Study Aids - Reading Primary Sources

The reading of primary sources is one of the most challenging and exciting tasks of the historian and the student. Sources provide our means of access to the past and are the raw materials out of which history is made. This study aid (and its companion on reading secondary works) are designed to offer helpful suggestions and advice about how to read the two different kinds of sources: primary sources and secondary works. Primary sources are documents, objects, images, or traces of the past which come from the era being studied. Each kind of source presents its own challenges and requires a slightly different method of thinking and study. The information below will provide some practical steps to improving your reading of sources.

Regardless of what you are reading, the important thing to remember is to be actively engaged with the text. You can sit in front of a book for hours, even underline large amounts of the text, and still not absorb it or understand it. The best way to read is to also take notes at the same time. By writing down the information, you force yourself to think about it and organize it. This writing process will focus your attention and also help you retain information.

How to Read a PRIMARY SOURCE: A List of Questions

Good reading is about asking questions of your sources. Keep the following questions in mind when reading primary sources. Even if you believe you can't arrive at the answers, imagining possible answers will aid your comprehension.

1. What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
2. What major differences appear in them?
3. What values and fundamental assumptions underlie their content?
4. What is the author's place in society? Even if I don't know her or his place in society, what could it be, based on the text?
5. What is "at stake" for the author to be credible? Is the author neutral towards the subject? Is the author biased? What evidence supports you contentions?
6. What in the text can I consider historical "fact"? What can I consider the author's "interpretation"? What can I actually know for sure about the past based on the text?
7. If I were a contemporary of the author, how might I react to the text? Would I be sympathetic? Antagonistic? How might my reaction to the text change depending upon my place in society?
8. How do the ideas and values in the sources differ from the ideas and values of my age?
9. What are my own preconceptions and assumptions regarding the subject of the source? How do they influence the way I read and evaluate the text?
10. How might a scholar use this text to support her or his argument? What kinds of argument might this text support?
11. What problems might a scholar encounter in using this source? Does the source represent a common experience or a unique circumstances?
12. If a historian used this source, what sorts of criticism might other historians make?
13. Of the arguments I have read in secondary sources, which might this text support? Which might it undermine?
Once you have considered these questions in relation to your primary source, you may also want to think about whether that source has any distinctive value as evidence-proof. If that source can be used to support a point in an argument you wish to make very strongly or if it can be used to prove something for which there is little other evidence, you should take special note of it. Although all evidence from the past is useful, some may be more useful to you at this particular time.

Close-Reading and Taking Exams: In one form or another, history exams often ask students to display their knowledge of primary sources. They can be examples illustrating larger trends explained in lecture, or exercises in analysis to demonstrate the ability to think historically. When reading primary sources remember that distilling them into examples is very important and so your notes should reflect this goal. For more information, see the Taking Exams page.

This study aid adapted from Prof. Betty Dessants, who formulated the initial version of its text.