough job, you might arrive at a wrong interpretation. In order to analyze a primary source you need information about two things: the document/artifact itself, and the era from which it comes. You can base your information about the time period on the readings you do in class and on lectures. On your own you need to think about the document itself. The following questions may be helpful to you as you begin to analyze the sources:

1. Look at the physical nature of your source. This is particularly important and powerful if you are dealing with an original source (i.e., an actual old letter, rather than a transcribed and published version of the same letter). What can you learn from the form of the source? (Was it written on fancy paper in elegant handwriting, or on scrap-paper, scribbled in pencil?) What does this tell you?
2. Think about the purpose of the source. What was the author's message or argument? What was he/she trying to get across? Is the message explicit, or are there implicit messages as well?
3. How does the author try to get the message across? What methods does he/she use?
4. What do you know about the author/object? Race, sex, class, occupation, religion, age, region, political beliefs? Does any of this matter? How?
5. Who constituted the intended audience? Was this source meant for one person's eyes, or for the public? How does that affect the source?
6. What can a careful reading of the text (even if it is an object) tell you? How does the language work? What are the important metaphors or symbols? What can the author's choice of words tell you? What about the silences--what does the author choose NOT to talk about?

Now you can evaluate the source as historical evidence.

1. Is it prescriptive--telling you what people thought should happen--or descriptive--telling you what people thought did happen?
2. Does it describe ideology and/or behavior?
3. Does it tell you about the beliefs/actions of the elite, or of "ordinary" people? From whose perspective?
4. What historical questions can you answer using this source? What are the benefits of using this kind of source?
5. What questions can this source NOT help you answer? What are the limitations of this type of source?
6. If we have read other historians' interpretations of this source or sources like this one, how does your analysis fit with theirs? In your opinion, does this source support or challenge their argument? Remember, you cannot address each and every one of these questions and I wouldn't want you to. You need to be selective.

Object	Physical Properties	Purpose	How is the Message Expressed	Author Details (Explicit / Implicit)	Audience (Explicit / Implicit)	Analysis:
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