

POINTERS

How to use documents in historical research

Written or printed documents that are primary sources can provide valuable information about people and events. However, it is very important to evaluate that information in order to decide how it will be useful to the development of your entry. Answering the following questions may help you use documents more effectively...

- What type of document is it? Letter, court record, diary, newspaper, broadside, government record? **Identify**
- What was the origin of the document?
- Can the author be identified?
- When was the document created?
- For what audience was the document created?
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- Read the document through the first time to get a general idea of the content. Find the meanings for unknown words or symbols. [The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the best dictionary for the history of words.] **Examine**
- Now read the document more slowly. Break it into smaller parts. What does the document tell you about lifestyle, governmental affairs, historical events, economics, laws, beliefs, etc?
- If the document is not dated, can you determine an approximate date from the information in the document?
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- Is the information given in the document reliable? How do you know? **Evaluate**
What other sources can you use to verify the document's accuracy?
- Did the author take part in the event or was he/she reporting what others had said?
- Did the author have a positive or negative interest in the events?
How can you tell?
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- What information from this document is useful for the development of your topic? **Determine its usefulness**
- What does this information add to the development or analysis of your topic? How can incorrect information or a biased viewpoint be used in your analysis of your topic?
- What other questions or lines of inquiry does this document suggest?
- Is the document a good visual for a project or a media presentation?
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For more information on using documents, see: Kyvig, David E., and Marty, Myron A. *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. Reprint edition. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984. Also, Shafer, Robert J. *A Guide to Historical Method*. 3rd edition. Homewood: Dorsey Press. 1980. Indiana Historical Bureau, State of Indiana, 1989.