

## Primary Source Questions

### 1. **What does it look like?**

Whenever you approach a primary source, you need to consider its appearance.

- Is it a work of art?
- A hastily scribbled diary entry?
- A beautifully constructed manuscript?

These details can help you understand the source and the conditions under which it was created.

### 2. **Who wrote it? Why?**

Someone took the time to create this thing. Why? What purpose does it serve?

### 3. **How does the author communicate ideas?**

If it is a written source, consider the use of language and structure. For example, a chart full of names and numbers could mean that the creator was attempting to track information, while a paragraph structure is used to explain ideas or provide evidence. Remember, too, to consider the language itself: look for imagery, tone, and style.

### 4. **What are the big ideas?**

What is this primary source really about? What does the author want to communicate?

### 5. **What ideas are left out?**

Given what you know about the topic, are there any relevant ideas that are not reflected in the document?

### 6. **Whose perspective does it reflect?**

Understanding the perspective of the author is essential. You might discover, for example, that the primary source reflects the values of aristocracy, and thus attempts to justify their wealth. Another primary source might question aristocratic wealth by focusing on the plight of the lower classes.

### 7. **Whose perspectives are omitted/questioned/challenged?**

Because the primary source reflects someone's perspective, other perspectives are usually omitted. Thus, part of the historian's task is to identify whose interests are not represented in a primary source.

It is often helpful to think of the primary source as a *response* to something. Whose ideas are being re-affirmed/challenged by this document? This can also help you understand how this primary source fits into a larger context.

### 8. **Which questions can this source help me answer? Which can it not?**

Remember that, like detectives, we are conducting an investigation; thus, the conclusions we reach must logically follow from the evidence. We cannot make generalizations or assumptions. Identifying those questions that can or cannot be answered will help you better understand the case!