

Guidelines for Reading and Studying Historical Texts

Students will regularly read and analyze primary sources. *Primary sources* provide direct information about *something, anything*, including cultural artifacts. Primary sources can be and actually are anything and everything: letters, newspaper articles, official documents, songs, movies, clothes, books, etc. Secondary sources are *about* primary sources. *Any* source can be a primary source: Simple boundaries between the two types of sources do not exist. For example, *American Negro Slavery* (1918) is a secondary source to the extent that it is a scholarly account of enslavement based on written sources from enslavers. Additionally, this work is a primary source because it provides much more information about the early 20th century than enslavement, given its focus on slavery as a basically-good, paternalistic institution. Likewise, the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is clearly *not* a primary source (or an accurate secondary source) about enslavement or the Civil War, but it *is* a primary source about how people tended to perceive. It could also serve as a primary source regarding filmic techniques at that time.

The following guidelines help us realize how richly complicated sources are:

- 1) identify where, when, and by whom/for whom it was originally produced;
- 2) articulate what hopes and fears are manifested;
- 3) describe at least three important points and evaluate the overall main argument;
- 4) evaluate the credibility;
- 5) consider what assumptions the author(s) has;
- 6) analyze its various meanings to different people or groups (e.g., women, men, leaders, everyday people, “the other”);
- 7) compare/contrast it with other assigned texts or documents;
- 8) explain why it is important (i.e., context and significance) and to whom;
- 9) consider how time and place have provided different perspectives;
- 10) consider how the core issue relates or does not relate to the same, different, similar, or parallel issues today;
- 11) state a reaction to the document;
- 12) consider what ethical issues are involved with said document being analyzed (this question is especially for sources that were not designed to be read by the public, such as private letters);
- 13) pull out one sentence (or so) that is especially effective from the document and explain why it was selected; and
- 14) develop a question about the document that would be good for further research and another question that would be a good quiz/test question.

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