

## Evaluating Primary Sources

Primary sources are at the heart of what historians do. They are defined by the American Historical Association's *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* as "all forms of evidence - not just written texts, but artifacts, images, statistics, oral recollections, the built and natural environment, and many other things - that have survived as records of former times." As such, they provide the basis of any analysis we conduct and the conclusions we draw. Primary sources are not, however, absolute. No historical subject ever fully exposes itself through primary sources, and the sources that we do find and work with are subject to interpretation. This guide summarizes a basic framework developed by Dr. Mark Kishlansky that uses three different levels to evaluate primary source documents.

### Level One

The first set of questions that need to be addressed are those for which you should be able to find concrete answers. The answers to these questions will give you the basic information you need to begin the process of interpretation.

1. ***Who wrote this document?***

You need to know how this document came to be created. Written historical records were created by individuals in a specific historical setting for a particular purpose. Until you know who created the document you have read, you cannot know why it was created or what meanings its author intended to impart by creating it. Nor is it enough to simply learn the name of the author; it is equally important to learn about authors as people, what social background they came from, what position they held, to what group they belonged.

2. ***Who is the intended audience?***

Identifying the intended audience of a document will tell you much about its language, about the amount of knowledge that the writer is assuming, even sometimes about the best form for the document to take. The relationship between author and audience is one of the most basic elements of communication and one that will tell you much about the purpose of the document. Think of the difference between the audience for a novel and that for a diary, or for a law and a secret treaty. In each case, knowing the intended audience determines your view of what to expect from the document. Knowing the audience allows you to begin to ask important questions, such as, "Should I believe what I am being told?"

3. ***What is the story line?***

The final "Level One" question has to do with the content of the document. You now know enough about it in a general way to pay attention to what it actually says. To learn the story line, you must take some notes while you are reading and underline or highlight important places in your text. The more often you ask yourself, "What is going on here?" the easier it will be to find out. No matter how obscure a document appears at first, deliberate attention to the story line will allow you to focus your reading.

### Level Two

Now that you know who wrote the document, to whom it is addressed, and what it is about, you can begin to try to understand it. Since your goal is to learn what this document means, you now want to study it from a more detached point of view, to be less accepting of "facts" and more critical in the questions you pose.

1. ***Why was this document written?***

Everything is written for a reason. You make notes to yourself to remember, you send cards to celebrate and sympathize, you correspond to convey or request information. The documents

that historians traditionally study are more likely to have been written for public rather than private purposes, but not always. Understanding the purpose of a historical document is critical to analyzing the strategies that the author employs within it. A document intended to convince will employ logic; a document intended to entertain will employ fancy; a document attempting to motivate will employ emotional appeals. In order to find these strategies, you must know what purpose the document was intended to serve.

2. ***What type of document is this?***

The form of the document is vital to its purpose. You would expect a telephone book to be alphabetized, a poem to be in meter, and a work of philosophy to be in prose. The form or genre in which a document appears is always carefully chosen. Genre contains its own conventions, which fulfill the expectations of author and audience. A prose map of how one travels from Chicago to Boston might be as effective as a conventional map, but it would not allow for much of the incidental information that a conventional map contains and would be much harder to consult. A map in poetry would be mind-boggling!

3. ***What are the basic assumptions made in this document?***

All documents make assumptions that are bound up with their intended audience, with the form in which they are written, and with their purpose. Some of these assumptions are so integral to the document that they are left unsaid, others are so important to establish that they form a part of the central argument.

### Level Three

In Level Three, you will exercise your critical imagination, probing the materials and developing your own assessment of its value. "Level Three" questions will not always have definite answers.

1. ***Can I believe this document?***

To be successful, a document designed to persuade, to recount events, or to motivate people to action must be believable to its audience. For the critical historical reader, it is that very believability that must be examined. Every author has a point of view, and exposing the assumptions of the document is an essential task for the reader. You must treat all claims skeptically. One question you certainly want to ask is, "Is this a likely story?"

2. ***What can I learn about the society that produced this document?***

All documents unintentionally reveal things that are embedded in the very language, structure, and assumptions of the document that can tell you the most about the historical period or event that you are studying.

3. ***What does this document mean to me?***

So What? Other than for the practical purpose of passing your exams and the course, why should you be concerned with historical documents? What can you learn from them? Only you can answer those questions. But you will not be able to answer them until you have asked them. You should demand the meaning of each document you read: what it meant to the historical actors – authors, audience, and society – and what it means to your own society.

#### Sources:

American Historical Association, *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct*, <http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/professionalstandards.cfm>.

Mark A. Kishlansky, "How to Read a Document," in *Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization*, Volume II: From 1600 to the Present. Seventh Ed. (New York: Longman Publishers, 2008), xiii-xxii.