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A word on facts, evidence, hypotheses, and sources

As we begin our discussion of the raw materials of history, our sources, I want you to think back to the materials on thinking historically. (If you did not read them then, or cannot remember, go back and do so now - before proceeding).

History is a discipline that uses fact-based inquiry and formulates hypotheses. Critical thinking is part and parcel to everything we do as historians and students of history. Simply memorizing lists of people and events is not history. Historians want to explain why things happened; how things happened; and even why they happened the way they did and not some other way. It takes a lot of training to become an academic (or professional) historian, but every one of you can hone your analytical skills and start to look at facts and evidence with a more critical eye to understand larger trends and contexts (remember the 5 Cs?). This is a marketable skill. Many companies seek out undergraduate history majors because they have proven critical thinking and analysis skills. In this course, I will teach you the basics of these skills and start you off on the path to be a junior historian.

Before discussing the various types of sources and evidence available to us, I want you to [skim read \(a quick perusal to pick up the key points, the gist of the material\) this excerpt \(click here\)](#)

on a murder in the Pyrenees in 1301. It is by John H. Arnold and taken from his book, *History: A Very Short Introduction*. In this excerpt, he lays out the historian's craft and where sources of information can lead us and the types of information we can ask of our evidence.

There are two types of sources that historians use, primary sources and secondary sources.

Primary Sources are documents and other items that are created at the time under study. So the inquisition registers mentioned in the Arnold piece are primary sources. A newscast from 1969 reporting on the reaction to Neil Armstrong walking on the moon is a primary source for the study NASA's impact on American society. A law passed by the British Parliament ending slavery is a primary document. A diary of a British traveler in the American West is a primary document. A letter between a soldier and a loved one at home is a primary document. A piece of artwork produced in the 1700s or other material artifacts of the past are primary sources. So the key is that anything

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Once you understand the definition of a primary source, secondary sources are easy to understand. **A secondary source is anything produced at a later date about the time under study.** So all books by historians are secondary sources, textbooks are secondary sources, documentaries about past events are secondary sources.

The tricky part is understanding that some secondary sources may contain primary sources. For example, if someone compiles a set of documents, annotates the documents, and provides an introductory essay about the collection we have a mixed set of sources. The documents themselves are primary and we need to give credit to the original author from the time under study. The annotations and introductory essay by the compiler (or editor, or translator) is secondary. **You must never confuse an editor, compiler, or translator with the author of the original work from the historical past.**

Historians base the majority of their original work on primary sources. But we don't discount what other academics/historians have said. We don't have to reinvent the wheel each time we look at a particular era. Therefore historians always provide their sources for others to use, like a breadcrumb trail, to follow their analysis, to verify their facts and evidence, and to engage in historical debate over the whys and hows and so whats of the past. When I get a new academic book by a historian, I will often read the footnotes or endnotes before reading the content, since it is through the sources and notes that historians engage with each other and peer review the interpretations of other historians.

It is perfectly acceptable to utilize the interpretations of another historian in your own work as long as you give the first historian full credit (citation) and you use your own words when you work the ideas into your own analysis. In this way you are being influenced by past historians but are adding new interpretations and analysis to his/her work. You do not merely regurgitate (paraphrase) because you have

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Peer-review is key to history. All works by academic historians are reviewed by peers and the comments can be brutal. Before a journal article or monograph is published, the draft has gone through at least one round, and likely more, of peer review. Other historians specializing in the same narrow field review to make sure that the analysis is supported by facts, appropriate evidence and sources, and that there are no glaring faults in logic or presentation of argument. It is not opinion, only the results of fact-based inquiry get published. Which is not to say that all historians always agree on everything. We don't. But we respect fact-based and logical arguments that do not leave out key pieces of evidence. Historians then argue (and boy, do we love to argue) about differing interpretations of events. Over time a synthesis develops, things all historians can agree on about a particular event or interpretation. These syntheses will become your textbooks. I might have a disagreement here or there about something in a text, but I generally agree with most American history texts.

So, in summary, when you write a piece of historical analysis in this class, it needs to be based on evidence and primary sources. You can pull ideas, properly cited, from secondary sources in creating your own original analysis.

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The importance of footnotes/endnotes

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Can you tell what this chapter/book is about simply from looking at the notes? Can you pinpoint a time and place? Can you get a the general category (social, political, economic, religious, military, etc.)? Can you guess at a more specific topic for the chapter? Below, you will have an opportunity to guess.

