

How to Read Primary Source Documents- A Primer¹

Primary sources do not interpret themselves. Your task is to analyze and evaluate the primary source materials assigned in this course, a process that requires you to interrogate your sources.

One useful strategy for evaluating primary sources is a modified and condensed version of Patrick Rael's PAPER method

(<http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/primaries.htm>) :

- Purpose of the author in preparing the document
- Argument and strategy she or he uses to achieve those goals
- Presuppositions and values (in the text, and our own)
- Epistemology
- Relate to other texts (compare and contrast)

Purpose:

- Who is the author or authors and what do we know about he, she, or them?
- Where and when was it written? For whom was it written? (What was its author trying to accomplish? Was it to inform a single reader? Was it for his or her own private reference? Was it to change public opinion? To persuade policymakers?)
- Does the author have a thesis? What is that thesis?

Argument

- What are the goals of the primary source (text, cartoon, or other material) and how does it make its case?
- What is left *unsaid*? Are there any important points that are omitted? Any implicit assumptions that the author presumes the reader agrees with?
- Do you think the author is credible and reliable? Why or why not?

Presuppositions

- How do the ideas and values in the source differ from present-day ideas and values?
- What preconceptions do we (as readers) bring to this source?

¹ Adapted and condensed from Patrick Rael, *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 2004). <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/>, accessed 6 August 2007; Michael Edmonds, Jennifer A. Hull, Erika L. Janik, and Keli Rylance, *A Handbook for Using Historical Documents to Improve Students' Thinking Skills in the Secondary Grades* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division, 2005).

- How do differences between contemporary values and those of the author affect and influence how we understand the text?

Epistemology

- How might this source support one or more arguments found in the secondary sources used in this course? (For example, pick a paragraph in a secondary source and then state how this text might be an appropriate footnote for that passage).

Relate- Now pick another reading and compare the two, answering these questions:

- What ideas occur repeatedly throughout the readings?
- What major differences are there between these readings?
- Which source do you find more reliable and credible? Why?

Two other noteworthy points:

Credibility versus Reliability:

- *Reliability* refers to our ability to trust the consistency of the author's account of the truth. A reliable text displays a pattern of *verifiable* truth-telling that tends to render the unverifiable parts of the text true.
- *Credibility* refers to our ability to trust the author's account of the truth on the basis of her or his tone and reliability. An author who is inconsistently truthful loses credibility. There are many other ways authors undermine their credibility. Most frequently, they convey in their *tone* that they are not neutral (see below).
- An author who seems quite credible may be utterly unreliable. Similarly, a reliable author may not always seem credible. Finally, individual texts themselves may have portions that are more reliable and credible than others.

Objectivity versus Neutrality

- Neutrality refers to the stake an author has in a text. In an utterly neutral document, the author is not aware that she or he has any special stake in the construction and content of the document. Very few texts are ever completely neutral. People generally do not go to the trouble to record their thoughts unless they have a purpose or design, which renders them invested in the process of creating the text. Some historical texts may appear to be more neutral than others, because their authors seem to have had less of a stake in creating them.
- Objectivity refers to an author's ability to convey the truth free of underlying values, cultural presuppositions, and biases. Many scholars argue that no text is or ever can be completely objective, for all texts are the products of the culture in which their authors lived. Many authors pretend to objectivity when they might better seek for neutrality.