

## THE HISTORIAN'S TOOLBOX: PRIMARY SOURCES

A **PRIMARY SOURCE** is a historical document or artifact created during a particular period that reflects the politics, economics, society, culture, or religion of that time.

### What can be a primary source?

Primary sources come in many forms. Primary sources can be **written documents** like letters, diaries, autobiographies, treatises, or newspaper articles. Often times, primary sources are called “first-hand accounts” of history since they were created by people living through an historical period under study. Primary sources can be **visual sources** like maps, paintings, sculptures, and architecture. Primary sources can be **oral testimonies** or **musical performances**. Primary sources can also be **objects** like clothing, weapons, playing cards, or trinkets. Anything that can reveal to us an experience of the past is a primary source.

### *Select Examples of Different Kinds of Primary Sources*



**SECONDARY SOURCES** address and analyze primary sources. Secondary sources deliver information and analyses of historical events, people, works, or topics after the fact. Most of the time, secondary sources are scholarly articles, books, and textbooks. Historians write secondary sources using primary sources as evidence.

**So why read/look at/examine a primary source if secondary sources are available on that particular time period?** Since primary sources are first-hand accounts of life in the past, primary sources provide us with windows into the past – a chance to catch a glimpse of a world that no longer exists. Through the words, pictures, artwork, and objects of people who lived through a particular time period, we can determine much about their private lives, their economy, their politics, their religious beliefs, and their culture. Although secondary sources like scholarly articles and textbooks are important, in many ways, you are taking someone else’s word for what happened and trusting them to approach the subject objectively, interpret the evidence thoughtfully, and report their findings in interesting and appropriate ways. But, unless you have examined the same evidence (meaning primary source), you will never know if the author of the secondary source wrote about the past in valid, accurate, or thoughtful ways.

**HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION:** On top of it, although you may think of history as a series of facts, **much of history is an interpretation.** Historians may read the same primary source, but come to vastly different conclusions about what the primary source means. For example, consider the topic of the American Revolution. Historians have written thousands of books and

articles on why the American Revolution happened. Many historians use the Declaration of Independence as a primary source when answering this question. A historian who is very interested in political history, can read the Declaration of Independence and determine that *the* cause of the American Revolution was the need to overthrow a tyrannical, monarchical government in favor of representative government. But, an economic historian could read the Declaration of Independence and determine that *the* reason the American Revolution happened because of unfair British taxation on the American colonies. Neither of these historians are wrong. Instead, they present different conclusions based on the same primary source. This is known as **historical interpretation**.

### HOW TO READ AND ANALYZE A PRIMARY SOURCE

When reading primary sources, think of yourself as a detective. Good historians bring to their work the detective's attitudes of curiosity, detachment, skepticism, and suspicion.

#### Before you start reading:

1. Determine **WHO** created your primary source. Gather some background information on this person or persons.
2. Look at the **TITLE** of the document. Can you infer (make an assumption) about anything from the title of the document?
3. Locate the publication **DATE** and **LOCATION**. What larger historical events happened during this period that you could connect this primary source to?

#### As you read or interact with the primary source, you should think about the following questions:

1. What kind of a primary source is it? How would you classify it? Is it a written document (letter, treatise, essay, newspaper article) or is it a visual source (a painting, a sculpture, a cartoon)?
2. What was the motive for producing the primary source? In other words, what is its main argument or purpose? What point(s) is the author trying to get across to the audience?
  - a. What seems important to the author?
3. For whom was the primary source created? Was it public? Was it meant for a specific person? Was it intended to be private?
4. What is the author's relationship to the audience? In other words, does the author want to please, displease, challenge, or deceive the audience?
5. Does the author expect a response from the audience? What do you think the author expects the audience to do in response?
6. What is the author's tone and does this effect the document's reliability?
7. Does the author reveal any biases or prejudices openly? Can you detect any biases (political, economic, cultural, religious, etc.) that the author may have?
8. Is it a useful document for historians? What are its strengths and weaknesses as a source?
9. What questions does the primary source leave unanswered?
10. What is your interpretation of the primary source? What are the biggest points you took away from it?
11. How might you question the source or author? In other words, are there gaps in the author's logic you could attack or contradict?