

2.b.

How to Read a Primary Source

Good reading is about asking questions of your sources. Keep the following in mind when reading primary 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*.

I. Evaluating primary source texts: I've developed an acronym that may help guide your evaluation of primary source texts: PAPER.

- C Purpose of the author in preparing the document
- C Argument and strategy she or he uses to achieve those goals
- C Presuppositions and values (in the text, and our own)
- C Epistemology (evaluating truth content)
- C Relate to other texts (compare and contrast)

Purpose

- C Who is the author and what is her or his place in society (explain why you are justified in thinking so)? What could or might it be, based on the text, and why?
 - Why did the author prepare the document? What was the occasion for its creation?
- C 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?
- C Does the author have a thesis? What — in one sentence — is that thesis?

Argument

- C What is the text trying to do? How does the text make its case? What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal? How does it carry out this strategy?
- C What is the intended audience of the text? How might this influence its rhetorical strategy? Cite specific examples.
- C What arguments or concerns does the author respond to that are *not* clearly stated? Provide at least one example of a point at which the author seems to be refuting a position never clearly stated. Explain what you think this position may be in detail, and why you think it.

- C Do you think the author is credible and reliable? Use at least one specific example to explain why. Make sure to explain the principle of rhetoric or logic that makes this passage credible.

Presuppositions

- C How do the ideas and values in the source differ from the ideas and values of our age? Offer two specific examples.
- C What presumptions and preconceptions do we as readers bring to bear on this text? For instance, what portions of the text might we find objectionable, but which contemporaries might have found acceptable. State the values we hold on that subject, and the values expressed in the text. Cite at least one specific example.
- C How might the difference between our values and the values of the author influence the way we understand the text? Explain how such a difference in values might lead us to misinterpret the text, or understand it in a way contemporaries would not have. Offer at least one specific example.

Epistemology

- C How might this text support one of the arguments found in secondary sources we've read? Choose a paragraph anywhere in a secondary source we've read, state where this text might be an appropriate footnote (cite page and paragraph), and explain why.
- C What kinds of information does this text reveal that it does not seem concerned with revealing? (In other words, what does it tell us without *knowing* it's telling us?)
- C Offer one claim from the text which is the author's interpretation. Now offer one example of a historical "fact" (something that is absolutely indisputable) that we can learn from this text (this need not be the author's words).

Relate: Now choose another of the readings, and compare the two, answering these questions:

- C What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
- C What major differences appear in them?
- C Which do you find more reliable and credible?

II. Here are some additional concepts that will help you evaluate primary source texts:

- A. Texts and documents, authors and creators: You'll see these phrases a lot. I use the first two and the last two as synonyms. Texts are historical documents, authors their creators, and vice versa. "Texts" and "authors" are often used when discussing literature, while "documents" and "creators" are more familiar to historians.
- B. Evaluating the veracity (truthfulness) of texts: For the rest of this discussion, consider the example of a soldier who committed atrocities against non-combatants during wartime. Later in his life, he writes a memoir that neglects to mention his role in these atrocities, and may in fact blame them on someone else. Knowing the soldier's possible motive, we would be right to question the veracity of his account.

C. The credible vs. the reliable text:

1. *Reliability* refers to our ability to trust the consistency of the author's account of the truth. A reliable text displays a pattern of *verifiable* truth-telling that tends to render the unverifiable parts of the text true. For instance, the soldier above may prove to be utterly reliable in detailing the campaigns he participated in during the war, as evidenced by corroborating records. The only gap in his reliability may be the omission of details about the atrocities he committed.
2. *Credibility* refers to our ability to trust the author's account of the truth on the basis of her or his tone and reliability. An author who is inconsistently truthful -- such as the soldier in the example above -- loses credibility. There are many other ways authors undermine their credibility. Most frequently, they convey in their tone that they are not neutral (see below). For example, the soldier above may intersperse throughout his reliable account of campaign details vehement and racist attacks against his old enemy. Such attacks signal readers that he may have an interest in not portraying the past accurately, and hence may undermine his credibility, regardless of his reliability.
3. An author who seems quite credible may be utterly unreliable. The author who takes a measured, reasoned tone and anticipates counter-arguments may seem to be very credible, when in fact he presents us with complete balderdash. Similarly, a reliable author may not always seem credible. It should also be clear that individual texts themselves may have portions that are more reliable and credible than others.

D. The objective vs. the neutral text: We often wonder if the author of a text has an "ax to grind" which might render her or his words unreliable.

1. *Neutrality* refers to the stake an author has in a text. In the example of the soldier who committed wartime atrocities, the author seems to have had a considerable stake in his memoir, which was to expunge his own guilt. In an utterly neutral document, the creator is not aware that she or he has any special stake in the construction and content of the document. Very few texts are ever completely neutral. People generally do not go to the trouble to record their thoughts unless they have a purpose or design which renders them invested in the process of creating the text. Some historical texts, such as birth records, may appear to be more neutral than others, because their creators seem to have had less of a stake in creating them. (For instance, the county clerk who signed several thousand birth certificates likely had less of a stake in creating an individual birth certificate than did a celebrity recording her life in a diary for future publication as a memoir.)
2. *Objectivity* refers to an author's ability to convey the truth free of underlying values, cultural presuppositions, and biases. Many scholars argue that no text is or ever can be completely objective, for all texts are the products of the culture in which their authors lived. Many authors pretend to objectivity when they might better seek for neutrality. The author who claims to be free of bias and presupposition should be treated with suspicion: no one is free of their values. The credible author acknowledges and expresses those values so that they may be accounted for in the text where they appear.

- E. Epistemology: a fancy word for a straight-forward concept. “Epistemology” is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge. How do you know what you know? What is the truth, and how is it determined? For historians who read primary sources, the question becomes: what can I know of the past based on this text, how sure can I be about it, and how do I know these things?
1. This can be an extremely difficult question. Ultimately, we cannot know anything with complete assurance, because even our senses may fail us. Yet we can conclude, with reasonable accuracy, that some things are more likely to be true than others (for instance, it is more likely that the sun will rise tomorrow than that a human will learn to fly without wings or other support). Your task as a historian is to make *and justify* decisions about the relative veracity of historical texts, and portions of them. To do this, you need a solid command of the principles of sound reasoning.