

## A Brief Guide to Analyzing and Writing about Primary Sources

**I. What Are Primary Sources?** Primary sources are documents and materials created by people who were eyewitnesses to or participants in events that historians analyze to understand the past. Primary sources include written documents such as journals, letters, newspapers, legal records, and government papers; visual documents such as photographs, films, and works of art; and aural documents such as sound recordings and music to name only a few. Historians rely on primary sources to reconstruct past events and to provide them with evidence to support their interpretations and arguments. The essays, articles, and books historians write about past historical events are called secondary sources since historians are often not eyewitnesses or participants in the events they study. For example, a journal written by an English slave trader about his experiences along the coast of West Africa in 1693 is a primary source. A book written by a historian in the year 2001 that uses this journal to interpret some aspect of the African slave trade is a secondary source.

**II. How Do You Read and Interpret Primary Sources?** When reading a primary source, you first want to understand the topic, or event, the source describes. Who are the people involved? What are they doing or communicating? After reading a primary source carefully, it is a good idea to write a short summary of it.

After you understand the general scope and content of your primary source, it is time to analyze it in more detail:

- **Author:** Who created the primary source you are investigating? What do you know about the creator's identity and background? Why did this person or group create this source? What was their purpose or motivation? How might their background and identity (their place of origin, gender, race, social class, religion, etc.) shape or influence their account?
- **Audience:** Who did the author have in mind when they created their source? Which person or group was the intended audience and why? Was the author trying to persuade or convince his audience or trying to describe past events? How does the author's intended audience shape their interpretation or presentation of events?
- **Reliability:** How genuine and reliable is the source? What information do you think the document leaves out and why? Do you think the author purposefully includes or excludes certain information? Why?

**III. How Do You Write a History Essay Based on Primary Sources?**

- **Step One – Formulate a Question and Argument:** After you have read and analyzed your primary source or sources, you want to focus your topic and develop your main argument or thesis statement, by posing an important question your essay will address and answer. What will your essay reveal about your topic? What will your audience learn from reading your essay? What do your sources reveal about the historical event or person you are writing about and why is that important? Your answer to questions like these will comprise your essay's thesis statement or main argument that you will establish in your essay's introduction or opening paragraph.
  - **Step Two – Provide Historical Context:** Historians analyze their sources while paying attention to the unique circumstances and conditions that existed at the time of their creation. When writing your essay, you must situate your sources in historical context and explain how large scale events and forces influenced their creation and purpose. For example, if you are analyzing a document describing the African slave trade, you must explain, briefly, the purpose and importance of the trade during the time period under consideration.
  - **Step Three – Analyze Your Sources:** The next step is to analyze your source and not just summarize it. Your analysis of the source's content and purpose will answer the questions you developed in the prewriting stage and support the thesis statement or main argument you established in your essay's introduction. Each paragraph should begin with a relevant topic sentence that gives the reader a sense of what you'll be analyzing in that particular paragraph.
  - **Step Four – Provide Quotes to Support Your Points:** You should use quotes to bring your topic to life and help reinforce your arguments. Be sure, however, not to quote too much of your source so that your paragraphs are dominated by quotations from your primary source. It's best to choose short but relevant lines from your source and balance the quotes with your own words and analysis.
  - **Step Five – Make a Conclusion:** Your essay should have a conclusion that ties together your main points and reiterates your thesis statement that you wrote in your introduction.
  - **Step Six – Cite Your Sources:**  
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/1/>. Please consult the following website for instructions about how to format your essay, including quotations, in-text citations, and a works cited page, based on the MLA format.<sup>[1]</sup>
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