



Delving into History

Using Primary Sources to Understand the Past



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Historians and Primary Sources

When historians begin their research, they look for firsthand accounts from people who lived through the events. Historians study presidents and revolutionaries, soldiers and peacemakers, factory workers and farmers, entrepreneurs and inventors, chroniclers and ordinary people. The firsthand accounts or “primary sources” are the raw material of historical analysis.

Original documents – primary sources – created at the time of or soon after an event give us the most immediate and unfiltered view of historic events and eras. Primary sources can be letters, photographs, maps, newspaper articles, speeches, editorial cartoons, songs, journal entries, advertisements, and many other items. Not all primary sources are published. For historians, family photographs and diaries can be used as primary sources. Not all primary sources are documents, either. Coins, stamps, tools, furniture, paintings, buildings, uniforms, and other tangible objects, known as “artifacts,” may be primary sources.

By contrast, most history books and school textbooks that we read are “secondary sources.” Secondary sources collect, summarize, synthesize, and interpret historic events. Secondary sources may be valuable, interesting, and important in developing our understanding of the past, but they are not direct sources.

Secondary source books like history textbooks may contain primary sources when they quote people or reprint primary sources like documents or photographs.

What are “primary sources”?

Primary sources are original documents and objects or “artifacts.” Primary source materials comprise the “historical record.”

What are some examples of primary sources?

Primary sources include many different kinds of materials:

Letters, maps, photographs, oral histories, journals, newspaper articles, membership lists, magazines, cartoons, songs, poems, speeches, video, recordings, advertisements, government records, court records, posters, voting records, census data, passenger manifests, and tangible objects (“artifacts”) like tools, coins, stamps, paintings, furniture, buildings, and uniforms.

A “secondary source” summarizes or interprets history using primary sources as evidence. Sometimes, secondary sources can rely on other secondary sources. Textbooks or biographies, for example, would be considered secondary sources.

What you write in a research paper will be a secondary source. Later, scholars can read your work to understand the topic, but they will be relying on your analysis and interpretation of the historical materials.

Because other people will rely on your work as a historian, it is crucial to be accurate, thorough, careful, and as objective as you can be while applying your own common sense and analytic skills.

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Key Terms:

Artifact
Bias
Critically
Objectivity
Subjectivity
Synthesize
Tangible

At the same time, you, as an objective historian, do not have to stifle your imagination. Imagine connections among your ideas. Imagine what it would be like to take part in the events or live during the times that you are reading about. Imagine how and why events unfolded as they did, why people did what they did.

As you conduct your own research, you will see that writings reflect the author's view of events he or she witnessed or participated in. You will want to read critically and not accept the primary source document author's viewpoint at face value. Recognizing the bias of any writer will help you understand that primary sources may be subjective. So, as you investigate the primary source materials, you will connect to the past and at the same time develop your analytical skills.


In Depth: Thinking Critically

How to Analyze Primary Sources

As with any historical research, you, the historian, should think critically about your sources. A historian will pick up the historic materials, hold it in his or her palm, turn it around, shake it, turn it upside down, examine it from different angles, and hold it up to the light to see what is there.

When historians consider a historic item, they do not take the item at face value. Instead, they ask themselves a number of questions about the item. Many of the questions are similar to what you might ask yourself if you were researching a school project: who, what, where, when, why. **Let's consider some of the questions listed below.**

With the proliferation of **web-based sources**, you should carefully evaluate the validity of the materials you have found online.

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- ❖ What is the item you are studying?
 - ❖ Who was the author or creator of the material?
 - ❖ When was it created?
 - ❖ For whom? Who was the intended audience?
 - ❖ Why was the item created? What was its purpose?
 - ❖ Where was the item found? Where was it originally found? Are these original items or copies, and if copies, how do we know that they are accurate copies?
 - ❖ What is missing?
 - ❖ What is the context?
 - ❖ What other sources refer to this source or item?
 - ❖ How does this item fit with the historical record?

You should ask yourself other questions to understand the material: Is the document, for example, intended to be neutral or does it express a viewpoint? Was the document written over time, during some event, just after the event, or a long time after the event? Did the author write about firsthand observations or write down what others told him or her? Was the document written for one person, as with a letter, or for a large audience, as with a speech?

As you ask yourself questions to better understand the historical record, and as you research the context of the event or era, you will begin to analyze the reliability and credibility of the evidence. For example, if you know that a speech was written to persuade a large audience, you might consider first how the speaker presented his or her

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arguments and whether that presentation treated facts neutrally or tried to cast them in a certain light. If your research about that speech comes from how newspaper reports treated the speech, you might want to compare different papers to see if they reported the speech differently and what those differences were and why.

Similarly, you will be judging reliability. If a writer was writing a memoir, 30 years after the events in question, you should consider whether the recollection is accurate, especially compared to contemporary accounts. On the other hand, later writings may benefit from perspective, though you as the historian should recognize that time may create a different perspective than the immediate reaction. The perspective of time also raises questions of credibility, and whether the author is trying after the fact to persuade readers to take a different view of the events.

Historians are aware that all sources express some view. Even observers that intend to be neutral or objective will have some bias toward subject matter. That is simply human. Your job as historian is to understand bias and try to filter it out or explain it as best you can. It is difficult to get at historical “truth.” We can say that we as historians strive to be as accurate and fair as possible. We want to get at the truthfulness and truth of our sources.

At first, historians must be sure that the materials are real, authentic. Assuming that the materials are actual primary source materials, we consider their reliability and their credibility, as well as the context and the other questions that help us understand the primary sources, which in turn allow us to use the primary sources to analyze history.

In court cases, lawyers must follow certain rules about the evidence. Those rules help judges and juries evaluate witness testimony and documentary evidence. In a similar way, historians evaluate primary sources for

reliability and credibility. Where a court looks at a witness’ bias, so the historian looks at the writer’s bias. When a witness tells about the events he or she observed, the lawyer on the other side may ask questions to make sure that the witness had the chance to observe the events and report them accurately. The lawyer may even ask about the witness’ bias to account for any influences that may have affected how the witness viewed the event.

As the historian, your job is to separate myth from fact, to understand the primary source material as well as you can, and to use that material to make your arguments about history. If you can support your argument with solid primary source material and a reasonable interpretation, you will have succeeded as a historian. You will have done the initial analysis, applied your judgment, and drawn your own conclusions based on solid evidence and careful research.

You should be familiar with secondary sources and existing historical interpretations. You do not have to accept common or standard interpretations if they do not make sense to you, and you can develop your own hypothesis, based on solid research. You should understand that historical interpretations can and often do change over time. You should test your theory by talking about it with your teachers and fellow students. Let people come up with flaws in your theory, because then you can go back and check the material to support your ideas. If you can do that, if you can rebut those challenges, your interpretation will be on even more solid footing. If you cannot, you then can recast your ideas, taking into account the questions other people have raised.

When you apply your own research and judgment to form your own opinions about the past, and then you write a well-reasoned and well-supported paper on the topic, you are the historian.



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