

Clueless: Using Primary Sources like a Pro

If historical writing is like doing detective work, then primary sources are like clues; you can't write history without them. You would probably end up with a wrongful conviction lawsuit on your hands if you did. Thus, learning what primary sources are and how to use them is essential.

What is a primary source?

The answer depends on your historical question. Like evidence collected from a crime scene, primary sources usually come from the times and places in which you are interested. They are materials produced by the actors whom you study, or by those who were involved in the event or topic. Primary sources allow you to construct a case—to write a persuasive account of the beliefs, motivations, and forces that defined a person, group, or event.

Types of primary sources.

Primary sources provide the evidence historians need to figure out what happened and why. As such, almost anything can be a primary source. Standard ones include: newspapers, essays, letters, diaries, government documents, magazines, speeches, autobiographies, photographs, political cartoons, recordings, oral interviews, art, novels, and films. The list goes on.

How to find primary sources.

Different sources help answer different research questions. Always keep your questions in mind when looking for sources. Here are some examples of how to do this:

- A 1923 *Time Magazine* article on Benito Mussolini could help you answer questions like “How did Americans perceive fascism during the earliest years of the interwar period?” or “Did fascism have broader support in the US prior to World War II?”
- “Principles of Political Morality” by Maximilien Robespierre could help you answer questions like “How and why did Robespierre justify terror during the French Revolution?” or “What audience was Robespierre trying to reach and why?”
- An autobiography by a political prisoner during the Argentine military dictatorship from 1976-83 could help you answer questions like “How have Argentinians remembered the Dirty War?” or “How have concentration camp survivors made sense of their experiences?”

Primary vs. Secondary Sources.

Primary sources are not secondary sources. While secondary sources cover the people or events under investigation, they are typically produced by scholars after the fact. These sources are useful when trying to find out what scholars have said about what you're studying. They can help you step into larger debates, identify broader themes and contexts, and make useful contributions. However, don't base your historical arguments on secondary sources alone. This is like deciding a guilty verdict on the opinions of others. History has enough injustice in it already.

How to use and analyze primary sources.

Once you've acquired your primary source you can begin your interrogation. Start by asking yourself the basic detective questions: who, what, when, where, how, and why?

- **Who** is the author? Who was the intended audience? What are the gender, occupation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation and ideological background of each?
- **What** kind of document is it? In what genre (government report, newspaper article, etc.) does it belong?
- **When** and **where** was it created? (Once you know these answers, you can ask related questions like “What else was going on in the time and place where the source was produced?” or “Were there other sources like this one circulating at the time?”)
- **How** was the document created? Did the process of its creation affect its content?
- **Why** was the source created? What was its intended function? (Answers to the earlier questions will give you hints regarding the document's historical significance and the author's motives.)

These questions are good starting points, but don't stop with them. Each will likely lead to more complex queries related to your argument. You could analyze the language of a source. You could compare one primary source to others from the same place and time. You could investigate the source's reception. Whatever direction you take, consider how a primary source challenges or contributes to what scholars have said about your topic. Make sure you put forward your own interpretation of the source and its significance. This is how we gain new insights about the past.

Other tips and suggestions.

- Primary sources don't always tell the truth. They never tell the whole truth. Using discretion in regards to a source's meaning and validity is crucial. Weigh the intent behind the source's creation against its content. Compare sources. Hindsight isn't always 20/20, but we do have the critical distance our actors lacked.
- Pay attention to the author's biases. These are clues to the source's context and significance. Remember: bias is not an intrinsically bad thing. All sources come from a particular viewpoint and were produced with a particular purpose in mind. Understanding the perspective of a source can be vital to making your case.
- Note interesting statements. If it offends you, seems odd, or elicits a “huh?”, then it is worth remembering. Heed the title, repetition of certain phrases or words, and recurring ideas. These could help answer your research questions—or lead to new ones.
- There is always more than one way of interpreting a source. Read critically, think creatively, and, above all, be prepared to defend your interpretation.

Analyzing primary sources is hard work. It's not easy to step into the past, even though this process is essential to historical writing. As Sherlock Holmes said, “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.” Give yourself a chance to observe them.