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HOW TO ANALYZE A PRIMARY SOURCE

The work of the historian is done principally through the interpretation of primary sources. A primary source may be a government document, a letter or diary, a pamphlet, a newspaper or magazine article, a doctor's or social worker's report, a novel or autobiography, or even a scholarly article - as long as it is from the period under investigation. Although most historians focus on written material, primary sources also include visual or oral artifacts, such as advertisements, photographs, paintings, films, television shows, music, material artifacts (like vases or glassware or furniture or toys), and folktales.

Since we all bring different assumptions and analytic skills to our data, it is quite possible (and common) for historians to draw opposing conclusions from the same source. There is no one "right" interpretation of any document. However, there may be wrong interpretations! A convincing analysis of a primary source must be grounded in (1) an understanding of the document itself, and (2) knowledge about the era it represents.

You should begin your analysis of a primary source by coming to grips with the document itself. Try to suspend your beliefs and let the material "speak" to you. Keep an open mind now. Later, you will have to develop an argument or interpretation of the source. Here are some questions that may be helpful to you as you begin your analysis:

a. What kind of source is it (i.e. a novel or autobiography, a magazine article or government document)? Does it provide information about experience, ideology, and/or behaviour? Is it prescriptive literature (such as a sermon or medical tract) that describes how people are supposed to behave? Or is it evidence about lived experience (i.e. an oral interview, autobiography, or testimony in congressional hearings)? Does it tell us about the experience or beliefs of ordinary people or about those who are elite or well known?

b. What do you know about the author? What is his/her region, religion, race/ethnicity, gender, class, political orientation, etc.? Does it matter? What was the author's relationship to the ideas or events illuminated by the source? Is she a reliable witness who was at the center of the event, or simply an observer?

c. What was the author's purpose in writing (or the editor's in collecting)? Who is the intended audience? Was the source intended for public consumption? Was the author trying to be objective or to rally readers to a cause? When was the document made/published? Was it produced during or shortly after the event it describes or many years later?

d. What can a close reading of the "text" tell you? Who are the important people/characters? How does the language or visual imagery construct meaning? What are the important metaphors or symbols? Pay special attention to choice of words. And think about the silences: what's not there may be just as revealing as what's there.

e. After you've understood the source on its own terms, you should evaluate it as historical evidence. Is it a useful source for your topic? Is it a common source for historians? What

historical questions can be addressed by using it? What questions cannot be answered? What other sources would supplement this one? Have other scholars looked at the issue you're examining, but not used this or similar sources? If they have used this source, how have they interpreted it? Does your interpretation differ from theirs? How does the source support or challenge the conclusions they/you have drawn?

Once you have used your analytic skills to understand the source and to assess its historical significance, then you should develop your own interpretation of it. Pick out one aspect of the document and discuss that. You can't cover every aspect of a document in a short paper.