

Primary Source Analysis

In order to fully understand a primary source, you should identify, contextualize, explore, analyze, and evaluate it. This is a guide to help you do so.

1. Identify the source

- a. What is the nature of the source? (newspaper, oral history account, photograph, letter, government document, etc.)
- b. Who created this source, and what do I know about him/her/them? (e.g. – could this source be biased; if so, how?)
- c. When was the source created? (Contemporary to the time period in question or not? How might the answer to this question affect the source's validity?)
- d. Where was the source produced? (This can affect the perspective the source was written from.)

2. Contextualize the source

- a. What do you know about the *historical context* for this source? (What was going on at the place and time that this source was created?)
- b. What do I know about how the creator of this source fits into that historical context?
- c. Why did the person who created the source do so? (Was this a private document? Were others intended to view it? Who was the audience? Was the author attempting to persuade? Does it seem as if the author “bent the truth” at all?)

3. Explore the source

- a. What factual information is displayed in this source?
- b. What opinions are displayed in this source?
- c. What is unintentionally conveyed or implied in this source? (e.g. – you may be able to infer certain unstated beliefs from *criticism* of a particular policy, group, person, etc.)
- d. What is not said in this source? (Look deeper. Are there points of view, perspectives, or factual information that were left out of this source? Why might that be?)
- e. What is surprising or interesting about the source?
- f. What do I not understand in this source? (You may need to research your research!)

4. Analyze the source

- a. How does the creator of the source convey information and make his/her point? (e.g. – is there any sarcasm used? Logical arguments? Guilt or emotional manipulation?)
- b. How is the world described in the source different from my world? (e.g. – were there certain laws that were or were not in effect that could change someone's perspective on this event? What were common beliefs of certain population groups of this period?)
- c. How might others at the time have reacted to this source?

5. Evaluate the source

- a. How does this source compare to other primary sources?
- b. How does this source compare to other secondary sources?
- c. What do you believe and disbelieve from this source?
- d. What do you still not know – and where can you find that information?

Adapted from Kathryn Walbert for North Carolina Digital History.



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