

## Reading primary sources: An introduction for students.

Based on a writing by Kathryn Walbert (<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-eg/745>)

**Assignment: Everybody does the first bullet; each group will do the second bullet.**

- Read Part I. Define primary source and secondary source, and give a specific example of each.
- Divide up Part II among group members; each group member will read one of the 5 approaches to primary sources and briefly summarize it for the rest of the group; each group will brainstorm at least one example of how different documents would be treated for each approach—to be shared out; each group will define/explain each of the nine high-lighted terms—to be shared out.

### Part I

Primary sources are sources that were created during the historical period that you are studying. Just about anything that existed or was created during that time period can count as a primary source — a speech, census records, a newspaper, a letter, a diary entry, a song, a painting, a photograph, a film, an article of clothing, a building, a landscape, etc. Primary sources are documents, objects, and other sources that provide us with a first-hand account of what life was like in the past. Secondary sources are written after the fact and can use many primary sources at once to develop an author’s analysis or interpretation of the past.

Determining what is a primary source and what isn’t can get tricky — what do you do, for example, with a recent recording of your aunt talking about her experiences during the Civil Rights Movement? It wasn’t created at the time, but it’s still a first-hand account. Eyewitness accounts like oral history interviews and memoirs or autobiographies, even those recorded recently, are considered primary sources because the memories that eyewitnesses reveal in those sources were created in that historical time period, even if those memories were not talked about or formally recorded until much later.

It can get even trickier. The movie *Gone with the Wind* is not a primary source about the Civil War and Reconstruction, even though it is a movie about that time period. It wasn’t created during that time period and it is purely a work of fiction and therefore it can’t provide us with any credible information about that era. It could, however, be used as a primary source for the Great Depression since the movie and the book on which it was based were both produced during that period. If you were writing a paper about American culture in the Depression or changing views of the Civil War and slavery, this would be an excellent primary source, but for a paper about slavery as it really was, it would be horrible.

### Why bother reading primary sources anyway?

Primary sources provide you with windows into the past — a chance to catch a glimpse at the world you’re trying to understand through the words, pictures, artwork, and objects of the people who lived in it. When you read a secondary source, 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 you can never know whether what that other person wrote about the past is valid, accurate, or thoughtful unless you’ve explored the evidence for yourself.

In short, primary sources allow you to be your own historical detective, piecing together the puzzle of the past by using materials created by the people who lived it. When you start reading primary sources, you stop just learning history and start doing history. It can be a challenging task, but in the end you’ll find that it’s much more rewarding and interesting than just passively accepting the conclusions of others.

### Part II

#### So how do I approach primary sources?

To understand a primary source, you must to identify it, contextualize it, explore it, analyze it, and evaluate it. The questions below will help you do all of those things, and understand why it’s so important to do them.

#### 1. Identify the Source

What is the nature of the source?

You'll want to know what kind of source it is — a newspaper, an oral history account, a diary entry, a government document, etc. — because different kinds of sources must be considered differently. Knowing that type of source you're dealing with can help you start to think about appropriate questions.

#### Who created this source, and what do I know about him/her/them?

Knowing something about who created the source you're using can help you determine what **biases** they might have had, what their relationship to the things they described in the source might have been, and whether or not this source should be considered credible. Keep in mind that someone doesn't have to be famous or need to have played a dramatic role in history to be a credible source.

Knowing who wrote the source can also help you figure out the angle or **perspective** that the source will convey. You might wonder different things about the account depending on who wrote it, so knowing the author would definitely help you start to ask the right questions.

#### When was the source produced?

Knowing when the source was produced can help you start to put it into historical perspective. If you don't know when a source was written, you can't start to put it into its historical context and understand how it connects to historical events. If you're using a first-hand account that was written some time after the events that it describes, you might also take the passage of time into account in your later analysis.

#### Where was the source produced?

Just as it is important to situate the source in time, it's also important to identify the place where the source was produced.

## **2. Contextualize the Source**

#### What do you know about the historical context for this source?

Once you know when, where, and by whom the source was created, you can start to place it in its historical context. What was going on in the place and time that this source was created? What significant events might this source relate to?

#### What do I know about how the creator of this source fits into that historical context?

Once you know the historical context of the source, you'll want to think further about the person(s) who created the source. How were they connected to that historical context? Figuring out how this person fit into their historical context, individually, can help you think more critically and creatively about what he or she had to say.

#### Why did the person who created the source do so?

You'll also want to know the **motivations** of the person who wrote the source, which may be easier to guess after you know their historical context. Do you think this source was created as a private document, or was it intended for others to view? How do you know that? If there was an **intended audience**, then who was that audience? Does someone write differently depending on their audience; if so, how so? What did the creator of the source intend for that audience to get out of it? Was she trying to **persuade** people to a particular point of view? Was she simply **recording** daily events? Was she intentionally trying to **deceive** the audience? Was she trying to make herself look good?