Now why am I having you do this? For two reasons, first to show you how important it is to cite your work, the proper format for citation, and to show you the preponderance of evidence you need in good historical analysis. Second, to show you that footnotes/endnotes of an academic work are a great place to do research, to go and find the documents to read them for yourself and to use in your own research/work (the breadcrumbs that historians leave each other to follow).

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HOW TO ANALYZE A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT



You will be answering these six questions in the worksheet below. For your convenience, [click here](#) for a downloadable copy of this list of questions.

1. Who is the author of the document?

In analyzing a primary source document, simply knowing the name of the person who wrote it is not enough, you also need to learn something about the author to understand his/her point of view and biases. Give the name of the author and provide a brief biographical comment. Please think about the definition of an author. Is an author someone who merely translates or edits a collection or the originator of the document in the historical past? Do not confuse editors and translators with authors.

2. When was this document written? How long after the event was it written?

Okay, sometimes this is obvious and sometimes it takes a bit of sleuthing and critical thinking skills to figure out. In this class you will find all the information you need to know to answer questions like these from the assigned materials. If someone writes about an event they were part of in their diary that same day, you will get fresh, first-hand account, but it will also lack perspective. If someone writes about an event in their memoirs later, you will have a fading of memory but the author will also have a better picture of the importance of an event and the impact it had on later events. Both are valid primary sources, but you have to use them differently.

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4. Where does the action contained in this document take place? Is it important to the subject of the document? What is the relationship of the author to the action?

Asking this question of a document is very important as it speaks to the biases of the author and also as to the types of information the author should reasonably have. As you have seen in this course, historical geography is important. Does geography have any bearing in your document? Is the author present at the event?

5. Why did the author write this document? Who is his audience? What does he hope to gain from writing this document? What is his point of view?

All of these questions speak to the author's bias. Every time you write, you write for an audience (even if it is only for yourself). There is a purpose to writing. The author wants to gain something from writing; the historian's job is to understand the motivation behind the creation of document and the biases inherent within. Sometimes an author will modify what he/she is saying to impress a particular audience (or to get the audience to do something he/she wants) or to excuse their own actions. Understanding why the author will help you better use the document and interpret history.

6. Taking the above answers into account, how accurate do you find this document? What would be the drawbacks of using this document? What would this document help a historian to explain/analyze?

Historians ask questions like these (and more) of each and every primary source they use in interpreting the past. This is critical thinking. It is a skill that needs to be learned through practice, but can also be used to analyze almost any situation or source of information in life. Every document/source has its advantages and drawbacks; this is why historians never rely on only one document. Historians utilize multiple primary sources and multiple points of view when analyzing the past. History is not just one person's opinion; it is a careful reading and analysis of multiple perspectives to answer the questions of not only what, but why.

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In this exercise, you will learn about the building blocks of historical analysis. **Sources and evidence:** As a reminder, there are two key types of sources:

Primary Sources are anything produced at the time of study. For example a transcript of a court case from 1805, a diary entry of First Lady Dolley Madison concerning the British invasion, a newsreel of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, a letter between a labor organizer and the president of a company concerning negotiations over a labor agreement in 1937, a map showing the proposed route of a transcontinental railroad from 1856, a newspaper article from 1876 recounting the defeat of Gen. Custer at Little Big Horn, or even material evidence such as pottery from an Anasazi site, a nurse's uniform from WWI, or a Frank Lloyd Wright designed building from the mid-20th century.

Secondary Sources are anything produced *after* the time under study. A key example would be the Corbett textbook or any book by a historian.

Evidence is drawn from your sources, both primary and secondary, in support of an argument (thesis) you are making. For example, if I were to propose that Cheeseburgers are the best food for a meal I will need evidence to convince you of my argument. I might provide you with numbers derived from restaurant data that show cheeseburgers are the most ordered entree in the US for the past ten years (primary source), some facts from a book written about the ingredients of cheeseburgers (a secondary source), and results of a survey of people on the streets of downtown Dallas (primary source) in support of my argument.

In this course, you must back up every broad statement (cheeseburgers are best) with specific and detailed evidence (sales statistics, surveys, and ingredients) from both primary and secondary sources.

To organize your argument you will need a Rule of Three **Thesis Statement:** *Cheeseburgers are the best food for a meal since they lead restaurant sales, are popular with average Americans, and have wholesome ingredients.*

This thesis tells the reader the premise of the argument and where the argument is going (a road map of the essay). You will then follow up with your specific and detailed evidence and an explanation of how this evidence supports your argument. And since the thesis is a road map, you will need to discuss your evidence in the order in which it is presented in the thesis (restaurant data first, then surveys, then ingredients).

We require "Rule of Three" analytical writing in this course. In the folder below is more information on Rule of Three writing.

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