

## **“Thinking Like a Historian”: How to Read a Primary Source**

Adapted by Lara Campbell (<http://laracampbell.ca/>)

For more details, see Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (Bedford/St. Martins) and Jeffrey W. Alexander and Joy Dixon, *Writing in History* (Thomson Nelson)

### **1. Defining primary vs. secondary sources**

#### i) Secondary sources

- give you information about a historical subject
- are books and scholarly articles which interpret historical evidence
- help you understand how historians understand and interpret past events

#### ii) primary sources

- are materials produced by people directly involved in an event under consideration (either as participants or witnesses), in the time period under discussion
- includes eyewitness accounts, speeches, autobiographies, census data, newspaper articles, magazines, advertisements, pictures, letters, diaries, laws, etc.

### **2. How to analyze a primary source**

- read through the document and identify the time, place, events, ideas
- try to place the document in the wider historical context: i.e., the circumstances in which the document was written
- what does this document tell us about the period of time under consideration?

#### i) reliability of sources

- authors of primary sources reflect the assumptions, interests, and concerns of their time
- try to identify the point/intent of the author: what is he or she trying to convince the reader of? And why?
- compare primary sources to each other to see if they corroborate or contradict each other
- why might different sources tell us different things about the same event?

#### ii) Questions for evaluating the sources

- what is the date of the source? What kind of source is it? Who is the author?
- what might be the religious, political, social or racial beliefs of the author and of the intended audience of the document?
- what is the relationship between the author (gender, race, class, job, etc) in comparison to the people he/she is writing about or for
- why is the author writing? What is the gain in convincing others to a particular part of view?
- what kind of information do you think might be missing, limited, or distorted?
- what kinds of unspoken assumptions does the text contain? What set of assumptions and values does their author bases his or her view on?
- are there other sources to compare to this source? What are they?
- who is the audience of the source, and how might the intended audience have understood this document? Would they have “received” it in the intended way? Or might they have responded in a different way than the author intended?