HOW TO ANALYZE PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Historians study sources to reconstruct the lifestyles and events of previous generations. By examining the ideas and thoughts conveyed in primary sources, we can attempt to understand the past as the people who lived it did. By using sources, historians craft an understanding of the people, events, ideas, trends, and themes of the past based upon interpretation of those sources.

Primary sources are generally first-hand accounts or records. They may have been written or created during the time period under investigation, or they may have been written at a later date by someone who lived through earlier events. Most crucially, primary sources have not been interpreted by anyone else, though they may offer interpretations of the events they describe.

The primary source documents presented here give you the opportunity to put your investigative skills to the test by analyzing the sources yourself, rather than by reading others' interpretations.

WHEN ANALYZING A PRIMARY SOURCE, YOU SHOULD ASK SEVEN KEY QUESTIONS.

1. Who is the author?
   Who wrote or created this? Is there a single or multiple authors? An author's identity sometimes helps you answer the later questions.

2. What type of source is this?
   All the sources here are documents, but what type? Is it a biography or a government document? This is a simple but crucial step because you must consider what you can expect to learn from the document.

3. What is the message of this source?
   What is the author describing? What is happening in the text? What is the story?

4. Who is the intended audience?
   Who is the author addressing? Was the source intended for private or public consumption? Identifying the audience will help you answer the next question.

5. Why was this source created?
   Does the author have an agenda, a larger purpose? Is the author trying to persuade the audience? Is the document or source simply a compilation or facts, or does it include opinion, inference, or interpretation?

6. Is this source credible and accurate?
   Historians must examine every source with a critical eye. What do you know about the author? Does the document make sense? Do the facts presented by the author or what you know about the time period support the thesis, statement, assertion, or story the author is conveying? Why should you trust, or distrust, this source?

7. How is this source valuable to me?
   How does the source relate to other sources from the time period or along the same issue or theme? Does it support or contradict them? Does it repeat information from other sources or add new information? How relevant is the source to your topic of inquiry? Does it extensively cover your topic, or only marginally or not at all? Remember, you should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

Let's take a look at a portion of a document to see how this process works. Reading the full document selection, of course, provides even more clues to understanding this source.

Galileo Galilei, Letter to the Duchess Christina

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was one of the primary figures in the Scientific Revolution. In 1608 Galileo, then a professor of mathematics at the University of Pisa, heard of a new technology, the telescope. Galileo quickly built his own telescope and used it to observe the planets and the stars. His observations provided evidence in favor of the Copernican theory of heliocentrism. For a variety of reasons, many religious leaders considered heliocentrism dangerous, and Galileo was initially commanded by the Roman Catholic Church to avoid teaching it. After the publication in 1632 of his most important work, Dialogue on the Two World Systems, which was supposed to be impartial but favored heliocentrism, he was forced to recant his claim that the earth moves in relation to the sun. He spent the remainder of his life under house arrest. Galileo is also famous for his work in theoretical mechanics, particularly for his formulation of the law of inertia. In the following selection, Galileo describes how the results of the new science can be reconciled with the Bible.

My goal is this alone; that if, among errors that may abound in these considerations of a subject remote from my profession, there is anything that may be serviceable to the holy Church in making a decision concerning the Copernican system, it may be taken and utilized as seems best to the superiors. And if not, let my book be torn and burnt, as I neither intend nor pretend to gain from it any fruit that is not pious and Catholic. And though many of the things I shall reprove have been heard by my own ears, I shall freely grant to those who have spoken them that they never said them, if that is what they wish, and I shall confess myself to have been mistaken. Hence let whatever I reply be addressed not to them, but to whoever may have held such opinions.

The reason produced for condemning the opinion that the earth moves and the sun stands still is that in many places in the Bible one may read that the sun moves and the earth stands still. Since the Bible cannot err, it follows as a necessary consequence that anyone takes an erroneous and heretical position who maintains that the sun is inherently motionless and the earth moveable . . .

