

## Reading and Interpreting Primary Sources

Primary sources are sources that were created *during* the historical period that you are studying. Just about anything that existed or was created during that time period can count as a primary source — a speech, census records, a newspaper, a letter, a diary entry, a song, a painting, a photograph, a film, an article of clothing, a building, a landscape, etc. Primary sources are documents, objects, and other sources that provide us with a **first-hand account** of what life was like in the past.

Because they are first-hand accounts of life in the past, created during the time period that you are interested in, primary sources provide you with windows into the past — a chance to catch a glimpse at the world you're trying to understand through the words, pictures, artwork, and objects of the people who lived in it. This window is especially important for historians because, unlike other scholars who study people and societies such as psychologists, sociologists, or anthropologists, historians can't use direct observation and experimentation to *prove* their arguments — at least not until the time machine is invented! Instead, historians must rely on the records left behind by the people we're trying to understand.

Of course you could learn about the past by reading your textbook or the conclusions of other historians and reading those secondary sources can be important, but reading secondary texts is no substitute for immersing yourself in the first-hand accounts of primary sources. When you read a secondary source, you are essentially taking someone else's word for what happened and trusting them to approach the subject objectively, interpret the evidence thoughtfully, and report their findings in interesting and appropriate ways. But you can never know whether what that other person wrote about the past is valid, accurate, or thoughtful unless you've explored the evidence for yourself.

In short, primary sources allow you to be your own historical detective, piecing together the puzzle of the past by using materials created by the people who lived it. When you start reading primary sources, you stop just *learning* history and start *doing* history. It can be a challenging task, but in the end you'll find that it's much more rewarding and interesting than just passively accepting the conclusions of others.

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/745>

## **Interpreting your source:**

Go through the following steps, answering any questions as completely as possible using the primary source provided.

### **Step 1: Scan the document.**

Look over the source - do not write anything down yet - just look. Take time to note different things about the how the source looks, feels, makes you feel, and any clues to what the source may be.

### **Step 2: Transcribe.**

What does the source say?

What kind of source is it?

Who created the source?

When was the source produced?

### **Step 3: Interpret.**

What does the source mean?

What do we know about the historical context of this source?

Why was this source created?

### **Step 4: Analyze.**

What is implied by this source?

What factual information is this source giving me?

What opinions are related to this source?

What is surprising about this source?

What do I not understand about this source?

### **Step 5: Synthesize.**

How does it fit in with my research?

What do you believe and disbelieve about this source?

What new questions do I now have after looking at this source?