

Bias

Most evidence that historians analyze is biased because it represents the perspective of the person or group that created it. Historians use the following guidelines when reviewing evidence from the past:



National Archives

- Every piece of evidence and every source must be viewed skeptically and critically.
- Evidence should not be taken at face value. The author's point of view must be considered.
- Each piece of evidence must be cross-checked and compared with related sources.

Analyzing Primary Sources



Library of Congress

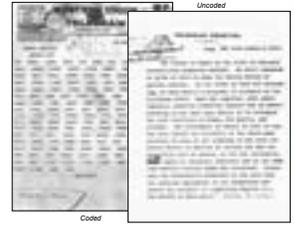
Probing questions can help you determine the relevance and importance of primary sources.

- Who created the source and why?
- Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event, or report what others saw or heard?
- Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the author have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
- Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
- Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How long a lapse of time?



National Portrait Gallery

How to Analyze a Text



What type of document is this? Is it a letter, an official proclamation, a private diary entry, an advertisement, or perhaps a coded message?

- Why do you think the document was written?
- What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written?
- Is there a bias or certain perspective that the author is writing from?

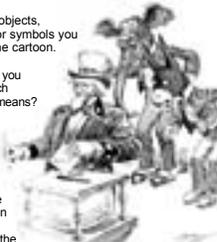
Write a question for the author that is left unanswered by the document.

National Archives, General Records of the State Department

How to Analyze a Political Cartoon

Political cartoons use symbols and hyperbole (exaggeration) to make a point. Here are some helpful tips for analyzing a political cartoon:

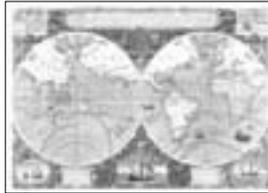
- List the objects, people or symbols you see in the cartoon.
- What do you think each symbol means?
- Describe the action taking place in the cartoon.
- Are there words? Do they help to clarify the cartoon's symbols?
- In your opinion, what is the message of the cartoon? Do you think others might interpret it differently?



Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division 1918

How to Analyze a Historical Map

Maps are symbolic representations of places shown in relation to one another. All maps necessarily include some details and leave out others. Next time you look at a map ask yourself the following questions:



Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

- When and where was the map produced?
 - What details has the mapmaker chosen to include (or exclude) in order to complete this representation?
 - Why do you think the map was drawn?
- How can you determine if a map is accurate?

How to Analyze an Artifact

Artifacts take many forms. They might be a coin, a stone tool found in an archaeological excavation, a piece of clothing, or even a piece of trash from your classroom's rubbish bin. Keep these points in mind when analyzing an artifact:

- Why was this object created?
- What and where would it have been used?
- What does the artifact tell us about the technology available at the time it was created?
- What can it tell us about the life and times of the people who used it?



If someone arrived from another planet, how difficult would it be for him or her to figure out what this object is? Why?

National Museum of the American Indian

Primary & Secondary Sources

Photo: Vimy Ridge, 1917, National Archives of Canada



Primary sources are historical documents, written accounts by firsthand witnesses, or objects that have survived from the past. Examples include letters, personal papers, government documents, oral accounts, diaries, maps, photographs, articles of clothing, artifacts (including art objects and architecture), coins, or stamps.

Secondary sources are accounts of past events created by people some time after those events happened.

Painting: "Barrage of Vimy Ridge" 1918, Canadian War Museum



How to Analyze a Photograph

Study the photograph for several minutes and write down everything that you think is important. Then divide the image into quadrants (4 sections) and detail the important elements from each section. Answer the following questions:

- What is the subject of the photograph?
- What does the photograph reveal about its subject?
- What is the setting for the photograph?
- What other details do you observe?
- When and where in the past do you think the photograph was taken? How can you tell?
- How would you describe the photographer's point of view?

America Revealed

