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| How to Analyze Primary Sources |

Primary source accounts are invaluable tools for historians as they work to interpret

past events. Anything that was produced or written by someone who directly

participated in or observed a historical event can be considered a primary source.

Traditionally, historians have used a wide array of written primary sources such as

trial transcripts, contracts, financial records, correspondence, diaries, memoirs, edicts,

laws, philosophical treatises and works of literature. Historians of older periods,

especially those in the ancient and medieval worlds, have a broader definition of

primary sources that encompasses anything produced or written in the general time-

frame of their study. Increasingly, they now also use visual materials, such as

pictures, photographs, and maps. Choosing what primary sources to use to study a

historical event or trend is important because different sources provide different

perspectives on the event. An official newspaper account, for example, would present

a very different version of an incident than a diary entry written by a person directly

involved.

If read carefully and analytically against their historical backdrops, primary sources

clarify not only what happened, but more importantly, they also shed light on the

underlying beliefs, assumptions and ideas that informed why people acted as they did.

Because most primary sources offer one particular view of an event or trend, it is

important to use them in conjunction with secondary sources (overview histories of

the period under study, such as a textbook) to place them in the larger context of

historical trends, linking them to larger ideas and events that were happening at the

same time in history.

There are no precise rules or procedures that dictate how to read or analyze historical

documents—no two historians would interpret a primary source document in the

same way. Also, each period of historical study poses unique problems in this regard.

There are, however, some general approaches and methods that can help guide you as

you work. Reading primary sources involves carefully considering and exploring

several key aspects of a document. Which will be discusses below. These include:

• Analyzing Authorship

• Determining the Audience

• Identifying the Argument

• Historical Significance: Making Links to Larger Ideas, Trends, and Events

**Analyzing Authorship**

When reading primary sources, a good starting point is to consider the author’s

background in order to determine, at least to some degree, the factors that shaped his

or her account of the historical era, issue or event. Knowing something about the

author helps to analyze his or her argument and tie it to larger political, social,

intellectual and economic trends occurring at the same time.

Several factors are key to understanding an author’s viewpoint. Consider what kind of

education the author received. The author’s religious and political beliefs are also

often relevant, as well as his or her social status or place in the society. Other factors

that can shape an author’s approach are gender and race.

In analyzing authorship, it is also important to think about the author’s reliability as a

source. In some cases, they participated directly in the event under study, while in

other scenarios, they were observers or bystanders. While both types of accounts can

be credible sources, the different vantage points might yield different versions of what

transpired. For example, a judge writing about his verdict on a trial would likely

explain and justify his decision, while an observer who was sympathetic to the

accused would be more likely to question the judge’s decision and offer a more

critical view of his verdict. Analyzing authorship means thinking about the author’s

interests and how they affect his or her version of events.

Determining when the author wrote or created a document also helps to analyze the

authors’ viewpoint. An account of an event written or recorded immediately, is

usually a dependable source for the detailed sequence of events. Likewise, an account

written long after the event transpired might not get the details of what happened just

right, but might better explain its long-term consequences or ramifications. Some

questions to consider when analyzing authorship are:

• What kind of education did the author have?

• Where can you place the author in terms of social and economic

status? Are they from a marginalized group or the elite?

• Was the author a female or male? How might gender shape how the

author experienced and understood the event?

• What were the author’s political views?

• What were the author’s religious beliefs and views?

• When was the document written or created in relation to the event

described?

**Determining the Audience**

Sometimes the main audience or intended receptions of the document are clearly

indicated, as for example, with letters or correspondence. For other documents, it is

necessary to use other methods to establish, in more general terms, the groups and

individuals targeted by the author.

Literacy rates, which estimate what groups and people could read during any given

historical period, are often helpful in determining the audience. Using your textbook

or other secondary source, research what groups of people were likely, or not likely,

to be able to read during the time the document appeared. Using estimated literacy

rates and gauging the level of difficulty of the vocabulary used in the document, can

provide a rough estimate of its audience. Another important factor is where the

document appeared and what kind of access people had to it. For example, if it was

published in a newspaper or a pamphlet, it would likely have a larger and broader

audience, than if it appeared in a limited run of hardback books which were expensive

to print and purchase. Finally, one should consider in what language the source was

originally created, and how many people in the writer’s society would have been

familiar with that language.

