

Reading primary sources: An introduction for students

BY KATHRYN WALBERT

Primary sources are sources that were created *during* the historical period that you are studying. Just about anything that existed or was created during that time period can count as a primary source — a speech, census records, a newspaper, a letter, a diary entry, a song, a painting, a photograph, a film, an article of clothing, a building, a landscape, etc. Primary sources are documents, objects, and other sources that provide us with a **first-hand account** of what life was like in the past.

Determining what is a primary source and what isn't can get tricky — what do you do, for example, with a recent recording of your aunt talking about her experiences during the Civil Rights Movement? It wasn't created at the time, but it's still a first-hand account. Eyewitness accounts like oral history interviews and memoirs or autobiographies, even those recorded recently, are considered primary sources because the *memories* that eyewitnesses reveal in those sources were created in that historical time period, even if those memories were not talked about or formally recorded until much later.

It can get even trickier. The movie *Gone With The Wind* is not a primary source about the Civil War and Reconstruction, even though it is a movie *about* that time period. It wasn't created during that time period *and* it is purely a work of fiction and therefore it can't provide us with any credible information about that era. It could, however, be used as a primary source for the Great Depression since the movie and the book on which it was based were both produced during that period. A fictional film produced in 1930s can tell us nothing credible about the 1860s, but it could certainly tell us a lot about what people were interested in during the 1930s — their fantasy world, their dreams, their view of history, and their tastes in film. If you were writing a paper about American culture in the Depression, this would be an excellent primary source, but for a paper about slavery, it would be horrible!

Why bother reading primary sources anyway?

Because they are first-hand accounts of life in the past, created during the time period that you are interested in, primary sources provide you with windows into the past — a chance to catch a glimpse at the world you're trying to understand through the words, pictures, artwork, and objects of the people who lived in it. This window is especially important for historians because, unlike other scholars who study people and societies such as psychologists, sociologists, or anthropologists, historians can't use direct observation and experimentation to *prove* their arguments — at least not until the time machine is invented! Instead, historians must rely on the records left behind by the people we're trying to understand.

Of course you could learn about the past by reading your textbook or the conclusions of other historians and reading those secondary sources can be important, but reading secondary texts is no substitute for immersing yourself in the first-hand accounts of primary sources. When you read a secondary source, you are essentially taking someone else's word for what happened and trusting them to approach the subject objectively, interpret the evidence thoughtfully, and report their findings in interesting and appropriate ways. But you can never know whether what that other person wrote about the past is valid, accurate, or thoughtful unless you've explored the evidence for yourself.

In short, primary sources allow you to be your own historical detective, piecing together the puzzle of the past by using materials created by the people who lived it. When you start reading primary sources, you stop just *learning* history and start *doing* history. It can be a challenging task, but in the end you'll find that it's much more rewarding and interesting than just passively accepting the conclusions of others.

So how do I approach primary sources?

In order to fully understand a primary source, you'll want to identify it, contextualize it, explore it, analyze it, and evaluate it. The questions below will help you do all of those things, and understand *why* it's so important to do them.

1. IDENTIFY THE SOURCE

What is the nature of the source?

You'll want to know what kind of source it is — a newspaper, an oral history account, a diary entry, a government document, etc. — because different kinds of sources must be considered differently. For example, you might think about a *description* of a Civil War camp differently than you would think about a *photograph* of one, or you might have different questions about census data regarding poverty in the 1930s than you would about oral history interviews with people who were poor during the Depression. Knowing that type of source you're dealing with can help you start to think about appropriate questions.

Who created this source, and what do I know about him/her/them?

Knowing something about who created the source you're using can help you determine what biases they might have had, what their relationship to the things they described in the source might have been, and whether or not this source should be considered credible. Keep in mind that someone doesn't have to be famous or need to have played a dramatic role in history to be a credible source — in terms of understanding the experience of World War I, for example, the writings of a regular soldier in the trenches may be as valuable or even much more so than the recollections of President Wilson or a general.

Knowing who wrote the source can also help you figure out the angle or perspective that the source will convey. For example, the description of a Revolutionary War battle might be very different if it was written by a soldier in the Continental Army, by George Washington himself, by a British soldier, or by an American loyalist. You might wonder different things about the account depending on who wrote it, so knowing the author would definitely help you start to ask the right questions.

When was the source produced?

Knowing when the source was produced can help you start to put it into historical perspective. A discussion of women's rights in America, for example, would obviously be very different in the 1820s (one hundred years before women could vote), the 1920s (when women first got the vote), the 1970s (when the feminist movement was thriving and the Equal Rights Amendment was debated), and 2004. If you don't know when a source was written, you can't start to put it into its historical context and understand how it connects to historical events.

