How to Read a Historical Source

- **Who?**
  - Determine the author(s), if we know. Is there debate about who wrote it?
    - Take note of any biographical details we know about the author, and think about what expertise, biases, and limitations the author might be bringing to this work.
  - Determine the intended audience.
    - Is the author speaking to “insiders” or “outsiders”? Social superiors or inferiors? Friends, enemies, or something in between?

- **What?**
    - Every genre has its own conventions: what parts of this source meet those expectations? Are there any surprises?
  - Material: papyrus, manuscript, wood, stone, etc.
    - Does the material affect the form or preservation of the message?

- **When?**
  - History: When was this text written and/or circulated?
    - What were the political, social, and economic circumstances at the time and how might they affect this work?
  - Biography: At what time in his/her life did the author write this text?
    - Is he/she in a position of influence? In exile?

- **Where?**
  - In what country/city/community was this text written?
    - What was the geography, history and culture of this place? Was the text circulated further than the local community?
  - In what language is the text?
    - What “statement” did it make when a person wrote or spoke in this language at the time the text was written? What cultural or political allegiances was one declaring when using this language?
    - Is the language you are reading the original language of its composition? Was it even preserved in the original language?

- **Why?**
  - Short term: what was the author trying to accomplish?
    - Is the author defending him/herself or a community against an accusation? Is there a specific scandal or event to which the author is responding?
  - Long term: was this text part of the author’s larger goal?
    - Is it an excerpt of a larger work? Is it a small piece that has thematic connections to the author’s other works?
Further Reading


