

His 199: Using primary sources in history

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In a history class, you will read two main types of materials: primary sources and secondary sources. **Primary sources** form the “raw data” of history, and include things like government documents, speeches, memoirs, diary entries, newspaper and magazine articles, and eyewitness accounts of events. Most of the primary sources we will be looking at were created at the time of the event being described, and they provide historians with a window into the past. **Secondary sources** are books and articles written by historians based on the primary sources, and incorporate their own arguments and interpretations of the events. You should not approach these two types of readings in the same way, nor should you read them the same way you might read a textbook, where your goal is to read for information.

Reading primary source documents

There are a number of things you need to think about to use primary sources effectively. Each of these points has a space on the accompanying chart for you to fill in as you work through the documents.

- 1) *What type of source is this?* Historians use lots of different sources, and you need to understand what type of source you are looking at to get the most out of it. You should note the kind of source you are looking at. Some examples of documents you will see in this class: diary entries, secret government reports, memoirs, political speeches, transcripts of conversations, newspaper and magazine articles, police reports, and charts and graphs. These sources have very different audiences and purposes, which will be discussed below.
- 2) *Who is the author and why is this person historically significant?* Many of the documents we will examine are written by well-known historical figures, while others are written by people you may not have heard of before. You should note not only the name of the author, but also some identifying information, if available. This will help you to assess the point of view of the author. For example, you might be asked to examine a number of different early Cold War documents, such as a memo by the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Nikolai Novikov, on US policy in the early Cold War, and American diplomat George Kennan’s report on Soviet policy written during the same period. Why is it important to keep in mind each author’s official position? The fact that Novikov is a Soviet diplomat provides a useful balance to the American documents, and is a signal to you as a reader that his perspective is going to be different from that of the American officials. You might also examine a speech by Senator Joseph McCarthy. You will learn in class that McCarthy is known for his drive to root all communist influence out of American government in the early 1950s. You should keep this in mind as you read the document, as it tells you something about McCarthy’s perspective as an author.
- 3) *When is the document written?* Knowing the date of the document will help you to place it in the chronology of the course. However, when you think about the date, go beyond noting simply the month and year. Where does this document fit into the larger chronological scope of the class? For example, if you look at a document on the Vietnam War, think about how the date of production fits into what you know about how the war changed over time: was it produced at the beginning of the conflict or near the end? This will help you to place each individual document into its larger historical context.

These first three questions ask you to look for basic factual information about the document, the “who, what, where and when.” The next group of questions ask you to go a step farther, to think about the “hows and whys” of history. This will require you to think more deeply about the sources, the message of the authors, and how these documents fit into the larger themes of the course. This is where the interesting work begins!

- 4) *Who is the author’s intended audience and what is the author’s purpose for writing?* These two questions are closely related, and to answer them you need to have thought about the questions above. Many of the documents you will read were written to persuade someone to do something: perhaps to convince the president to support a particular policy, to encourage the American people to vote for a particular candidate, or to win the public’s support for a movement for reform, such as civil rights. Once you identify the target audience, think about why the author chooses to address them. What does the author hope to convince them to do?
- 5) *What are the key points of the author’s argument?* This is where you should begin to evaluate the body of the document. How does the author structure the argument? What does the author use as supporting evidence? You will find, for example, that in the presidential speeches historical references are often used to make a point. Think about how the speechwriter uses these references to reach the American people with a specific message.
- 6) *What is the value of this document to you as a student of history?* This is the “what’s the point” question, or, at its most fundamental level, why is your professor making you read this particular document? Why is it so important? Think about how this document sheds light on a particular event you have discussed in class or a course theme. Many of these documents, when read together, give conflicting opinions about events. How does this help us to develop a more complex view of historical events and debates?

Some of the documents you are assigned for class will be discussed in more depth than others, and it may not be possible to write a long answer to each of the above questions for every document. But if you keep these six points in mind, along with the specific details that your individual professor asks you to focus on, you should have a good grasp of the primary documents you need to read for History 199.

Using visual primary sources

As students of the recent past we are lucky to have a whole array of visual sources available, including photographs, television shows, advertisements, movies, and documentaries. Be careful not to “tune out” these rich historical documents; instead, “read” them as you would a print source. You can ask many of the same questions: when was the film or commercial you are viewing produced? How does it reflect the concerns of Americans at that particular time? If it is a documentary or informational film, such as the classic 1951 “Duck and Cover” civil defense film, think about who produced it and what message they hoped to convey to their target audience. You can then apply these critical thinking skills to the visual media that we encounter today!