

# Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy

(the short version)

Primary sources are materials in a variety of formats that serve as original evidence documenting a time period, an event, a work, people, or ideas.

A person knowledgeable in the use of primary sources can:

## CONCEPTUALIZE

- 1A - Distinguish **primary** + **secondary sources** based on research Q
- 1B - **Brainstorm possible** primary sources for a project
- 1C - Generate **research questions** based on primary sources
- 1D - Understand that **research is iterative** - sources inform Qs, Qs inform sources

## FIND AND ACCESS

- 2A - **Identify where** primary sources might be found
- 2B - **Search for and locate** primary sources. Use tools like catalogs and finding aids.
- 2C - Know the difference between **descriptions about sources** that are found online + **digitized sources**
- 2D - Understand how the **historical record is shaped**.  
Understand that some evidence never existed, didn't survive, or is not publicly accessible.
- 2E - Recognize how institutional/platform **access policies differ** and affect use of primary sources.

## READ, UNDERSTAND, AND SUMMARIZE

- 3A - **Read and examine a source**. Read script, font, language; understand or operate a technology; comprehend vocabulary, syntax, communication norms; etc.
- 3B - **Identify and communicate information in a source**.  
Summarize content; identify key components such as format, how created, by whom, when, etc.
- 3C - Understand **iterations** (excerpts, transcriptions, translations) + **transformations** (publishing, copying)

## INTERPRET, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

- 4A - **Assess the appropriateness** of a primary source for a project.
- 4B - **Critically evaluate perspectives** of creators. Recognize tone and bias.  
Determine original purposes and audiences.
- 4C - Situate a primary source in **context**.  
Context may be historical, cultural, biographical, technical, or curatorial.
- 4D - Identify, interrogate, and **consider silences**, gaps, contradictions, power in the documentary record.
- 4E - **Factor physical and material elements** into interpretation of primary sources.
- 4F - Demonstrate historical **empathy, curiosity** about the past, and **appreciation** for historical actors.

## USE AND INCORPORATE

- 5A - Synthesize a variety of sources to **construct, support, or dispute an argument**.
- 5B - **Respect privacy** rights and **cultural contexts** when using primary sources.
- 5C - **Cite appropriately**.
- 5D - Adhere to **copyright and privacy laws** when using primary sources.

## Teaching tip:

Use these broad objectives to build specific, measurable learning outcomes. Just a few at a time - keep it simple!

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