

Analyzing Primary Documents

HIPP Analysis

Primary documents enable historians to get as close as possible to what actually happened during an historical event or time period. A primary source reflects the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer. Primary documents preserve the memory of past events. Examples include government records, letters, speeches, diaries, merchants' account books, literature, pictures, etc. However, no single primary source gives historians a complete or totally unbiased picture. Each has its perspective, value, and limitations. It is imperative to critically analyze primary documents in order to gain a useful and coherent picture of the past.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Who created the source? What do you know about the author? Where and when was the source produced? What do you know about the time period in which the document was produced? How might this information affect the meaning of the source? Why is the source important? To what broad historical theme(s) does the source relate?

Sentence starters: "At the same time...", "Coincided with...", "Influenced the...", "Related to...", "Came as a result of..."

INTENDED AUDIENCE

For whom was the source created and how might this affect the reliability of the source?

Sentence starters: "Sought to address...", "Written for...", "Resonated with...", "Tried to persuade...", "Targeted..."

PURPOSE

Why was this source produced at the time it was produced? How might this information affect the meaning of the source?

Sentence starters: "Created with the intention to...", "The intent was...", "Attempted to..."

POINT OF VIEW

What is the author's point of view? What point is the source trying to convey? Analyze the author's gender, social background, economic status, political persuasion, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and race. How does the author's point of view affect his reliability?

Sentence starters: "From the perspective of...", "May present a biased point of view because...", "Was a ... therefore, his/her writing was influenced by..."