If you're using a first-hand account that was written some time after the events that it describes, you might also take the passage of time into account in your later analysis. For example, you might view the diary of a settler moving west in the 1870s that was written during her travels in a different way than you would view the memoirs of that same settler written fifty years later for her grandchildren.

Where was the source produced?

Just as it is important to situate the source in time, it's also important to identify the place where the source was produced. If you found an editorial in a newspaper discussing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, you would want to know where the newspaper was published — a newspaper from Montgomery might be considered very differently from one published in Boston, Massachusetts, Mobile, Alabama, or Washington, D.C.

2. CONTEXTUALIZE THE SOURCE

What do you know about the historical context for this source?

Once you know when, where, and by whom the source was created, you can start to place it in its *historical context*. What was going on in the place and time that this source was created? What significant local, regional, or national events might this source relate to? You can look for information about the historical context for your sources in many places. Sometimes sources are packaged along with descriptive information that can help you

contextualize them — this is often true of web-based collections of resources in which the website compiler might provide you with a written introduction to the sources to help you place them in context. Similarly, libraries and archives often provide collection descriptions or finding aids for their materials that can provide context. You can also consult secondary sources to learn more about the time and place in which the source was created.

What do I know about how the creator of this source fits into that historical context?

Once you know the historical context of the source, you'll want to think further about the person(s) who created the source. How were they connected to that historical context? If it's a source about the Civil Rights Movement, for example, you may have already figured out the person's location, their race, their sex, and some other basic information — but what do you know about his connection to the Movement? Was he an activist? Was he opposed? Was he involved in the race riot that he describes in the source and, if so, what was his role? Figuring out how this person fit into their historical context, individually, can help you think more critically and creatively about what he or she had to say.

Why did the person who created the source do so?

You'll also want to know the motivations of the person who wrote the source, which may be easier to guess after you know their historical context. Do you think this source was created as a private document, or was it intended for others to view? How do you know that? If there was an intended audience, who was that audience? Family? The general public? "Future generations?" What did the creator of the source intend for that audience to get out of it? Was she trying to persuade people to a particular point of view? Was she simply recording daily events? Was she intentionally trying to deceive the audience? Was she trying to make herself look good?

3. EXPLORE THE SOURCE

What factual information is conveyed in this source?

Some sources can provide us with valuable factual information about what happened in the past. As you read, think about what information in the source is presented as fact. But, of course, things that are presented as fact are not always accurate, so you will also want to think about whether the facts presented in the source can be verified. Where else might you look to check and make sure that those facts are accurate? How will you decide whether you believe this person's accounting of the facts to be accurate?

What opinions are related in this source?

Since primary sources are first-hand accounts that often convey only a single person's point of view, they will likely contain a fair bit of opinion. Identify sections of the source that seem to be opinion and ask yourself why the creator of the source might hold that opinion. Who else might share that opinion? Is it an opinion that you find compelling? Why or why not?

What is implied or conveyed unintentionally in the source?

People don't always spell out what they are thinking when they write a letter, a diary entry, or a newspaper column. Intentionally or unintentionally, there may be ambiguities or vagueness in the source — places that require the reader to "fill in the blanks" and use the author's tone, rhetorical strategies, and attitude to make inferences about meanings that are not spelled out. For example, in a letter to the editor in a newspaper criticizing a particular politician, the author may never spell out his or her beliefs about the role of government or how the government should handle particular kinds of issues, but based on their criticisms, you can probably infer or make an educated guess about those questions.

What is not said in this source?

Sometimes what *isn't* said in a source can be as interesting as what is said. Ask yourself, what did I expect to have seen here that I didn't see? For example, it would seem odd to find a letter written the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor that didn't mention that event — you might wonder, "Why didn't this person write about the Pearl Harbor attack? Did she not know about it? Was it not important to her or to her audience? Was it so much on everyone's mind that she didn't feel a need to write about it?" You may have no good answers to these questions, but thinking about what seems missing can help you imagine the writer's frame of mind and motivations a bit more clearly.

What is surprising or interesting about the source?

Once you know what is and isn't in the source, take a minute to think about what was interesting or surprising. What did you learn that you didn't know before? What details were interesting to you? Was the perspective revealed by this source one that you hadn't thought about before? What did you not expect that you found here — and what *did* you expect that wasn't here after all?

What do I not understand in this source?

