

## READING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

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### What is a “primary document”? What is the advantage of reading one?

When you read a primary document, you are reading original materials for yourself, free of another person’s opinion. Textbook authors, in contrast, usually collect information others have written, then organize it and add a layer of personal interpretation to the *primary* or original information.

### Why do primary documents seem more difficult to read than textbooks?

#### 1. *Format*

Textbooks are written with students in mind. Therefore, textbooks tend to be “user-friendly.” They help you understand by using clues such as chapter divisions with introductions, questions, headings, and visual aids (e.g. bold print, pictures, and charts). The author of a primary document did not have students in mind, so the user-friendly clues will probably be missing.

#### 2. *Time Period*

Professors select textbooks written recently, so the language being used is similar to language you are used to reading and speaking. Also, the author’s examples are usually ones you can relate to. Primary documents may be written in language that seems outdated or stuffy. The examples may have been written for people in a different time period or with a different type of experience.

#### 3. *Your own experience*

You have been reading textbooks for a long time, but you may not have had much experience reading primary documents. Also, you will have to get used to more than one style of writing.

### What can you do to make your reading of primary documents more productive?

#### **PREPARE before you begin to read.**

1. Be certain your general background knowledge in the course is up to date so you can understand how the information in the primary documents fits in.
  - If you have a textbook in the course, be sure you are caught up on your reading.
  - Review your class notes.
2. Consider what you need to learn from the reading.
  - Why has the professor assigned the reading? What should your focus be?
  - How carefully should you read? Does your professor want you to understand it well or just gain an overview? To get a feel for the author’s attitude or the mood of the times?
  - How does the reading relate to the themes of a chapter? Or the themes of the course?
  - Have you been assigned writings that represent opposing points of view?
3. If the reading contains any introductory information at all, READ IT!
  - The introduction will give you background information.
  - The introduction may summarize key points and provide a useful guide to the reading, especially if the primary document is part of a collection.
  - If your class is using *Discovering the American Past*, you should read carefully “The Problem,” “Background,” “The Method,” “Questions to Consider,” and “Epilogue”!  
*Note:* “The Problem” ends with questions which will help you know what to study!
4. Look up in the dictionary any words in the title and subtitle that are unfamiliar.

#### **Have a few specific questions in mind and read to answer them. Answering these questions will help you concentrate when you start to read.**

1. Who is the author?
2. When was the document written?
3. What kind of document is it? [letter, court record, diary, newspaper, government record, etc.]
4. What is the historical context in which it is written?
5. Why did the author write it?
6. Does the author seem to have had a particular group of readers in mind?
7. What point of view is being expressed? How does that perspective influence what the author has included?
8. Think about the examples the author has selected.

**If the reading seems difficult at first, keep going for at least a paragraph or a page.**

- **See whether you can get a general idea of the content.**
- Plan to stop periodically and ask, “What is the point here?” “What is the author getting at?”  
Note your answers in the margin. You may find that you need to read a segment more than once to answer these questions, but sometimes it is best to read an entire section before rereading.
- Remember that authors sometimes state an opponent’s view first, then their own. [Watch for words that signal this “debater’s approach,” such as *however, on the other hand, in contrast.*]
- Finished? What have you learned about lifestyle, historical events, peoples’ beliefs, laws, etc.?

**Sometimes your professor will ask you to evaluate the reading.**

- Is the information reliable? How do you know? How could you check its accuracy or objectivity?
- Did the author take part in the events being reported?
- Did the author have a specific interpretation of the events?

**What if you find that you are having trouble concentrating or remembering what you have read, or if you feel you are “spinning your wheels?”**

Call the Learning & Advising Center at (215) 951-2730 and make an appointment to work with a professional tutor. One-on-one assistance is available!