Knowing the intended audience for a document is important, because authors

persuade or inform by appealing to their audience’s interests. The author, audience,

and argument of any given document, then, are tightly intertwined. In trying to

determine the audience of a document, consider the following questions:

• Did the author write or create the document for publication, or was it written

only for friends or family members?

• What groups or individuals might have been expected to see it beyond those

who were explicitly addressed?

• Did the choice of language that the document was originally written in limit or

expand the size of the document’s potential audience?

• Where was the document published or where did it first appear?

• Based on cost, literacy rates, and availability, who would have had access to it?

**Identifying the Argument**

For some documents, it is easy to determine the author’s argument, but in others it

takes the form of a more subtle message. Likewise, authors writing about the same

event or trend often have conflicting arguments or messages which depend on their

own perspectives, backgrounds, and interests. All arguments or versions of the event

might be equally valid, all might be "true." It is our job, as historians, to identify their

main arguments and analyze the underlying ideas, viewpoints, and interests that

informed their different perspectives or arguments. To use a modern example,

imagine that a fender-bender takes place in a parking lot. The drivers of the two

vehicles that collided would no doubt have very different accounts of what actually

transpired. Bystanders who saw the crash take place might also have yet other points

of view. The drivers of the cars would presumable filter the exact sequence of events

through their own "argument" about what took place, intentionally or unintentionally

distorting them for a purpose. When reading primary source documents, we have to

consider and analyze the arguments and information offered by the author or authors,

taking into consideration their interests and perspectives.

• What main idea or concept was the author trying to convey?

• What were the author’s primary motivations for creating the document? Was the

author trying to instruct or persuade? How?

• What groups’ or individuals’ political, economic, religious or social interests

were directly addressed by the author in the document? How?

**Historical Significance: Making Links to Larger Ideas, Trends, and Events**

A good analysis of a primary source document takes into consideration the author, the

author’s audience, and his or her argument, and then links these to larger, significant

historical events, trends, and changes happening at the same time.

Reading primary sources often means wrestling with the idea that people in the past

viewed and understood their own lives, events, and the world around them in very

different ways than we do today. In the words of English writer L.P. Hartley (1895-

1972) "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." The actions of

people in the past can often be attributed to assumptions, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes,

but these are often very different than the ones we hold today. For example, people in

medieval and early modern Europe believed that illnesses stemmed from an

imbalance of fluids or humors in the body, and so they treated the sick by bleeding or

cutting to release a small amount of blood. They believed this practice readjusted the

humors in the body and returned a person to good health. From our vantage point of

the twenty-first century, this practice seems absurd, counterproductive, and even

potentially lethal. By placing these practices into historical context and understanding

the medical and philosophical traditions grounded in ancient and medieval theories

about how the body functioned that informed them, it is possible to understand why

and how this approach to curing illnesses made perfect sense to people at that time.

Dismissing those who came before us as ignorant or irrational is a barrier to thinking

historically. A good analysis of a historical document seeks to determine how their

beliefs, ideas, and approaches were linked to larger ideas and traditions that informed

people’s actions and shaped how they saw the world. This allows us, as historians, to

link particular events to larger historical trends and identify periods where they began

to shift or change. To make links to larger historical trends, consider the following

questions:

• What other important events or trends were occurring at the same time the

document was written (for example, wars, intellectual movements, religious

movements)? What does the primary source tell us about these larger historical

issues?

• In what ways was the author’s argument connected to larger trends, events, or

issues happening at the same time?

• What kinds of symbols or images were depicted in the document, how were they

linked to larger issues or trends, and what did they represent or mean to the author

and his or her audience?

Source: http://wps.prenhall.com/hss\_spodek\_wrldhist\_4mylab/140/35914/9194233.cw/index.html