

Reading Primary Sources: thinking about thinking ^[1]

This edition is one in a series of guides on reading historical primary sources. [Primary sources](#) ^[2] — sources that give us a first-hand look at the past — can come in many forms, including diaries and letters, newspapers and magazines, oral history interviews, photographs, maps — any record that survives from the time you're studying.

Historians have special ways of reading primary sources, a “toolbox” of questions they ask about each type of source and methods they use to answer them. The way we read a source from the past is different from the way we'd read a similar source in the present.

For example, you might read a magazine published last week to find out about new music from your favorite band, but you might read a magazine published in 1835 to find out about what life was like in the antebellum South. You don't think about things like culture and historical context when you read a present-day magazine, because they're assumed by the authors, publishers, and readers. But you don't share the same assumptions with the people who wrote and read a magazine published in 1835, and so when you read it, you have to think about those things consciously.

Similarly, reading letters from the past isn't like reading letters (or emails or text messages) your friends sent you this morning, even though they might look very similar. The diary of a teenaged girl in 1870 is much like the diary (or blog) of a teenaged girl today, but the differences, and the fact that you don't share her time, place, or culture, can trip you up. Even something as seemingly objective as a map may have been produced by people whose assumptions about what a map was for were very different from yours!

Thinking about thinking

When you read historical primary sources, then, you have to think about the assumptions, background, and context of the people who created them, and about how they differed from yours. You have to read and think about them, but you also have to think carefully about how you're reading and thinking about them!

These guides are designed to help you learn to “think about thinking” — to plan your reading, to ask good questions of different kinds of sources, and to question your assumptions. To step you through the process of reading primary sources, we've divided up the questions a historian might ask into five levels, from the basic (what is this, and who produced it?) to the complicated (how is their world different from mine? what do I believe and not believe?).

As you ask and answer these questions, you'll learn to think like a historian. As you read more primary sources, asking and answering these kinds of questions will become second nature. And many of these skills, like questioning the motives of an author and understanding someone's cultural background, will help you in reading present-day materials, as well.

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