Primary Sources

What are primary sources?

★ Primary sources are “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.”
★ Written documents, furniture, art, music – and any other items produced at a specific time and place.
★ Essential building blocks for the historian to reconstruct a moment in time and build his or her arguments.

Reading primary sources

★ First read for CONTENT
  o What does the document say?
  o What is the story?
  o What are the main events, ideas, and arguments?
    ▪ It can be helpful to summarize the document in your own words.
★ Reread for CONTEXT
  o Authorship
    ▪ Who is the author?
    ▪ What is his or her background?
    ▪ Why did the author write the document? What were his or her motives?
    ▪ What assumptions or beliefs may have influenced his or her writing?
      • These may include, but are not limited to, class, ethnicity, religion, nationalistic, gender, or cultural beliefs.
  o Audience
    ▪ For whom was the document intended?
    ▪ Did the audience have any effect on the document’s content?
    ▪ Was the author attempting to silence another group?
    ▪ How was the document received?
  o Language
    ▪ What do the language, vocabulary, and rhetoric tell you about the period?

What does the language say about cultural assumptions?
- Have word meanings changed over time?
- Was the document translated into English?
- Could the translator have altered the meaning, tone, or content?

- Reliability
  - What can the source tell you about the past?
  - How useful is it for understanding the past?
  - Does it exclude or downplay evidence or issues verified through other sources?
  - What did the author leave out?

- Authenticity
  - Is there any reason to doubt the authorship of the document?
  - Was it possibly a forgery?
  - Has it been altered?
  - Was it transcribed by anyone other than the author? Who?
  - What role might a scribe have had in shaping tone and content?

- Influence
  - How important or influential was the document at the time it was written?
  - Was it widely distributed and read (like a pamphlet)?
  - Was it personal (like a diary)?
    - Be careful here – some people intended to publish their diaries
  - What were the consequences of publication (both intended and unanticipated)?

- Relationship to the class
  - How does the document relate to the course themes?
  - What kind of connections can you draw to lectures and other primary and secondary sources?

Writing essays based on primary sources

- Review the assignment
  - Follow the guidelines set down by your professor
    - Keep the assignment’s goals in mind as you read sources, develop a thesis, outline, and write

- Develop a strong thesis statement
  - What is the main question you are trying to answer with this paper?
  - With what point do you want the reader to come away from the paper?
    - You may have a question assigned.
      - If this is the case, make sure you address the question fully.
    - You may have permission to focus on a particular theme or topic.
      - If this is the case think about the unifying ideas.
        - This is particularly important when writing about multiple documents.
  - 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.
      - No one would disagree with this – it simply states a fact.
    - Example of an argumentative thesis: Thomas Paine’s use of plain language, biblical analysis, and themes of equality explains the enormous appeal of *Common Sense*. 
Note that this sets up the rest of your paper – you would discuss each of the three points in individual paragraphs.

★ Analyze, do not summarize!!
  o Primary source essays should NOT summarize or restate the contents of the document.
  o Instead analyze or dissect the meaning of the text.
  o The questions at the beginning can give you ideas on how to analyze.

★ Use strong topic sentences
  o The first sentence of the paragraph should announce both the subject of the paragraph and the significance of the information which follows.
  o Place your strongest sentence at the beginning.
  o Do not let your reader wonder why he or she is wading through all of the evidence you provide.

★ Quote wisely
  o Introduce quotes in your text, do not just drop quotes into your paper without explanation.
  o Do not overuse quotes, it limits the space for your analysis, which is the most important part of your paper.
  o Develop your arguments
  o Refrain from block quotes unless absolutely necessary
    • Quotes longer than four lines should be in block format
    • Block quotes are single-spaced, indented, and do not have quotation marks
  o Provide citations for all quotes
  o Do not take words, phrases, or sentences out of context
    ★ Note the information in italics at the top of the documents in Envisioning World Civilizations is background information. It is not part of the document.