



Tools for Analysis—Primary Evidence

Once relevant secondary literature has been examined to provide background, historical context, and historiographical context, beginning historians start interpreting the primary sources identified in the research trail. They should also identify additional primary sources from their reading of the secondary sources—in particular, examining footnotes and bibliographies. The analytical process associated with primary sources is the most satisfying aspect of research because the researcher ultimately reaches independent conclusions about the evidence that goes beyond a simple summary of the documents.

The opportunities for beginning researchers to access primary sources used to be more limited. College libraries or local archives might contain scattered manuscript holdings, sources on microform, government documents, or newspapers; however, except at major research libraries such collections tended to be limited and, perhaps, reserved only for scholars. Beginning researchers usually gleaned what primary evidence they could from edited collections in print, materials on microform, or from selected document readers; thus, access to primary sources remained restricted. Such constraints often determined the kinds of topics explored, the depth of the research project, and the questions that could be reasonably posed.

But this situation has changed dramatically in recent years. The availability of materials on the Internet has transformed access to historical evidence and brought entire collections of primary sources within reach of historians almost anywhere on the planet. The possibilities for researching topics have increased exponentially as a result. In addition, many Internet websites include effective search engines that permit researchers to sift through larger quantities of evidence more efficiently than historians in past generations. While digitized technology

has made an infinite variety of rich source material potentially accessible to all historians, the very volume of evidence creates the necessity for a more systematic understanding of how to evaluate and use it.

This chapter will first define primary evidence, then examine ways to read, analyze, and interpret it, with particular emphasis on digitized sources. The focus will be on the kinds of questions to ask as part of the ongoing conversation with the sources. Once students are familiar with the techniques of analysis, they are better prepared to interpret the various primary sources they have identified for their own projects. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how student historian Paul McDowell interpreted primary evidence to construct his argument.

WHAT IS A PRIMARY SOURCE?

A **primary source** is any record contemporary to an event or time period. Primary sources may be written, oral, visual, or physical. Some of these sources were produced with the intent of being preserved for the future. Such **intentional sources** include government documents, church records, autobiographies, or memoirs. On the other hand, many primary sources were produced without any intent of future use. Such **unintentional sources** may include private correspondences not originally meant for posterity but which later are deposited in archives and libraries. Physical evidence such as buildings, clothing, tools, and landscapes may also be labeled as unintentional sources.

Identifying a primary source is far simpler than analyzing such sources effectively. The most common sources used in historical research are written; any discussion of primary evidence must start with them. Before the analytical process can begin, however, researchers must read the source closely to make absolutely certain they understand its content, language, meaning, and argument—if it has one. Only then is it possible to begin to analyze. Beginning historians must learn to adopt a critical or skeptical approach to thinking about evidence and go beyond basic issues of factual content (who, what, when, where). Such an approach helps begin an active dialogue with the evidence. All researchers initiate their analyses of primary written evidence with questions to help them understand particular documents and how groups of these fit together within the context of other primary sources.

When analyzing primary evidence, certain questions are standard. Historians begin by determining the validity of the evidence. Is it what it purports to be? Where does it come from? Is it corroborated by other sources? Traditionally records found in libraries, archives, or other repositories have already been evaluated to establish their authenticity as sources—however, websites in the digital age raise new questions about reliability, accuracy, and authorship. Where trained archivists, historians, and special collections librarians could vouch for the validity of a source, the profusion of information on the web requires the practice of external criticism skills. First, one must pay careful attention to the author or creator of a website. Is the site maintained by an individual or organization with authority on

the subject matter? Does the site have an ideological axe to grind? Can information contained on the site be corroborated by other evidence?

Once the historian has determined the validity of the source by applying the tools of **external criticism**, he or she moves on to consider questions about interpreting the evidence, or **internal criticism**. These include: Who authored the source? How long after the event is it being described? Is the author an eyewitness? Who was the intended audience? What is the audience's relationship to the author? What is the purpose of the source? What is the tone of the language used? Does an obvious point of view color the evidence? How reliable is the evidence? Is there anything critical missing from the account that might diminish its value? How does the source fit into the historical context established by other primary sources and secondary accounts? What new information does it provide? Does the source help explain causal or other relationships? Is the source significant? How can the source be used to advance the research project?

EVALUATING WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Author

In examining any written source, it is helpful to have some information about the author. A biographical dictionary or other resource may provide the necessary information, but in some cases information about the author must be gleaned from the source itself. This is the case when the author is either not identified or is unknown. The historian should attempt to ascertain the author's relationship to the event described.

