

## Reading Primary Sources

When reading primary sources, ask yourself, “What can I know about the past based on this text? How sure can I be about it? How do I know these things?” To guide you in reading primary sources, refer to the following questions. Depending on the nature of the text, some questions will be more relevant or applicable than others. Be sure to provide specific evidence from the document that supports your answers and interpretations.

The author:

1. Who is writing this document? What can be discerned about the background of the author (age, gender, nationality, profession, etc.)? How might this influence what is said?
2. What is the author’s political, social, and economic situation? How do these factors compare to the people about whom he or she is writing?
3. Was the author closely involved in the event? If so, in what capacity? Would this matter?

The historical context:

1. What time period was this document created? What is the larger political, social, and economic context of the time period?
2. Was this document created soon after or during the event discussed or much later? Why might this be important?
3. Are there other sources from the same period to which this document can be compared? If so, which one?

The audience:

1. Who is the intended audience for this document?
2. What is the author trying to tell his or her audience?
3. What is the author’s motivation for telling this to his or her audience? What is the author trying to achieve? Why did the author create this document?

Reading between the lines:

1. Is the author placing himself or herself at risk by writing this document? Is he or she forced to say things in a veiled fashion to avoid trouble for himself or herself?
2. Is the document missing anything obvious that you would expect to be mentioned? If so, why do you think that material is missing?
3. What unspoken assumptions does the author make?

Evaluating credibility and reliability:

1. What type of document is it? A personal letter, diary entry, government paper, etc.? How does this affect its value?
2. How credible or reliable is this source? What are some problems with using this as a primary source?
3. Are there discernible biases in the document? To what would you attribute these biases?
4. What historical ‘facts’ (something that is absolutely indisputable) can we learn from this source?
5. How do the ideas and values in the source differ from the ideas and values of our time?