History 101, Western Thought Since 1600
Fall 2012

How to read a primary source[1]

Primary sources can include laws, political speeches, personal letters, newspapers, plays, poetry, maps, and a wide variety of other materials. They are *primary* sources because they were written or made during the period you're studying. Works written *about* the past are secondary sources.

Reading a historical source involves more than simply understanding the words. In order to interpret a historical source, you need to know more about it, including who wrote it, why it was written, and whether it is reliable.

The questions in this handout are a good starting-place for acquiring this information. In some cases, you may not be able to answer them without further research, but you should at least be aware of the limitations of your knowledge.

First-level questions

The first step is to establish the basic facts relating to the source. Ask yourself:

1. Who wrote the source? Sources were written by people, with their own perspectives and interests. For example, a farmer might have a very different view of taxation than a tax collector.

2. Who is the intended audience? The audience for a source will have different expectations, and the author may tailor it to the audience who will read it.

3. What is the story line? What are the important points the source makes? You should be able to summarize it.

Second-level questions

The next step is to go beyond the basic facts to look more closely at the kind of source and the motives behind it. Ask yourself:

1. Why was the source written? Sources don't simply pop out of thin air. They are written for a purpose. If you know that purpose, you will be better able to judge the source.

2. What type of source is this? An official report of a battle and a poem about it will have different emphases and different standards of accuracy. It is important to judge a source according to appropriate criteria.

3. What are the basic assumptions behind this source? This can be difficult to determine, but it is worth the effort. One basic assumption behind the Declaration of Independence, for example, is that the King of England had certain responsibilities toward his subjects, and that they had the right to complain if he neglected those responsibilities.

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[1] Based on Mark Kishlansky, "How to read a document," in *Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Longman, 1998), pp. xi-xx.

Third-level questions

The next step is to *interpret* the sources. Consider

1. Can I believe this source? If you know who wrote a source, who was supposed to read it, why it was written, and some of the basic assumptions behind it, you can begin to judge whether its contents are reliable. A letter complaining about unfair taxation might not be a reliable source about tax levels.

2. What can I learn about the society that produced this source? This question can be answered in many ways. Sources often reveal much more about a society than their authors intend.

3. What does this source mean to me? Every source communicates something. As you read, you should ask yourself what it means to you. Do you agree or disagree? Does it interest you at all? Even tax records can interest historians because they provide evidence for an argument. Many of the sources we will read in this course have much greater intrinsic interest, but their ultimate value to you is a matter only you can decide.