

How to Read Primary Sources

Good reading is about asking questions of your sources. Even if you believe you can't arrive at the answers, imagining possible answers will aid your comprehension. Reading primary sources requires that you use your historical imagination. This process is all about your willingness and ability to ask questions of the material, imagine possible answers, and explain your reasoning.

What is the **PURPOSE** of the text?

- Who is the author and what is her or his place in society? What could or might it be, based on the text, and why?
- What is at stake for the author in this text? Why do you think she or he wrote it? What evidence in the text tells you this?
- Does the author have a thesis? What is that thesis?

Does the text make an explicit or implicit **ARGUMENT**?

- How does the text make its case?
- What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal? How does it carry out this strategy?
- What is the intended audience of the text? How might this influence its rhetorical strategy?
- What arguments or concerns does the author respond to that are not clearly stated?
- Do you think the author is credible and reliable?

What are the authors' assumptions or **PRESUPPOSITIONS**? And yours?

- What presumptions and preconceptions do you as a reader bring to bear on this text? For instance, what portions of the text might you find objectionable, but which contemporaries might have found acceptable?
- How might the difference between our values and the values of the author influence the way you understand the text?

What kind of **EVIDENCE** can you glean from this text?

- How might this text support one of the arguments found in secondary sources you've read?
- What kinds of information what does this text tell you without knowing its telling you?

What is its **RELEVANCE** to other readings you've done in the field? Other texts?

- Compare this with another primary source relevant to this topic.
- What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
- What major differences appear in them? Which do you find more credible?