

How to Read a Primary Source

Good reading is about asking questions of your sources. Keep the following in mind when reading primary sources. Even if you believe you can't arrive at the answers, imagining possible answers will aid your comprehension. Reading primary sources requires that you use your historical imagination. This process is all about your willingness and ability to ask questions of the material, imagine possible answers, and explain your reasoning.

As a historian, you will want to ask:

- What can I know of the past based on this material?
- How can I be sure about it?
- How do I know these things?

Evaluating primary source texts: I've developed an acronym that may help guide your evaluation of primary source texts: **PAPER**.

Purpose and motives of the author

Argument and strategy she or he uses to achieve those goals

Presuppositions and values (in the text, and our own)

Epistemology (evaluating truth content)

Relate to other texts (compare and contrast)

Ask the questions that come under each of these headings.

Purpose

- Who is the author and what is her or his place in society (explain why you are justified in thinking so)?
- What could or might it be, based on the text, and why?
- What is at stake for the author in this text?
- Why do you think she or he wrote it?
- What evidence in the text tells you this?
- Does the author have a thesis? What is that thesis?

Argument

- How does the text make its case?
- What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal? How does it carry out this strategy?
- What is the intended audience of the text? How might this influence its rhetorical strategy?
- What arguments or concerns does the author respond to that are not clearly stated?
- Do you think the author is credible and reliable?

Presuppositions

- How do the ideas and values in the source differ from the ideas and values of our age?
- What presumptions and preconceptions do you as a reader bring to bear on this text? For instance, what portions of the text might you find objectionable, but which contemporaries might have found acceptable?
- How might the difference between our values and the values of the author influence the way you understand the text?

Epistemology

- How might this text support one of the arguments found in secondary sources you've read?
- What kinds of information does this text tell you without knowing it's telling you?

Relate

Now choose another of the readings, and compare the two, answering these questions:

- What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
- What major differences appear in them?
- Which do you find more reliable and credible?

Here are some additional concepts that will help you evaluate primary source texts:

Texts and documents, authors and creators:

You'll see these phrases a lot. I use the first two and the last two as synonyms. Texts are historical documents, authors their creators, and vice versa. "Texts" and "authors" are often used when discussing literature, while "documents" and "creators" are more familiar to historians.

Evaluating the veracity (truthfulness) of texts:

For the rest of this discussion, consider the example of a soldier who committed atrocities against non-combatants during wartime. Later in his life, he writes a memoir that neglects to mention his role in these atrocities, and may in fact blame them on someone else. Knowing the soldier's possible motive, we would be right to question the veracity of his account.

The credible vs. the reliable text:

- **Reliability** refers to our ability to trust the consistency of the author's account of the truth. A reliable text displays a pattern of verifiable truth-telling that tends to render the unverifiable parts of the text true. For instance, the soldier above may prove to be utterly reliable in detailing the campaigns he participated in during the war, as evidenced by corroborating records. The only gap in his reliability may be the omission of details about the atrocities he committed.
- **Credibility** refers to our ability to trust the author's account of the truth on the basis of her or his tone and reliability. An author who is inconsistently truthful -- such as the soldier in the example above -- loses credibility. There are many other ways authors undermine their credibility. Most frequently, they convey in their tone that they are not neutral (see below). For example, the soldier above may intersperse throughout his reliable account of campaign details vehement and racist attacks against his old enemy. Such attacks signal readers that he may have an interest in not portraying the past accurately, and hence may undermine his credibility, regardless of his reliability.

An author who seems quite credible may be utterly unreliable. The author who takes a measured, reasoned tone and anticipates counter-arguments may seem to be very credible, when in fact he presents us with complete fiction. Similarly, a reliable author may not always seem credible. It should also be clear that individual texts themselves may have portions that are more reliable and credible than others.

The neutral text:

We often wonder if the author of a text has an "ax to grind" which might render her or his words unreliable.

- **Neutrality** refers to the stake an author has in a text. In the example of the soldier who committed wartime atrocities, the author seems to have had a considerable stake in his memoir, which was to expunge his own guilt. In an utterly neutral document, the creator is not aware that she or he has any special stake in the construction and content of the document.
- **No texts are ever completely neutral.** People generally do not go to the trouble to record their thoughts unless they have a purpose or design which renders them invested in the process of creating the text. Some historical texts, such as birth records, may appear to be more neutral than others, because their creators seem to have had less of a stake in creating them. (For instance, the county clerk who signed several thousand birth certificates likely had less of a stake in creating an individual birth certificate than did a celebrity recording her life in a diary for future publication as a memoir.) Sometimes the stake the author has is the most interesting part of a document.

If you take these factors into account, you should be able to read and understand the historical implications of your primary source.

This page was adapted from the website by Patrick Rael, "[Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students](#)," (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 2004). www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/