

Steps for Analyzing Textual Primary Sources

Step 1: Sourcing & Contextualization

This is the first step in making sense of the source. Try to answer these questions both before and after reading the source. If you are unsure, you should venture and hypothesis and then revise that hypothesis if your first close reading of it offers insights into where, when, or who produced it.

- Who produced the source? When was it produced? Where was it produced?
- What kind of source is it? (E.g., a personal letter? A law?)
- Who seems to have been the expected audience?
- Why was this source produced? What was the author's intent?
- Is the source trying to say or show something? If so, in your own words, explain what. In doing so, it is best to set aside the matter of whether the person is right or wrong in what they are saying.
- What language (words, phrases, images, symbols) does the author use to persuade the source's audience?
- Is the message explicit, or are there implicit messages as well?
- How does the source's language indicate the author's perspective?
- What unspoken assumptions does the source make?
- How might the circumstances in which the document was created affect its content?

Step 2: What Can This Source Show Me?

The second step is to examine what the source can tell us about the world that lies behind it. So the next question is:

- What conclusions can you draw from the source about the time that produced it?
- Do your answers to the above set of questions in any way influence or limit what conclusions you can draw from the source?
- Did whoever produced the source have any reason to mislead?
- What is missing from this source? Who or what is left out?
- What do you know about the author? Race, sex, class, occupation, religion, age, region, political beliefs? How would that have shaped the source's perspective?

There are also narrower questions which might be helpful in drawing historical conclusions from the source. Here is a (far from exhaustive list):

- What or whom does the source seem to view as authoritative?
- Does the source divide people into groups in any way? If so, what are those groups?

- Does the source make assumptions about how those groups do or should relate to one another? About how individuals relate to one another?
- Does the source make moral distinctions? If so, what is viewed as good? As bad? What values does the source seem to assume?
- If the source makes an argument, what is the argument about? What issues seem to be debated in this society? In what terms?
- Does the source attempt to explain anything? If so, how does it go about doing so?
- Does the source provide evidence of actions taken by people in the past? If so, what conclusions can you draw from those actions? How well informed can you suppose the writer to have been about the events recounted? How reliable a reporter?

Step #3 Conclusions

Finally, there is the matter of the significance of the conclusions you draw.

- Do your conclusions have implications for your understanding of larger questions historians have about the period you are studying?
- Do your conclusions help you identify causes or effects of events or developments you have studied?
- Do your conclusions imply change or continuity between the time that produced the source, on the one hand, and earlier or later history, on the other?
- Do your conclusions imply change or continuity between the different time periods in the past or between the past and the present?

Step 4: Analyze this Source vis-à-vis Others

- To what extent do the perspectives, goals, intentions of this source conform to or diverge from what you know about the period from secondary sources? Does it seem to corroborate or contradict others?

Primary source analysis is useful for many fields. By using historical evidence, you will be sharpening your skills at reasoned argument from any kind of evidence. Most people encounter arguments which purport to be based on evidence. Journalists, businesspeople, lawyers, politicians, TikTok influencers, and many other people try to persuade one that evidence – “the facts” – shows this or that. By learning how to handle historical evidence well, you learn how better to come to reasoned acceptance or rejection of what you hear or read.