

## How to Analyze a Primary Source Document

On this web site, you will analyze primary sources for yourself, rather than merely reading others' interpretations in secondary sources.

When analyzing any primary source, ask yourself seven key questions about the source.

1. Who is the author?

Who wrote or created this? Is there a single or multiple authors? An author's identity sometimes helps you answer the later questions.

2. What type of source is this?

Is it a photograph or a poem? A biography or a government document? This is a simple but crucial step because you must consider what you can expect to learn from the document.

3. What is the message of this source?

What is the author describing? What is happening in the text or image? What is the story?

4. Who is the intended audience?

Who is the author addressing? Was the source intended for private or public consumption? Identifying the audience will help you answer the next question.

5. Why was this source created?

Does the author have an agenda, a larger purpose? Is the author trying to persuade the audience? Is the document or source simply a compilation of facts, or does it include opinion, inference, or interpretation?

6. Is this source credible and accurate?

Historians must examine every source with a critical eye. What do you know about the author? Does the document make sense? Do the facts presented by the author or what you know about the time period support the thesis, statement, assertion, or story the author is conveying? Why should you trust, or distrust, this source?

7. How is this source valuable to me?

How does the source relate to other sources from the time period or along the same issue or theme? Does it support or contradict them? Does it repeat information from other sources or add new information? How relevant is the source to your topic of inquiry? Does it extensively cover your topic, or only marginally or not at all? Remember, you should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.