

## How to Read a Primary Source in a History Class

Historians arrive at their knowledge of the past mainly by analyzing primary sources. A primary source is a text (or sometimes an image or a physical object) that was produced during the time period under study. Below are some questions that historians think about every time they read a primary source. Answering these questions will help you to arrive at helpful and persuasive conclusions about the primary source.

1. **Identify** the text as completely as possible. This includes stating:

- The **author** (when known) and relevant information about the author
- The **title** (when there is one)
- The **time and place** where the text was written (as precisely as possible); sometimes it is also necessary to think about **textual transmission** (the different versions, translations, etc. that brought the text to its present form)
- The **genre** of the text. What category of text is it? Is it a political speech? A greeting card? A blog entry? What is the purpose of the genre?

2. **Understand** the content of the text. This means having a clear idea of what the text is about. You should be able to give a detailed summary of the text in your own words. If there are technical or foreign terms that you do not understand, look them up.

3. **Analyze** the text in itself. This means explaining how the text does what it does, or why each word was chosen. Below are some common questions that are relevant to analyzing a source: What is the original purpose of the text (this is often closely related to genre)? Who is the intended audience of the work? What goal was the author trying to achieve? Is the text meant to entertain, to persuade someone to a particular viewpoint (if so, what view point?), to record information for personal reference, or some other purpose? How does the author go about achieving his or her goal? Does he or she make a logical argument, an appeal to the emotions, a vivid word-picture, or something else? What shared assumptions does the author draw upon?

4. Put the text in **historical context**. What does the text tell us about the time and place that it was written? There are many ways to answer this question, and you should not try to cover them all. Rather, any historian concentrates on one or two aspects, such as economics, gender, political organization, the evolution of language, cultural mindsets, and so on. For many history classes and assignments, your instructor will focus this portion of the analysis by asking a specific question about the text.