Are there words that were unclear to you? Are there events or people referred to that you aren't familiar with? Does anything not make sense? Think about where you might go to clarify these issues so that you can understand the source fully. You might look up unfamiliar vocabulary in the dictionary or do an online search to find some basic historical information about an event that the source writer described. Doing these simple things can help you make sure that you get the most out of each source.

4. ANALYZE THE SOURCE

How does the creator of the source convey information and make his/her point?

Sometimes it's important to not only think about what the author said, but how he said it. What strategies did the writer/artist/etc. use to convey information? In the case of written or oral sources, did he use humor? Sarcasm? An appeal to patriotism? Guilt? An appeal to religious principles? Logical arguments? Tugging on heartstrings?

How is the world described in the source different from my world?

Think about the time and place in which this source was created. What did the author and people around her believe? What was their world like? What significant differences are there between that world and your world today? How would you feel if you were in the author's shoes? What would be reasonable to expect of the author, given his or her historical context?

How might others at the time have reacted to this source?

Would the ideas and perspective revealed by this source have been universally accepted by others? Would certain individuals or groups have disagreed with the account in this source? Why or why not? Imagine an individual who might have disagreed with something in this source — how would that person's account be different? What might they convey in their own source, and how? (For example, if you're reading the diary of a plantation owner, how might a source giving the perspective of an overseer, an abolitionist, the owner of a bigger or smaller plantation, or a slave be different?)

5. EVALUATE THE SOURCE

How does this source compare to other primary sources?

Have you read other sources like this one? What did they say? Does the account in this source seem to mesh with those, or does it depart dramatically? Remember that if your source doesn't say exactly what other sources say, it may still be entirely truthful. It could be that the other sources were wrong. It could also be that all of the authors of your sources told the truth as they saw it, but that their own individual perspectives gave them different views and therefore different accounts. It may also be that the author of your source had a unique experience that wasn't like most people's experiences, but it happened that way just the same. For example, some people remained very wealthy during the Great Depression — they were not in the majority, to be sure, but their stories are still true and can offer valuable insights into the diversity of experiences during that era in American history. Consider all of the possible reasons why this source may differ from other primary sources before you decide to reject any of your sources as "untrue" or "useless."

How does this source compare to secondary source accounts?

You'll also want to think about how your source compares to secondary sources that you have read such as your textbook and accounts written by historians. Does this source seem to fit with the interpretations presented in those secondary works? In what ways does it fit and in what ways does it differ? Keep in mind that just because it differs from what your book says, that doesn't mean that the source isn't accurate. It may be that this source offers an insight that the secondary text authors didn't know about. It may also be that this source presents information that the secondary source authors weren't interested in or chose not to include for a variety of possible reasons. Consider all of the possible reasons why this source may differ from the secondary source account before you decide to reject one or the other completely.

What do you believe and disbelieve from this source?

Based on everything you know about the historical context and from reading other accounts, what elements of this source do you take as credible and believable? What does the weight of the evidence suggest to you about the believability and historical usefulness of the information and attitudes conveyed in this source? Does anything in this source seem unbelievable, exaggerated, deceptive, or simply mistaken? Think about *why* you are willing to believe certain parts of the source but not others — what are your reasons for accepting some evidence and rejecting other evidence? If you found some parts of the source to be less than credible, do you think that this assessment in any way taints other parts of the source?

What do you still not know — and where can you find that information?

After assessing your source thoroughly, you'll want to take stock of what you do and don't know after reading it. What are you still wondering about? What gaps did this source leave in your understanding of the topic at hand, and what new questions did it raise for you? Think, too, about where you might turn to find out what you still don't know. What kinds of primary sources would help you fill in the blanks, and what kinds of secondary sources might you consult to answer some of your broader questions?

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About the author

KATHRYN WALBERT

Kathryn Walbert holds a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs LEARN NC's efforts to develop instructor-led and self-guided materials for professional development in a range of topics in United States and North Carolina history. She has developed and taught online courses on "The Civil Rights Movement in Context" and "North Carolina American Indians." She is also the author of several articles for LEARN NC, including a series on using oral history in the K-12 classroom and "Beyond Black History Month."

A long-time associate of the Southern Oral History Program, Walbert has been using oral history in her own research and training others in the craft for over ten years. Her doctoral research focused on Southern women, both black and white, who became teachers after the Civil War, and the role of teaching in shaping their identities. From 2001 to 2003, she was an academic skills instructor at Duke University. She now serves as a consultant on U.S. history, oral history, and academic skills to LEARN NC and other organizations.