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GUIDE TO READING PRIMARY SOURCES

What is a primary source?

Primary sources are those constructed by people who were actually there at the time of the event you are studying. For example, an 1865 newspaper account about the assassination of President Lincoln is a primary source. Primary sources may include but are not limited to: letters, journals and other items written by individuals; newspapers, magazines and other news sources; laws, statutes and regulations; and memos, reports and other records generated within organizations. A physical artifact, such as a piece of pottery excavated from an archeological site, can also be viewed as a primary source. In contrast, a secondary source is one that compiles or analyzes information about events with which the author was not directly involved. A textbook is a secondary source, as are many articles in scholarly journals.

Why is reading a primary source different from reading a secondary source?

Reading primary source materials differs significantly from reading textbooks and other secondary sources. Very often, textbooks and other secondary sources will tell the reader what is important to remember from the text, and will organize the material specifically with the student in mind as the audience. In contrast, because the author of a primary source was not thinking of college students in the future as the most important audience for his or her work, s/he did not provide a road-map to the reader to highlight what is most important. Reading a primary source therefore puts more responsibility on the reader to extract from the text what is important.

How should I approach reading a primary source?

PREPARATION: Learning is a process of hanging new information on a framework of knowledge that already exists in your mind. Before starting to read, ask yourself a couple of questions to help identify your framework.

- What do I already know about this subject?
- What do I want to get out of this reading?

WHILE READING: Try to think critically while reading a primary source. To do this, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the author saying?
- What does the author imply?

- What does the author assume?
- Is the argument valid? How does the author support the argument?

AFTER READING: Once you have read the material, take a few moments to reflect on it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Can you repeat in a concise statement what the author's main argument was and how it was supported?
- Can you extend the author's argument to other circumstances?
- How does what you read change the framework you had in mind before you started reading?
- What questions remain that you want to explore in this class?
- If you were going to start a discussion about this reading, what questions would you raise?

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