

### Tips for Identifying and Evaluating Sources

Research assignments in history courses usually require you to use both primary and secondary sources.<sup>1</sup>

**Primary sources** were written by people who were directly involved in the historical event you are studying: often, they were either participants or witnesses to the event. Primary source documents include materials like diaries, letters, articles, speeches, memoirs, autobiographies, census data, public registers (e.g. marriage/death/birth certificates). Primary sources may also be oral narratives, or aspects of material culture, like objects, tools, maps, photographs and artwork. When possible, the focus of your research should be on primary sources.

Just because a primary source presents a firsthand account of an event, though, doesn't mean the information is reliable. **When evaluating a primary source**, you need to be aware of author bias and any omissions or possible misrepresentations. Ask yourself the following:

- Are the same facts or information repeated in other sources from this period?
- Does the author's choice of words demonstrate a biased opinion?
- What assumptions are being made in the text?
- What are the circumstances under which the text was written? who was it written for? for what purpose? how does this influence the reliability or certainty of the content?
- If the book has been translated or edited, is there anything missing from the original? are there alternative ways of translating the same words/passages?
- If the source is not a written document, who was the intended user or audience? What was the purpose of this source? Did the person or organization that produced it have a particular agenda? What is the significance of this source? What does it tell us about its creator or the society that produced it?

Identifying a bias does not mean you should dismiss a source as "unreliable." Rather, historians use the biases and assumptions in their sources to understand more about the period they are studying.

**Secondary sources** are articles and books that discuss or provide perspective on primary sources. They are generally written by historians. **When analyzing secondary sources**, ask yourself the following:

- What is the author's thesis (main argument)? TIP: this is usually stated clearly in the introduction and conclusion
- What reasons or evidence does the author provide to support this thesis? TIP: these are usually introduced at the beginning of body paragraphs
- Does the author use primary sources as evidence? Do the examples or evidence used support the author's conclusions? Could the same information be interpreted differently?
- Do you disagree with any of the author's points? Why?
- Is this a scholarly source? i.e. Is it published by a university press or academic publisher who uses peer review to vet manuscripts? Does the source contain citations, and does the author refer to other sources to back up his or her assertions?
- How current is this source? Are the theories, methods or materials used by the author outdated or incomplete?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless you are writing a historiographical paper, which evaluates only secondary sources. Historiographical essays ignore primary sources because their goal is to understand and compare the different perspectives or approaches that historians have taken on a particular event or topic. Historiographies may examine historical interpretations from a chronological point of view (i.e. how interpretations of a particular event have changed over time), or they may compare the various theoretical schools or perspectives that have been used to study the past.

## Writing Tips

Avoid generalizations.

- Remember: one author's words or opinions do not represent those of an entire group, culture, or historical period.
- Don't begin your introduction with general statements like "Throughout history, ..." or "Since the beginning of time, ..." or "In ancient times, ..."

Avoid anachronistic statements—in other words, don't assume that modern knowledge, practices, values, or beliefs are the same as those from the past.

- Remember: your goal is not to judge the past by today's standards, but to try and understand the greater context and viewpoints of the past.

Maintain the language used in the original source when quoting directly.

- When quoting, don't revise or replace terms that are considered offensive today (e.g. *Negro*, *Savage*, *Oriental*).
- In your own sentences, though, use neutral, contemporary language (e.g. *black* or *African American*, *aboriginal* or *First Nations*, *Asian*).

Avoid biased language, i.e. language that communicates a negative judgement.

- Don't use words like *backward*, *primitive*, *barbaric*, *uncivilized*, *unsophisticated*, or *superstitious* when describing past practices or cultures.
- Don't use language that is sexist or that demonstrates a gender bias (e.g. use *humankind* rather than *mankind*).

Use appropriate verb tense.

- Use the past tense when describing actions or events from the past. (E.g. Caesar *died* in 44 BC.)
- Use the present tense when you are describing the contents or appearance of documents. (E.g. In his memoir *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, Caesar *describes* his seven-year military campaign against the Gauls.)
- Use the present tense when describing the words or ideas contained in modern documents, too. (E.g. In his 2009 article, Richard Belguin *analyzes* Caesar's use of rhetoric.)

Make an argument.

- Don't just describe facts or evidence found in your sources: you must also draw connections between these sources and explain the significance of the information contained within them.

Have a strong thesis statement.

- Don't just name your topic in your thesis statement. (E.g. This essay is about the rise of the Nazi party.)
- Don't just state an undisputed fact related to your topic. (E.g. the Nazi party was formed in 1920.)
- Make sure your thesis is a specific statement about your topic, one that is based on research and your analysis and interpretation of the facts. (e.g. the Nazi party was able to rise to power because it appealed to a heightened sense of nationalism in Germany, because it promised relief to economically depressed areas of the country, and because its leader was a persuasive orator).