Was the author an eyewitness to what is described or only a contemporary to the event? A scientist who observed Yuri Gagarin's successful orbit in 1961 aboard *Vostok I* provides different information from someone who happened to be alive at the time but only read about it in the newspaper or was unaware it had taken place. Some other questions to consider:

- How long after the event was the document produced? Fresh memories tend to be clearer and capture the moment more accurately.
- What authority does the author have to describe the event? How much does he or she know about what is occurring? How able is the author to understand what he or she is witnessing? For example, the frame of vision of an ANZAC infantry soldier on the beach at Gallipoli in April 1915 was necessarily limited. While that individual may well provide excellent primary documentation for the part of the battlefield he witnessed, he would be less valuable as a source for understanding the broader mission that day. A fisherman who observed the same event from a neighboring village might describe the battle very differently.

Point of View

All authors have biases, prejudices, and assumptions that influence their perspective or **point of view**. Some of the most important factors that influence point of

view are family background, religious views, value system, personal experiences, age, time period, place, ethnicity, gender, education, and social class.

- What background factors might influence the author's point of view? Was there any reason for the author to misrepresent or exaggerate the account? For example, a worker's newspaper editorial would likely depict a strike differently than a speech delivered by a company manager. Despite these varying accounts, both may be credible.
- Is the author trustworthy? How do we know? Are there other primary sources that can help to corroborate the account?

Audience

Any source is written with an audience or audiences in mind. The audience may significantly influence what or how the author writes. The audience needs to be differentiated between an **intended audience**—the audience for whom the author primarily crafts his or her message—and the **unintended audience(s)**, which may also be of lesser importance. Knowledge of the audience is nearly as important as knowledge of the author.

- Who was the intended audience for this document? For example, most diaries are composed with the author alone as the intended audience. The famous English diarist Samuel Pepys even composed his diary in shorthand to guard against others reading it. While he wrote out all names, he developed a particular way of recording everything else. Thus, his diary was clearly intended to be private and personal. However, Pepys's diary has been decoded and became widely available to historians, demonstrating that many primary sources have unintended audiences; in this example, Pepys's diary provides a unique window into his life and times. Correspondence, like some diaries, is also intended for a limited, private audience. The intended audience may well influence the degree of candor expressed, the familiarity or formality of language used, and the assumptions made by the author. Knowing something about the intended audience is thus a significant part of understanding the source and using it to support a historical argument.
- If a document is produced for private or individual consumption, can the reader assume greater candor by the author? Are there reasons to stretch the truth in a personal diary or private letter? By contrast, if the document has been produced for the public, can the reader conclude its language is more guarded and its content less revealing or honest? The answers to these and similar questions require a careful reading of the document, meticulous thinking about what it says, and close corroboration with other primary and secondary sources before reaching a conclusion.
- What cultural assumptions must the reader of a private document guard against? In some cultures, formal language is more standard. In Early

Modern Europe, children and parents addressed one another differently. John Paston III's salutation to his father in March 1464 illustrates the point: "Right reverend and worshipful father, I recommend me unto you, beseeching you lowly of your blessing, desiring to hear of your welfare and prosperity, the which I pray God preserve unto his pleasure...."¹ How would many modern fathers respond to a similar greeting today? When studying evidence from other cultures, it is especially crucial to be aware of such distinctions and to evaluate all evidence thoughtfully and critically.

Once researchers have a clearer understanding of the intended audience or have concluded that such information cannot be known with any certainty, they turn next to the author's purpose in examining the source.

Purpose

When analyzing any written document it is vital to comprehend the author's purpose. Why was the document produced, and why has it survived? Some records, such as those produced by government agencies or other organizations or institutions, are intended to survive. Statutes, tax records, annual reports, and the like are recorded with the understanding that they will endure indefinitely. These documents may be more formulaic in their language, neutral in their tone, and precise in the kinds of information they provide. By contrast, private letters, diaries, memoirs, notes, and other such sources are less likely to be written with any intention they will survive to become historical documents. Writers of such documents may be more inclined to be spontaneous and open and, therefore, may be more revealing. They may also employ certain terms or references they know their reader will understand but may not be clear to those reading the letter in subsequent years or centuries. The historian must try to classify whether a document is categorized as public or private and whether it was intended to last or survived by accident.

The next step is to determine what the author was trying to achieve with this document. Often, the author's point of view influences the purpose:

- Is the author simply providing information or trying to lead the audience to a particular conclusion? Is the information accurate? That is, can it be corroborated by other primary evidence? If the source includes errors, are they intentional? Are they significant?
- What other kinds of evidence does the author introduce to support an argument or claim in the source? Why was it chosen?
- Is the coverage balanced? These questions relate to what is called the author's bias.

