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Using Historical Sources

Historians get their information from two different kinds of sources: primary and secondary. *Primary sources* are first hand sources; *secondary sources* are second-hand sources. For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. The story in the newspaper the next day is a secondary source because the reporter who wrote the story did not actually witness it. The reporter is presenting a way of understanding the accident or an *interpretation*.

Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are interesting to read for their own sake: they give us first hand, you-are-there insights into the past. They are also the most important tools a historian has for developing an understanding of an event. Primary sources serve as the evidence an historian uses in developing an interpretation and in building an argument to support that interpretation. You will be using primary sources not only to help you better understand what went on, but also as evidence as you answer questions and develop arguments about the past.

I. Reading a primary source.

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past.

To help you interpret primary sources, you should think about these questions as you examine the source:

A. Place the source in its historical context.

1. Who wrote it? What do you know about the author?
2. Where and when was it written?
3. Why was it written?
4. To what audience is it addressed? What do you know about this audience?

B. Classify the source.

1. What kind of work is it?
2. What was its purpose?
3. What are the important conventions and traditions governing this kind of source? Of what legal, political, religious or philosophical traditions is it a part?

C. Understand the source.

1. What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
3. What evidence does the author give to support the thesis?
4. What assumptions underlay the argument?
5. What values does the source reflect?
6. What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
7. What action does the author expect as a result of this work? Who is to take this action? How does the source motivate that action?

D. Evaluate the source as a source of historical information.

1. How typical is this source for this period?
2. How widely was this source circulated?
3. What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
4. What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?

II. Be Your Own Interpreter

It is very tempting in a course of this kind to use the textbook as a source of interpretations. If you encounter a primary source which you don't entirely understand it seems easiest to look up the proper interpretation in the text, rather than trying to figure it out for yourself. In this course I would like to encourage you to develop your interpretation. This process will take some patience, some imagination, some practice and a lot of hard work on your part. But you will be developing an important, transferable skill and also the tools and attitudes you need to develop to think on your own.

Using Secondary Sources

There is a strong temptation in a history class to believe that the answers to all the questions are found in the textbook and that the object of the course is to learn the textbook. While it is certainly possible to approach this course in that manner, you will not learn as much since you will be a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an active participant in the learning process, and it will actually mean more work for you since you will be doing more than you need to. This section is designed to help you use the textbook more efficiently and effectively.

I. Three ways to use a secondary source.

A. As a collection of facts.

Use a secondary source if you need to find a particular piece of information quickly. You might need to know, for example, when Genghis Khan lived, in what year the cotton gin was invented, or the population of London in 1648.

B. As a source of background material.

If your interests are focused on one subject, but you need to know something about what else was going on at that time or what happened earlier, you can use

a secondary source to find the background material you might need. For example, if you are writing about Luther's 95 Theses, you should use a secondary source to help you understand the Catholic Church in the Renaissance.

C. As an interpretation.

Since the facts do not speak for themselves, it is necessary for the historian to give them some shape and to put them in an order people can understand. This is called an interpretation. Many secondary sources provide not only information, but a way of making sense of that information. You should use a secondary source if you wish to understand how an historian makes sense of a particular event, person, or trend.

II. Using interpretations.

One of the most important tasks in reading a secondary source is finding and understanding that particular author's interpretation. How does that particular author put the facts together so that they make sense?

A. Finding the interpretation.

Good authors want to communicate their interpretation. Because the reason for writing a book or article is to communicate something to another person, a good author will make the interpretation easy to find.

1. In an Essay.

In an essay, particularly a short one, an author will often state the interpretation as part of the thesis statement. The thesis statement is the summary of what the author is going to say in the essay. The thesis statement is usually found at the end of the introductory section or in the conclusion.

2. In a Book.

In a longer work, such as a book, the author will very likely have many thesis statements, one or more for each section or chapter of the book. The thesis for the book as a whole will often be found either in the introduction or in the conclusion. The thesis for individual chapters is often found in the first or last paragraph. Topic sentences of paragraphs will also often have important clues as to the author's interpretation.

N.B. It is often helpful, particularly if you are interested in the author's interpretation to "gut" a book: Read only the first and last chapters in their entirety; for all of the other chapters, read only the first and last paragraphs. If this is a well-written book, this should give you a fairly good idea of the author's point of view.

B. The importance of the interpretation.

An interpretation is how a historian makes sense of some part of the past. Like a good story, well-done history reveals not only the past, but something about the present as well. Great historians help us to see aspects of the past and the human condition which we would not be able to find on our own.

C. Historians often disagree on interpretations.

Some facts are ambiguous. Historians ask different questions about the past. Historians have different values and come to the material with different beliefs about the world. For these and other reasons, historians often arrive at different interpretations of the same event. For example, many historians see the French Revolution as the result of beliefs in liberty and equality; other historians see the French Revolution as the result of the economic demands of a rising middle class. It is, therefore, important to be able to critically evaluate a historian's interpretation.

III. Evaluating an interpretation.

A. The Argument

- a. What historical problem is the author addressing?
- b. What is the thesis?
- c. How is the thesis arrived at?
 - i. What type of history book is it?
 - ii. What historical methods or techniques does the author use?
 - iii. What evidence is presented?
 - iv. Can you identify a school of interpretation?
- d. What sources are used?

B. Evaluation

- a. Did the author present a convincing argument?
 - i. Does the evidence support the thesis?
 - ii. Does the evidence in fact prove what the author claims it proves?
 - iii. Has the author made any errors of fact?
- b. Does the author use questionable methods or techniques?
- c. What questions remain unanswered?
- d. Does the author have a polemical purpose?
 - i. If so, does it interfere with the argument?
 - ii. If not, might there be a hidden agenda?

C. The Debate

- a. How does this book compare to others written on this or similar topics?
- b. How do the theses differ?
- c. Why do the theses differ?
 - i. Do they use the same or different sources?
 - ii. Do they use these sources in the same way?
 - iii. Do they use the same methods or techniques?
 - iv. Do they begin from the same or similar points of view?
 - v. Are these works directed at the same or similar audience?
- d. When were the works written?
- e. Do the authors have different backgrounds?
- f. Do they differ in their political, philosophical, ethical, cultural, or religious assumptions?