

A Guide to Reading Primary Source Documents

Reading a primary source is much different than reading a textbook. Below are a series of questions that will help you understand and analyze a primary source.

1. **Historical Context:** When and where was the document written? What social, political, or economic changes were occurring at the time that might be key to understanding the document?

2. **Author(s):** Who wrote the document? You may not have much information about the author, but gather as much as you can. Consider the author's race, class, and gender. What factors might have influenced her or his perspective? Consider things such as religion and political orientation. Is s/he a credible author?

3. **Audience:** Who did the author intend to read the document?

4. **Purpose:** Why is the author writing? To persuade? To provide information? To save his/her reputation? What is the author's agenda?

5. **Content:** What is the author arguing, and what evidence does she use to support her argument? Sum up the argument in one sentence and include three to four details.

6. **Analysis:** Why is this document significant? Think BIG picture. How does this document help us understand the past? How does it relate to the major themes of the course?