



## Interpreting Primary Sources

Primary sources work in the same way. While textbooks provide a good overview of what happened, they are not the same as reading the words of people who actually lived through a particular event. Textbooks offer an interpretation of a historical person or event by those who did not witness them or live during that time period. They are called secondary sources. Reading primary sources allows us to judge whether we agree with that interpretation because we will have read or seen the same primary sources as the textbook author.

If you have not read primary sources before, you might be surprised to find that it is not like reading from a textbook. Primary sources do not speak for themselves—they have to be interpreted. You do not just simply read about the past, you must investigate the past by asking questions.

To help you interpret primary sources, you might think about these questions as you examine the source:

### A. Place the document in its historical context

1. Who wrote it? What do you know about this person?
2. Where and when was it written?
3. Why was it written?
4. Are there any SOCIAL ANXIETIES?
5. Who was it written for? This is called the “audience.” What do you know about this audience?

### B. Understanding the document

1. What are the key words and what do they mean?
2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
3. What evidence does the author give to support this thesis.
4. What assumptions does the author make?

### C. Evaluate the document as a source of historical information

1. Is this document similar to others from the same time period?
2. How widely was it circulated?
3. What problems, assumptions, and ideas does it share with other documents from the time period?

### D. Analyze the document in the historical context

1. How might this text support one of the arguments found in secondary sources you've read?
2. What kinds of information does this text tell you without knowing it's telling you?

### E. Relate

Now choose another reading from the same period and/or subject matter, and compare the two, answering these questions:

1. What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
2. What major differences appear in them?
3. Which do you find more reliable and credible?

Asking yourself these questions as you read will help you understand and interpret the document for yourself. It is very tempting to use the textbook as a source of interpretations, especially if you encounter a primary source you do not completely understand. A critical part of the process of reading and using historical sources is figuring out what the documents can tell you about a past event, and to decide whether you agree with the interpretation offered by the author of your textbook. Primary sources support the author’s interpretation of the event, so without primary sources, he or she has no basis to make a conclusion about the past. Reading primary sources allows you to interpret the past by providing the tools and evidence needed to make informed statements about the world around you.