

Bridging History: Using Documents

Primary sources are firsthand evidence and artifacts of the past. They may include letters, photographs, maps, government documents, diaries, oral accounts, pamphlets, or leaflets. Some may be published, others not. Read attentively, they can give us multiple perspectives on history and open up a vast array of issues and concerns.

Historians read primary sources skeptically and critically. Typically, they consider where, when, and why something was created. This is called the "time and place rule." And they look for bias, considering what the document's author thought happened and how it compares with other documents or artifacts of the period. This is called the "bias rule."

1. Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
2. Did the creator have firsthand knowledge of the event, or did the creator report what others saw and heard?
3. Was the creator a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
4. Did the creator produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?
5. Was the source meant to be public or private?
6. Did the creator wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the creator was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the creator have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
7. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?

When you review visual images, print out the following questions* to guide you:

1. What was the creator's purpose?
2. Why this pose, perspective, and framing?
3. Why this subject?
4. What objects were included and excluded? What clues do they provide about the conditions and attitudes of the day?

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