

History Lab #3 How to Read a Primary Source**Due Fri 10/20**

Primary sources do not speak for themselves—they have to be interpreted. You do not just simply read about the past, you must investigate the past by asking questions. You must be the detective, and interrogate the document.

A. Historical context

Who wrote it? What do you know about this person?

Where and when was it written?

How much time has lapsed between the document's creation and the event it portrays?

Why was it written? Was it meant to be public or private?

Who was it written for? What do you know about its audience?

Did the author have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or did he/she report what others saw and heard?

B. Understanding the document

What are the key words and what do they mean?

Does the author wish to inform or persuade others? Check the words – they may tell you whether the author is trying to be objective, or persuasive.

What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis. Can you restate it in one sentence?

What evidence does the author give to support this thesis?

What assumptions does the author make?

Was the author a neutral party, or did she/he have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded? Does the author have reasons to be honest or dishonest?

C. The document as a source of historical information

Is this document similar to others from the same time period?

How widely was it circulated?

What problems, assumptions, and ideas does it share with other documents from the time period?

Why are you looking at it now?

How might you verify the information in this document?

All sources have biases and limitations. Their reliability and usefulness are determined by the questions asked of them. If your source can't be trusted to tell you facts, ask about opinions. For example, if someone swears that Elvis was abducted by Martians, the question you should ask is not, "Was 'The King' really snatched by space invaders?" but rather, "Why would an American living in the 1990s want to believe this story?" What does the existence of such a belief tell us about the individual, the society, or the era?

Resources:

Wisconsin Historical Society, "Using Primary Sources," <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/primarysources.asp>

"How to Read a Primary Source," www.ups.edu/faculty/wbreitenbach/how'to'prmy.doc

Library of Congress, "Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources" <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/studqsts.html>

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Using the questions provided, compare 2 of the primary sources provided in Martin's sourcebook *Brown v. Board of Education*. Clearly & correctly cite your sources using MLA.

First **DESCRIBE** each as a historical source, placing it in its historical context, answering at least some of the "A" and "B" questions from our list (which should take about 1-2 pages).

Then **COMPARE** them to one another and **ASSESS** their value as historical sources. You're not trying to decide whether one is "better" or "worse." You're just pointing out similarities and differences, strengths or weaknesses of each. What can we learn from them? How might historians use these documents (most likely in ways the authors did not intend or could not have imagined)? (1-2 pages)

Finally, **SHARE** unanswered questions that came up for you in this assignment. What do you wish you had more time to pursue or figure out? If we had all semester to study these documents, what would you do next? (half a page).

Total length = 4-5 pages

Grading: Worth 5% of your grade