   ... Hence I think that I may reasonably conclude that whenever the Bible has occasion to speak of any physical conclusion (especially those which are very abstruse and hard to understand), the rule has
been observed of avoiding confusion in the minds of the common people which would render them contumacious toward the higher mysteries. Now the Bible, merely to condescend to popular capacity, has not hesitated to obscurse some very important pronouncements, attributing to God himself some qualities extremely remote from (and even contrary to) His essence. Who then, would positively declare that this principle has been set aside, and the Bible has confined itself rigorously to the bare and restricted sense of its words, when speaking but casually of the earth, of water, of heaven, or of any other created thing? Especially in view of the fact that these things in no way concern the primary purpose of the sacred writings, which is the service of God and the salvation of souls—matters infinitely beyond the comprehension of the common people.

This being granted, I think that in discussions of physical problems we ought to begin not from the authority of scriptural passages, but from sense-experiences and necessary demonstrations; for the Holy Bible and the phenomena of nature proceed alike from the divine Word, the former as the dictate of the Holy Ghost and the latter as the observant executrix of God’s commands. It is necessary for the Bible, in order to be accommodated to the understanding of every man, to speak many things which appear to differ from the absolute truth so far as the bare meaning of the words is concerned. But Nature, on the other hand, is inexorable and immutable: she never transgresses the laws imposed upon her, or cares a whit whether her abstruse reasons and methods of operation are understandable to men. For that reason it appears that nothing physical which sense-experience sets before our eyes, or which necessary demonstrations prove to us, ought to be called in question (much less condemned) upon the testimony of biblical passages which may have some different meaning beneath their words. For the Bible is not chained in every expression to conditions as strict as those which govern all physical effects; nor is God any less excellently revealed in Nature’s actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible.

NOW LET’S LOOK AT WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THIS TEXT.

1. Who is the author?
   From the header we know that the author is Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), a key figure during the Scientific Revolution.

2. What type of source is this?
   This is an open letter Galileo wrote to the Grand Duchess Christina to defend his position in the conflict between the scientific community and the Catholic Church.

3. What is the message of this source?
   Galileo’s message is that the Copernican system, even though it appears to be in conflict with certain Biblical passages, must be viewed as the truth. He wants readers to understand that in spiritual matters the Bible is the unquestioned authority, but in matters of Nature, human observation must be considered the final authority.

4. Who is the intended audience?
   The source is titled Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina, as it was written to the Grand Duchess at her request to answer her questions regarding the contradictions between the Bible and science. Letters of this sort were circulated among the elites, so Galileo wrote it with the anticipation that it would be widely distributed.

5. Why was this source created?
   As the header suggests, Galileo was in the middle of a controversy surrounding the relationship between science and religion. Galileo intended this document to defend the role of science and to argue man’s observational powers should stand alongside Christian doctrine.

6. Is this source credible and accurate?
   Galileo was constantly under duress from the Catholic Church, as he was forced to recant some of his scientific claims and was placed under house arrest by the Church. He was writing a letter to someone in a position of power, who, although she was Protestant, was certain to circulate his writings among members of the Catholic Church hierarchy. Despite this, Galileo appears to have written a letter outlining his argument that the findings of science must not be constrained by the Church’s desire to avoid confusing “the common people.” You must weigh the various outside factors and decide if this letter may be taken as an accurate representation of Galileo’s position in the matter and what that position means in the overall debate.

7. How is this source valuable to you?
   This source would be an invaluable central component if you were researching:
   • The debate between science and religion
   • Galileo’s writings and his position in the debate

   It would be an important part of a paper on:
   • The resistance to scientific knowledge by the Catholic Church
   • The origins of modern science

   It would be crucial background information if you were researching:
   • The writings and opinions of Galileo
   • The evolution of Catholic Church policy regarding scientific discovery

You now have the basic tools to begin analyzing historical documents yourself. As you apply these skills to the documents contained here, you will likely find that your skill level will increase rapidly. You may even find yourself reading others’ interpretations of primary source documents with a more critical eye.