

Analyzing Primary Sources

Based on: Mark Kishlansky, “How to Read a Document” in *Sources of the West* (1995).

Documents can be analyzed on many levels and asked to answer a number of questions. Not all of what follows will be useful with every document, but in general the following questions are useful and will cover virtually all of what you can get out of a document. In what follows, I am using the word “document” in the broadest possible sense. In some circumstances, a painting or a piece of music might be a document, and so might a gun or a coffee cup.

Level One Questions. These are questions for which there are normally concrete answers. The document itself might answer these questions in a straightforward way, but the answers might also require some deeper thinking.

- 1. Who created this document?** This doesn't mean just knowing the *name* of the author, though that is important. It also means knowing something about the author, since who that person is will influence the content and meaning of the document. Think about what the author's identity might reveal about the deeper meaning of the source.
- 2. Who is the intended audience?** Audience shapes what we expect from a source, and knowing the relationship between the author and the intended audience can tell us a great deal about the source because it determines a whole set of rhetorical conventions that might have an impact on the credibility of the text and/or the need to look for hidden meanings.
- 3. What is the story line?** The story line may be a narrative, but it may also be details that don't form a story in the conventional sense. A diary entry may offer a conventional linear narrative, while a will does not – but the will still has a “story”. Once you have the story, you should have a series of questions forming in your head that will take you beyond the “easy” details that you have addressed so far.

Level Two Questions. Now, you will probe beneath the surface. These questions still have essentially direct answers, and ones that can be ascertained in a fairly “objective” way. They are, however, questions that take you deeper into the source and sometimes between the lines.

- 4. Why was the document created?** Every source you will encounter was created for a purpose. What is it? Some possibilities (not an exhaustive list!) are: to persuade, to inform, to intimidate, to make something legal.
- 5. What type of document is this?** Genres have conventions – i.e., certain things that always appear (like beginning a letter “Dear —”). Knowing these is necessary for a secure understanding of the source.

6. What are the basic assumptions of this source? All documents make assumptions that are connected to their intended audience – things that the creators know the audience will know without having to be told as well as things that have to be stated because they are central to the argument.

Level Three Questions. In these questions, you exercise your critical imagination – the exercise of thinking *historically* about your sources. These questions don't have definite answers and may produce answers from you that others will dispute.

7. Can I believe this document? Do the assumptions, the rhetoric, etc. of this source undermine its credibility? Are there things that are believable even if other things seem not to be? What questions do I need to answer in order to feel comfortable trusting this source?

8. What can I learn about the society that created it? This may be the most important question for historians. Every source reveals things that its creators never intended to reveal. It's not necessarily the case that it reveals things they didn't *want* us to know – merely that we can see things with hindsight and a different perspective that they didn't realize they were telling us about them.

9. What does the source mean to me? This is the great “So what?” question. Now that you have decoded this source, what difference does it make? Have you learned anything useful from it? What will you (or *could* you) do with what you have learned?

Physical Appearance of Sources: If you are working with a facsimile, photocopy or microfilm of the *original* source, think about what the physical appearance and lay-out of the source reveals about it. For example: If it is a handwritten source, is the text “letter perfect” or are there corrections, erasures, interlinear notes, etc.? If it is a printed work, is it produced in a way that can give clues about the potential audience?