

Analyzing and Interpreting Primary Sources

Adapted from Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 8th Edition (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015), 13, 31-35.

Primary sources are the basic materials of the historian. Primary sources are things—any thing—produced by people or groups directly involved in an event of history which we wish to understand. Primary sources are, therefore, the testimonials of people who were either participants or witnesses to those events.

When using a primary source, it is important to ask questions of the source itself. Do not simply rely on another historian's analysis and interpretation of the source. The purpose of writing history is to develop your own interpretation and narrative based on the evidence you have assembled.

The task of historians is to accurately and objectively extract historical truth from the available sources. But primary sources do not always tell the truth. If every source always told the truth, then our work as historians would be much easier—if not redundant. Primary sources, like witnesses in a murder case, do not always tell the truth and for a variety different reasons.

1. Sometimes primary sources intentionally mislead, fabricating evidence to promote a specific ideological, philosophical, or political agenda.
2. Sometimes primary sources lie by omission, leaving out bits of information that are crucial to interpreting the event.
3. Sometimes primary sources mislead unintentionally because the author was not aware of all of the facts, misinterpreted the facts, or was misinformed.
4. Almost all primary sources contain some sort of bias—specific interests and concerns of an author—in that they contain certain unstated assumptions.
5. Primary sources may not only reflect the interests and concerns of their authors, but they also may contain information about the cultural and historical contexts in which these sources were written.
6. Primary sources that refer to one and the same event may contain conflicting information.

As a result, one of the challenges historians face in writing about history is evaluating the reliability and usefulness of their sources.

Historians do not take the evidence provided by their primary sources at face value. Like good detectives or investigators, they must evaluate the evidence to get at the truth of an event. They must, therefore, approach primary sources both analytically and critically. When you are working with primary sources, you should always ask the following questions:

- Who is the author?
- When was the source composed?
- Who was the intended audience?

- What is the purpose of the source? (Is it prescriptive or descriptive?)
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- How does the author's gender and socioeconomic class or status compare to the people about whom he or she is writing?
- What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?
- What biases are detectable in the source?
- Was the original text commissioned by anyone or published by a press with a particular viewpoint?
- How do other contemporary sources compare against this one?
- Why did the author write the source?

The following is an example of how an historian might evaluate a primary source.

In the summer of 1925 a high school history teacher named John Thomas Scopes was arrested in Dayton, Tennessee, for violating the Butler Act, a state law prohibiting the teaching of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools. At the time, the issue of Scopes' guilt or innocence quickly faded into the background. Instead, the public's deep fascination with the trial—which was quickly dubbed the “trial of the century”—was attributable to the larger-than-life personalities and reputations of the two lead attorneys: Clarence Darrow, the well-known champion of unpopular civil liberties causes, for the defense; and William Jennings Bryan, the fundamentalist “great commoner” and three-time Democratic presidential candidate, for the prosecution. On the seventh day of the trial, the defense, in an unexpected and unprecedented move, called Bryan to the stand as an “expert witness” on the Bible. Astonishingly, Bryan agreed to testify.

Example: Imagine that you have been given the following assignment:

The following is an excerpt from the transcript of the seventh day of the Scopes trial in July 1925, during which Darrow questioned Bryan about the creation of the earth. Your assignment is to write a short paper analyzing the interaction between Bryan and Darrow and evaluating the impact of their beliefs and personalities on the trial.

Darrow: Do you think the earth was made in six days?

Bryan: Not six days of twenty-four hours.

Darrow: Doesn't it [the Bible] say so?

Bryan: No sir.

Prosecuting attorney A. Thomas Stewart: I want to interpose another objection. What is the purpose of this examination?

Bryan: The purpose is to cast ridicule on everybody who believes in the Bible, and I am perfectly willing that the world shall know that these gentlemen have no other purpose than ridiculing every Christian who believes in the Bible.

Darrow: We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States and you know it, and that is all....

Bryan: ...I am simply trying to protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States! (Prolonged applause.) I want the papers to know I am not afraid to get on the stand in front of him and let him do his worst! I want the world to know! (Prolonged applause.)

Although this document is relatively short, an effective analysis would include several steps.

1. Examine the nature of the source. In analyzing any document, you should begin by asking questions about the nature of the source.

- When was this source created, and why?
- What kinds of information can be found in a trial transcript?
- Does the transcript record anything other than dialogue?

For other kinds of documents, you might ask questions about the author and his or her intended audience (see above).

2. Focus your analysis on the assignment. Since the assignment focuses on Darrow and Bryan, you then need to think about what the transcript can tell you about their personalities, their understanding of the meaning of the trial, and their relationship to each other.

The assignment first asks you to analyze the interaction between Bryan and Darrow.

- How does Darrow see Bryan? Is the tone of his questioning neutral? Respectful? Hostile? What adjectives does he use to characterize Bryan and his views?
- How does Bryan see Darrow? Is the tone of his questioning neutral? Respectful? Hostile? What adjectives does he use to characterize Darrow and his views?

The assignment then asks you to evaluate the impact of their beliefs and personalities on the trial.

- What can we determine from the transcript about the demeanor and behavior of Bryan and Darrow?
- What does Darrow see as the central issue of the trial?
- What does Bryan see as the central issue?
- Whom does Bryan see as his audience? Is he speaking to the judge? To the audience in the courtroom? To a wider audience?
- To who is Darrow speaking? Is he addressing his questions primarily to Bryan, or to a wider audience?

3. Consider what the document reveals about the wider historical context. Although the interaction between Bryan and Darrow is the dominant aspect of this text, the document also

provides some hints about what those who witnessed their confrontation thought about it, which could provides us with a view into the norms of American society in 1925.

- How does the audience in the courtroom react to the testimony? Do they support Bryan or Darrow?
- What does the audience's response suggest about the prevailing attitude toward evolution in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925?
- Why does attorney Thomas Stewart object to the line of questioning taken by Darrow? Why might he see this entire line of questioning as irrelevant?

Answering these questions will help you think about and analyze the source. Then you will need to organize your answers into an essay. Keep in mind that a source analysis is not a summary. Rather, a single-source analysis, like any other history paper, should focus on a thesis. The essay should include an introduction; several body paragraphs that present the evidence that supports your thesis; and a conclusion.