



# Primary Source Analysis

Primary sources are sources created during the time period under examination, offer first-hand commentary regarding events and topics of interest. Primary sources can be literary works (Like histories, plays, or philosophical works), or artifacts (Like paintings, sculptures, and coins). Primary sources help us understand the eras we study and provide an insight into the views surrounding events. Primary source analysis asks you to interact with one of these and interpret the impact it has on our understanding of events. This handout provides some tips and guidelines to think of when analyzing literary primary sources.

## Origins and Transmission

When interacting with a text it might be tempting to jump into the source's details immediately, but part of your analysis relies on looking at the whole source. If you have access to an original document, consider its' physical properties and think about some historical context that comes with the source.

### Ask yourself:

- What is the source made of?
- How was it preserved?
  - If it's a physical source, what is the method of preservation (casing, folder, book)?
  - If it's a digital source, what can we see from the digitization process (stains, wrinkles, faded areas, colour)?
- What visual cues are there about the source's creation (images, stains, edits or notes in the margins)?

The majority of literary primary sources you will work with will not be the original documents, but rather modern publications of the source that can often reflect a long tradition of transmission (and also often translation), and textual criticism. When reading a modern publication or translation of a primary source think about factors that resulted in the version you are reading.

### Ask yourself:

- Transmission history of this text?
  - How did this text survive? Who preserved, copied, or printed this text? What are the earliest surviving versions of the text and are they complete? Are there different manuscript traditions of this text with significant variations?
- What editorial principles guided the publication of this version?

- Has the text been translated or modernized for clarity or accessibility?
  - If so, what effect does this have on the text and its interpretation
- How does the editor's or translator's perspective influence this version of the text?
  - In translated texts, are there any ambiguous or contested readings that could influence the interpretation of a passage? If so, how has the translator addressed this issue?

Beginning your analysis with the meta-information about a primary source (i.e. details that describe the source itself) before turning your focus to the content within the source, provides insight not only into the messages within the source, but also how these messages were preserved (or modified). Source analysis requires us to acknowledge the source's purpose and reception and, especially in the age of digitization, we need to think of the entire source to fully interact with it.

## Who, when, and why

When considering the source, think of the entire text before picking specific details. This consideration makes it easier to find details you want to focus on when you write your analysis. Part of analyzing a primary source involves understanding the author's intention for the document, its date of creation, and understanding its message. This involves doing surrounding research to learn what was happening in history that led to the source's creation. Understanding the author, time, location, and intended audience of a source helps you better understand the source's purpose and analyze the message.

Some questions you may ask include:

- Who was the source written by?
- What do we know about the author?
- Who is the target audience?
- What do you know about the sources' genre (letter, diary, map, image)?
- Does the author use specific keywords? Are there ambiguities in language that require more research?
- Are there visual hints that can help you understand the source's commentary?

## Breadth and Limitations

Not every source will cover everything, especially if a source deals with an historical event that spans months or years. Authors' genres, purposes, and personal viewpoints will all influence the details included in a text. Each source has its own perspective on events because of the creator's viewpoint, which also means it has limitations.

When analyzing primary sources, think of the questions that the source cannot answer. Recognizing these limitations provides a better understanding of the author's perspective.

Recognizing a text's strengths, limitations, and biases highlights where you may need to do additional research to gain a fuller understanding of the circumstances that a text deals with. In turn, this will strengthen your analysis, as you can then place the source into a larger context and state the impact of the source on our understanding of what happened.

## Analysing Primary Sources for a Course Assignment

When you engage with primary sources in your coursework it will often be for specific purposes, such as providing evidence and analysis to support a claim in an essay. So it is important to have a good understanding of why and how you will use the source material. After you have interacted with the source broadly, in the ways outlined above, and noted the elements you believe are important, return to your assignment instructions. Look at the task and expectations outlined by your instructor and think of how the source applies to the course. Often, source analysis relies on applying theories and themes from the course to enhance your analysis and shape your interpretation of primary source material.

Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- What are the major themes and ideas of the source? How do they fit into themes from the course or assignment?
- Are there any theories or readings from the course I can use in my analysis?
- Which elements of the source should I focus on to clearly show its connection to the course or assignment?

If you want more insight on primary sources, check out this [guide](#) from the University of Calgary Library.

## Sources Consulted

Carleton University. (2021, March 25). *How to Analyze a Primary Source*. Carleton University History. <https://www.carleton.edu/history/resources/history-study-guides/primary/>

Reeves, P. (2014, January 1). *Primary Source Analysis Essay (student version)*. Moakley Archive Oers and Assignments. <https://dc.suffolk.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=archive-oer>