



# Department of History

# History Lab

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## Primary Sources

### What are primary sources?

- ★ Primary sources are “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.”<sup>1</sup>
- ★ 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
  - What does the document say?
  - What is the story?
  - What are the main events, ideas, and arguments?
    - It can be helpful to summarize the document in your own words.
- ★ Reread for CONTEXT
  - 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.
  - 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?
  - Language
    - What do the language, vocabulary, and rhetoric tell you about the period?

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (New York: Bedford Books, 2006), 3.

- 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!!
  - Primary source essays should NOT summarize or restate the contents of the document.
  - Instead analyze or dissect the meaning of the text.
  - The questions at the beginning can give you ideas on how to analyze.
- ★ Use strong topic sentences
  - The first sentence of the paragraph should announce both the subject of the paragraph and the significance of the information which follows.
  - Place your strongest sentence at the beginning.
  - Do not let your reader wonder why he or she is wading through all of the evidence you provide.
- ★ Quote wisely
  - Introduce quotes in your text, do not just drop quotes into your paper without explanation.
  - Do not overuse quotes, it limits the space for your analysis, which is the most important part of your paper.
  - Develop your arguments
  - 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
  - Provide citations for all quotes
  - 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.