

How to Analyze a Primary Source

What is a primary source?

History education expert Peter Seixas defines primary sources as the “litter of history.” He is referring to documents and other items that are left over from the past – often made to be used for a short time and then discarded. Examples include letters, diaries, and newspaper articles. This “litter” can be an important source of information about the past. By asking the right questions of primary sources, you can gain rich insight into history.

IMPORTANT!

Consider **only the primary source** and transcript when answering the questions below. Consulting any additional contextual materials could influence your interpretation.

HINT: If you cannot find the answer you are looking for, make your best guess based on the information that you have.

1. Summary

Read the document. What does it say?

2. Authorship

a. Who created this source?

b. What information can you infer about the author?

Can you guess their gender, age, race, religion, hometown, or other personal characteristics?

Can you tell what their job is, or who they work for?

3. Audience

For whom was this source created?

4. Context

a. When did the author create this source?

b. What important historical event was happening at that time?

- The First World War (1914-1918)
- The Second World War (1939-1945)
- Peacekeeping Operations in the Balkans (1990s-2000s)
- The Afghanistan War (2001-2014)
- None of the above

c. Where was the author when they created this source?

5. Purpose

Why did the author create this source?

6. Physical Description

Take a closer look at the physical appearance and condition of the source.
How was the source made?

7. Reconsider the Source

Review your answers.
How do your answers to questions 2-6 affect your understanding of what the source is saying?
Did your analysis raise any new questions about this document?