## **3. Explore the source**

#### What factual information is conveyed in this source?

Some sources can provide us with valuable factual information about what happened in the past. As you read, think about what information in the source is presented as fact. But, of course, things that are presented as

fact are not always accurate, so you will also want to think about whether the facts presented in the source can be verified. Where else might you look to check and make sure that those facts are accurate? How will you decide whether you believe this person's accounting of the facts to be accurate?

What opinions are related in this source?

Since primary sources are first-hand accounts that often convey only a single person's point of view, they will likely contain a fair bit of opinion. Identify sections that seem to be opinion and ask yourself why the creator of the source might hold that opinion. Is it an opinion that you find compelling? Why or why not?

What is implied or conveyed unintentionally in the source?

People don't always spell out what they are thinking when they write a letter, a diary entry, or a newspaper column. Intentionally or unintentionally, there may be ambiguities or vagueness in the source — places that require the reader to "fill in the blanks" and use the author's tone, rhetorical strategies, and attitude to make inferences about meanings that are not spelled out.

What is not said in this source?

Sometimes what isn't said in a source can be as interesting as what is said. Ask yourself, what did I expect to have seen here that I didn't see? For example, it would seem odd to find a letter written the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor that didn't mention that event — you might wonder, "Why didn't this person write about the Pearl Harbor attack? Did she not know about it? Was it not important to her or to her audience? Was it so much on everyone's mind that she didn't feel a need to write about it?" Thinking about what seems missing can help you imagine the writer's frame of mind and motivations a bit more clearly.

What is surprising or interesting about the source?

Once you know what is and isn't in the source, take a minute to think about what was interesting or surprising. What did you learn that you didn't know before? What details were interesting to you? Was the perspective revealed by this source one that you hadn't thought about before? What did you not expect that you found here — and what did you expect that wasn't here after all?

What do I not understand in this source?

Are there words that were unclear to you? Are there events or people referred to that you aren't familiar with? Does anything not make sense? Think about where you might go to clarify these issues so that you can understand the source fully. Look up unfamiliar vocabulary or do an online search to find some information about an event that the source writer described.

#### **4. Analyze the source**

How does the creator of the source convey information and make his/her point?

Sometimes it's important to not only think about what the author said, but how he said it. What strategies did the writer/artist/etc. use to convey information? In the case of written or oral sources, did he use humor? Sarcasm? An appeal to patriotism? Guilt? An appeal to religious principles? Logical arguments? Tugging on heartstrings?

How is the world described in the source different from my world?

Think about the time and place in which this source was created. What did the author and people around her believe? What was their world like? How would you feel if you were in the author's shoes? What would be reasonable to expect of the author, given his or her historical context?

How might others at the time have reacted to this source?

Would the ideas and perspective revealed by this source have been **universally accepted**? Would some have disagreed with the account in this source? Why or why not? Imagine an individual who might have disagreed with something in this source — how would that person's account be different? What might they convey in their own source, and how?

## 5. Evaluate the source

### How does this source compare to other primary sources?

Have you read other sources like this one? What did they say? Does the account in this source seem to mesh with those, or does it depart dramatically? Remember that if your source doesn't say exactly what other sources say, it may still be entirely truthful. It could be that the other sources were wrong. It could also be that all of the authors of your sources told the truth as they saw it, but that their own individual perspectives gave them different views and therefore different accounts. It may also be that the author of your source had a unique experience that wasn't like most people's experiences, but it happened that way just the same. Consider all of the possible reasons why this source may differ from other primary sources before you decide to reject any of your sources as "untrue" or "useless."

### How does this source compare to secondary source accounts?

You'll also want to think about how your source compares to secondary sources. Does this source seem to fit with the interpretations presented in those secondary works? In what ways does it fit and in what ways does it differ? Keep in mind that just because it differs from what your book says, that doesn't mean that the source isn't accurate. It may be that this source offers an insight that the secondary text authors didn't know about. It may also be that this source presents information that the secondary source authors weren't interested in or chose not to include for a variety of possible reasons.

### What do you believe and disbelieve from this source?

Based on everything you know about the historical context and from reading other accounts, what elements of this source do you take as credible and believable? What does the weight of the evidence suggest to you about the believability and historical usefulness of the information and attitudes conveyed in this source? Does anything in this source seem unbelievable, exaggerated, deceptive, or simply mistaken? If you found some parts of the source to be less than credible, does that taint other parts of the source?

### What do you still not know — and where can you find that information?

After assessing your source thoroughly, you'll want to take stock of what you do and don't know after reading it. What are you still wondering about? What gaps did this source leave in your understanding of the topic at hand, and what new questions did it raise for you? Think, too, about where you might turn to find out what you still don't know. What kinds of primary sources would help you fill in the blanks, and what kinds of secondary sources might you consult to answer some of your broader questions?