Western Civilization and United States History
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GUIDELINES FOR SOURCE ANALYSIS

Although these guidelines were created specifically to analyze primary and secondary sources in history classes, they can be useful to other social science and humanities classes too. The secondary source guidelines provide a valuable tool to anyone trying to determine the reliability, credibility, and objectivity of Internet sources.

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

Primary sources *are actual records that have survived from the* past [i.e., eyewitness accounts of the past] *such as letters, photographs, and articles of clothing.* These questions, adapted from the Library of Congress web site, provide an excellent way to analyze primary sources.

CRITERIA	QUESTIONS TO ASK
Author	***Who created the source and why?*** An author who shared in the decision-making process, formulated policy, or was a key participant in the event is a better source than a mere observer. One whose intention is to record the event for those not present is a better source than one who intends to persuade or convince.
Circumstances	***Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?*** The spur-of-the-moment account could be more emotional than accurate. The routine transaction may be accurate but designed to impress superiors. The thoughtful, deliberate process is likely to give the most accurate and detailed account as long as the intent is to record, not persuade.
Eyewitness Status	***Did the author have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the author report what others saw and heard?*** The author could be an eyewitness to some aspects of the event, but not to others. The most accurate account will come from firsthand knowledge of all aspects of what was recorded.
Objectivity	***Was the author a neutral party, or did the author have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?*** An author deeply committed to guiding principles might be ideologically incapable of objectivity. The information could be extremely valuable, but facts need to be checked with more neutral sources.
Audience	***Did the author produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?*** If the account was for personal use, it is likely to be most accurate. If it was for a small number of individuals, it is likely to be accurate if the motive was not to persuade or impress. The account intended for a large audience is most dependent upon motive. If the intention was to report, it is likely to be accurate. If it was to persuade or impress, it may be distorted or exaggerated.
Public or Private	***Was the source meant to be public or private?*** The source intended for private use is more likely to be accurate than one created for public consumption.
Purpose	***Did the author wish to inform or persuade others?*** (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the author have reasons to be honest or dishonest? Look for motives. Would the author benefit in some way by distorting or exaggerating the truth?
Timeframe	***Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?*** Information recorded during the event or immediately after the event is most likely to be accurate, if the author was not too emotionally involved in the event. If there was a lapse of time, the larger the lapse of time, the greater the likelihood of memory failures.

SECONDARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

Secondary sources *are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened* [i.e., information gathered by those who did not witness these events personally]. These questions, based on the recommendations of the American Historical Association, provide a systematic way to analyze secondary sources.

CRITERIA	QUESTIONS TO ASK
Author	***Who created the source? What are the author's credentials?*** An author who takes responsibility for the content of the source is more likely to provide accurate information than one who remains anonymous. Look for an author with the education (e.g., a Ph.D. in history), background (e.g., public service), or practical experience (e.g., employment as an economist) in the subject matter to provide expert knowledge.

Publisher	***Who hosted or published the source? Does the publisher claim responsibility for the source?*** A well-known publisher (e.g., nytimes.com) or one that corresponds well with the subject matter (e.g., epa.gov for matters related to the environment) will provide the most reliable information. If the publisher claims responsibility for the site, as well as the author, there is a high level of accountability.
Domain Name	***What are the implications of the domain name?*** Web sites with educational (.edu), government (.gov), or nonprofit (.org or .net) domain names are more appropriate than commercial (.com) or personal (aol.com or geocities.com) domain names. Personal web sites can be, but are not necessarily, less reliable than those affiliated with an organization. If it's a personal web site, be sure to investigate the author carefully.
Reference Works	***Is the source part of a reference work (i.e.,* Wikipedia, Answer.com*, or other encyclopedias or dictionaries)?*** Although these reference works are a good starting point and provide a general overview of a topic, they are not considered scholarly enough for historical research.
Currency	***When was the source created or the site updated?*** It's important to have the latest research on a subject. If the site has not been updated for a long time, the information may be obsolete or the author may have lost interest in the subject.
Audience	***What is the target audience?*** Sources intended for a professional or college-level audience are more likely to be scholarly and insightful than those intended for younger audiences or the general public.
Reliability	***How reliable or accurate is the source?*** If the author has the proper credentials, provides references to support his or her statements, and links to other sources that address the same subject, the source is likely to be based on solid research and will be more reliable than one that does not include these features
Credibility	***How feasible are facts and interpretations****?* You should be able to verify facts and standard interpretations in your textbook or other readily available resources. If the interpretation challenges a standard interpretation, the author should provide primary source supporting evidence and references
Objectivity	***Are facts and opinions clearly identified?*** Statements of fact can be proved, demonstrated, observed, or verified (either by witnesses or by other sources). Opinions are not necessarily verifiable. Nevertheless, if they are based upon logic, research, or experience, they can be very valuable. It's up to the author to distinguish between the two so that the reader can balance the account with other points of view. Opinions should be flagged with statements like "It seems logical…," "The limited research available suggests…," "Judging from my experience…," etc.
Documentation	***Are the primary sources the author used complete or edited? Are sources well documented? Are there references to other resources on the topic?*** If the primary source is an excerpt or edited in any way, it should be clearly spelled out so that the reader has the option of seeking the original. A well-documented source is an indication of scholarly research work and is more likely to be accurate than one that does not have references or links.
Reputation	***How credible is the source? What do others say about it?*** There are a number of ways you can obtain this information: ▪ What other web sites link to this site? Find out by doing a link: search in Google. Type "link:" followed immediately by the URL. If there are no links, the site is not necessarily poor. Others just may not have discovered it yet. However, if there are links from other reputable sites, it means that the site has earned a good reputation. ▪ Is the site reviewed? Look for reviews at the Merlot Project, Scout Report, or Best of History Web Sites. Since only a small number of sites available on the Internet are reviewed, a site that receives a positive review is likely to be excellent. ▪ What can you learn about the author? Do a Google search to obtain biographical information, reviews, and comments. Check to see if the author is listed at Amazon and obtain a bibliography of published works.
Attention to Detail	***Are there spelling or grammatical errors****?* If the source offers references to other resources, are they working and reliable? Errors in these areas are an indication of carelessness and suggest that the content of the site may be suspect.