



University of Southern Mississippi, Department of History's

# History Writing Lab

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## READING AND WRITING ABOUT PRIMARY SOURCES\*

What are primary sources? Historian Mary Lynn Rampolla defines them as “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.” The French historian Marc Bloch (1886-1944) put it another way in his book, *The Historian's Craft*: “the historian is, by definition, absolutely incapable of observing the facts which he examines. No Egyptologist has ever seen Ramses. No expert on the Napoleonic Wars has ever heard the sound of the cannon at Austerlitz. We can speak of earlier ages only through the accounts of eye-witnesses.”<sup>1</sup> Primary sources can include not just written documents (e.g., letters) but also the material remains (e.g., furniture, art, architecture, music) of a specific time and place. Primary sources are the essential building blocks for the historian's reconstruction of a moment in time. The historian's task is to design the blueprint and to assemble these blocks into a coherent structure.

### READING PRIMARY SOURCES:

Reading a source critically is one of the historian's most fundamental skills. First read the document(s) for *content*. What is the document saying? What is the story line? Glean the source(s) for the essential information about the main characters, events, ideas, and arguments. Once you have mastered the content, it is helpful to write a short summary of the document in your own words. Then re-read the document(s) for *context*. Think about the following questions as you critically examine the source(s):

**Authorship:** What do you know about the author's background? Why did the author write the document? What motives did he or she have in putting pen to paper? What personal, class, ethnic, religious, gender or cultural beliefs and assumptions might have influenced the author's viewpoint and writing?

**Genre:** Does the source fall into a distinct genre (defined as "a category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, and content")? How does the genre shape the author's writing? Examples of literary/historical genres may include novels, biographies, captivity and travel narratives, poems, petitions, newspapers, popular songs, speeches, laws, government records, and pamphlets.

**Audience:** For whom was the author writing? Did he or she address any particular person or group? Did the author's audience have any effect on the document's content? Was the author speaking for (or

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (New York: Bedford Books, 2006), 3; Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 48.

representing) a particular audience? Was the author trying to silence another audience? How was the document received?

**Language:** What can you tell about a historical period from the language, vocabulary, and rhetoric used? What does the writer's choice of words tell us about social or cultural assumptions? How have the meanings of the words changed over time? Was the document written in English or was it translated from another language? How might the translation have altered the document's meaning? What role might the translator have played in shaping the document's tone or content?

**Reliability:** What can the source tell you about the past? How useful is it for understanding the past? How trustworthy is the source? Does it exclude, downplay, or ignore evidence or issues that you can verify through other sources? What is the author leaving out?

**Authenticity:** Are there reasons to doubt the authorship of the document? Was the document possibly a forgery? Has it been altered in any way? If it is a transcription of someone else's words, who was the scribe? What role might the scribe have played in shaping the document's tone or content?

**Influence:** How important or influential was the source in its own day and age? By what standards can one measure a document's significance? Was it widely disseminated and read (e.g., a pamphlet)? Was it more personal (e.g., a diary—though some authors intended their diaries to be published)? Did the document's publication have anticipated and unanticipated consequences?

**Relationship to Other Course Themes:** How does the document relate to the course's main themes? What kinds of connections can you draw to other primary or secondary sources and the lectures?

### **HELPFUL TIPS FOR WRITING ESSAYS BASED UPON PRIMARY SOURCES:**

**Carefully review the assignment's goals.** Always follow your professor's specific guidelines before the general suggestions in this handout. Then have the assignment's goals in mind as you familiarize yourself with the sources, develop a thesis, outline your main points, and write the essay.

**Develop a strong thesis statement.** Give some thought to your thesis before taking notes and outlining, lest you end up with pages and pages of pointless evidence. Ask yourself, "What is the main question that I am trying to answer in this paper?" "What is the one point that I want the reader to come away with after reading my essay?" In some cases, your professor will have assigned you a question or questions to consider. You may, however, have permission to focus on a particular theme or topic in the document(s). If you are writing an essay based on numerous primary sources, consider a theme that unites the documents. Your thesis is like a coat tree upon which you will hang your supporting evidence. It should present your analysis of the meaning and significance of the source(s). Accordingly, your thesis should be argumentative, not descriptive.

- Example of a *descriptive* "thesis": "In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine presented his views on why the American colonists should break with Great Britain" (Note: no one would ever disagree with this statement; it only tells us what the author did and it says absolutely nothing about the meaning or significance of Paine's work).

- Example of an *argumentative* thesis: “Thomas Paine’s use of plain language, biblical analogies, and egalitarian rhetoric explains the enormous appeal of *Common Sense*” (Note: one could easily prove this argument by examining, in the subsequent paragraphs, the three points listed in the sentence).

**Don’t summarize—analyze!** A primary source essay should not be a restatement or summary of the document’s content. Essays typically call for a close analysis or dissection of the texts’ meanings. Refer to the first section of this handout for examples of analytical questions that you can pose of any source.

**Use strong topic sentences:** “What is the main point I am trying to make in this paragraph?” The first sentence in the paragraph—the topic sentence—should announce not only the subject of the paragraph but also the significance of the information that follows it. The topic sentence is essentially the thesis of an individual paragraph. Do not place your strongest points in the middle of or at the end of the paragraph lest the reader wonder why he/she is reading your evidence.

**Use quotes judiciously:** The essay should present *your* analysis of the sources; overuse of quotes reduces the amount of space in which you have to develop your arguments and shows that you have nothing more to say than the original document. Refrain from using block quotes in shorter essays (those that are fewer than eight pages long) unless the complete quote is indispensable to your analysis. If your quote is longer than four lines, then you should use a block quotation. Block quotes are single spaced, indented, and do not need the telltale quotation marks (“ . . . ”). Be sure that you provide citations and that your quotations do not take the words, phrases, or sentences out of context.