1. John Paston III to John Paston I, 1 March 1464, *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 103–104.

Tone and Language

The scholar should now consider issues of tone and language within the evidence. For many beginning researchers, these considerations are complex and require attentive reading:

- What is the tone of the source? That is, what is the author's attitude toward the subject matter? It is sometimes helpful to read the document aloud to get a clearer sense of its tone. Does the author appear to be angry? Argumentative? Sarcastic? Authoritative? Judgmental? Even-tempered? Omniscient? Conversational? Consider, for example, Mohandas K. Gandhi's bitter condemnation of Western "civilization" in his 1908 pamphlet *Hind Swaraj* (*Indian Home Rule*) or the eloquence of Abraham Lincoln in the 1863 *Gettysburg Address*. Gandhi wrote:

Formerly, when people wanted to fight with one another, they measured between them their bodily strength; now it is possible to take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun from a hill. This is civilization. Formerly, men worked in the open air only as much as they liked. Now thousands of workmen meet together and for the sake of maintenance work in factories or mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts. They are obliged to work, at the risk of their lives, at most dangerous occupations, for the sake of millionaires. Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion. Now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy. There are now diseases of which people never dreamt before, and an army of doctors is engaged in finding out their cures, and so hospitals have increased. This is a test of civilization.²

Gandhi's tone and examples in the passage indicate his anger at the claims of Western civilization and Westerner's attitudes toward his fellow countrymen. According to Gandhi, Westerners equate civilization with advanced technology used to kill thousands, factory work to enrich the few, and more numerous and dangerous diseases. To understand his meaning, the reader must study his tone.

In the *Gettysburg Address*, Lincoln said:

The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain,

2. Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, <http://www.mkgandhi.org/swarajya/coverpage.htm> (accessed 12 September 2011).

that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.³

The president's tone in this speech during a particularly bloody period of the war was conciliatory and inspirational. He sought to reunite a divided nation as it remembered its fallen from this bloody battle. He does not single out Union soldiers; he mourns for all Americans who died there. His eloquent language reminded all Americans of their responsibility to the fallen at Gettysburg and to their responsibility to reunite the nation.

- Is there a single tone employed throughout the document, or does it vary from part to part? How does the tone in one document by a particular author contrast with the tone in another, especially one written at a different time? How does a particular source's tone differ from other sources describing the same event or issue, especially when they share the same or similar positions? Obviously, an understanding of historical context obtained through a careful reading of primary sources will help the researcher to understand the tone of a particular document.

The language of a document takes many forms and reveals much about the author, the source, and the purpose. If the language is informal or conversational, the source may have been written in haste, written to a friend or someone close, or not intended to be permanent. In Early Modern England, for instance, approximately two-thirds of all wills were written within two weeks of an individual's death.⁴ Such documents, including oral wills, were often dictated quickly and contain repetitions and language that suggest the individual was struggling to record his or her last wishes. Other documents may be more rigid in structure, form, and language. As noted above, salutations and closings in past correspondence were far more formal than in modern times, and researchers must understand these conventions if they are to draw appropriate conclusions from the information.

Finally, language is often period specific, and researchers must be extremely cautious not to read modern definitions into past times and thereby corrupt meaning. Words may have had a specific meaning or use in the past that is far different from current usage. Further, just as modern English has its own jargon and idioms, they were also present in the past. For example, the past use of the word *icon* would have religious connotations, while in the twenty-first century the word would often be associated with a clickable image on a computer's desktop. Having the *Oxford English Dictionary* or another etymological dictionary close at hand for reference will help

3. Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863," *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Library, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp (accessed 12 September 2011).

4. Colin D. Rogers and John H. Smith, *Local Family History in England, 1538–1914* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 153.

researchers avoid this form of potential misinterpretation. This is especially important because of the instability and sometimes open-ended meaning which words may convey. In order for historians to extract precise meaning from language effectively, it is essential that they have a clear idea of how these words functioned in the context of their time.

Significance

One of the most difficult elements for beginning historians and seasoned scholars is determining the significance of a written source. Not every primary source is equal in importance. In examining written sources, a scholar should consider the following:

- What are the elements that make a particular document important? A useful convention in answering this question is to think about how the document relates to an understanding of the topic.
- First, how does the source help explain the event or topic being explored? Could the event or issue be explained as fully without the document?
- Second, does the source offer unique insights or alternative information about the topic?
- Finally, is the explanation or interpretation in this document different from others?

To this point, the discussion has focused on some of the key questions necessary to analyze primary, written evidence. While such sources are certainly the most commonly used by historical researchers, they are by no means the only kinds of evidence available. Depending upon the nature of the research project, oral, visual, or physical evidence may offer insights and information, and attention must turn to these forms.

EVALUATING ORAL EVIDENCE

Oral evidence takes several forms in today's digital environment. Recorded interviews with individuals, following guidelines and standards of the Oral History Association or other professional groups in the United States and their counterparts abroad, emerged by the mid-twentieth century as an important new source for historical research. These interviews have traditionally been either biographical or focused on specific issues. Many personal interviews have been transcribed and survive as written documents while others are available only on tape or in digitized form. Transcribed interviews generally must be evaluated as all other written primary sources. Television and video recordings added another dimension, and digitization has extended the availability of such oral evidence. Students of contemporary history now have access through their computer terminals to speeches, films, and other examples of oral evidence.