



Reading the World, Historically: A Closer Look at Primary Sources

We ALL practice history

Marking time is a basic way we relate to the world around us. Everyone is a historian, regardless of their feelings about history classes, history books, or even history professors. Neither boredom nor disdain will let you one the hook.¹

Do you:

collect things...save photos...observe traditions...remember anniversaries or celebrate birthdays...find yourself “in” or “out” of style ...scrapbook...keep a diary...think back to “good old days”...carry baggage from the past?



No sweatervest, no problem. Everyone with a meaningful relationship to some part of the past is a historian!

These are all ways people “mark” time. We leave our historical imprint on everything we touch. One could even say that we “write” our history, often literally, on the official records, family heirlooms, personal mementos, artwork, and even the waste we leave behind. Because all of this *stuff* is packed with data about time and place, scholars often lump it together, calling everything from photographs to census records “historical documents” or “texts”.

We live in a world full of these “texts”, both those we have made as well as those from more distant pasts. Using our senses and critical thinking we “read” these materials to discover things about the earlier times. Sometimes the information we collect is formed into narratives called “histories”. But even these histories will become only individual parts of a larger, changing history. So, from daily records to creation stories, *we produce documents in our time that will someday serve as historical records, and the histories we write today are only pieces of the larger history we will someday share with future generations*. Put simply, we all practice history all the time.

Everything is “stuck” in history

Everything takes center stage in its own historical play, simultaneously taking on supporting roles in many other historical dramas.² All materials are historical, but they are not all significant in the same ways. Age does not necessarily lead to importance, but inconspicuousness doesn't mean irrelevance, either. We must look closer. Everything has its own story; everything has a

¹ Unless you are Billy Bob Thornton, who has a phobia regarding antiques/old stuff. It's true. Look it up.

² For more on “stuck”ness or “unstuck”ness in time, see Vonnegut, Kurt. 2003. *Slaughterhouse-Five, Or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. Vintage.

“biography”. Everything is also a product or byproduct of other processes. Yesterday’s losing scratcher ticket in today’s gutter is as much a historical document as an American pioneer’s letter, Renaissance sculptures, or toilet paper from 1920. Each text has its own “life”, from its creation to its destruction, and each can be explained as a product or supporting part of other stories.

These “texts” can be “read” for the wealth of information they contain, which helps students of history develop research questions. For instance, we can ask “What is the document made of and through what process?” to reveal production methods of the time. Asking “What are the perspectives or moods which inform or limit the text? What couldn’t the creator get out of her head?” can help reveal the emotions and imagination of their creators. Asking, “Within the text what is considered right or wrong?” can give us glimpses of how an author makes arguments about ethics and morality. Asking “What couldn’t have appeared in this text or what could have appeared but didn’t?” can draw attention to the silences, absences, and things which the document left its creator unable to say.

So, how does one “read” historical “texts”?

Guides in the “Reading the World, Historically” series will explain how to decipher primary source documents - diaries, films, letters, music, literature, photographs, etc. To do so the guides will focus on three things: Content, Context, & Form. Below are a few tips to get you started.

- **Content** - “What does the document say?” Go beyond the obvious. Look deeply and pay attention to repeating, strange, or out-of-place details. Characters, words, themes, and images are all parts of content. You should try to make visible things which are obscured and learn to see the obviousness in subtlety.
- **Context** - “When and where does the document come from? What is its historical moment?” Find ways to link things to their time and place, to express the contingencies (must-have-happened-firsts) of an object’s existence. Express texts as a product of their times and also as forces which exert influence themselves.
- **Form** - “What type of thing is it?” and “How does the nature of this thing influence the information it can, or cannot, convey?” Use the faculties of scholars, artists, archivists, and curators as you catalogue documents by type. Then, use those categories to drive your investigations.