**PRIMARY DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

What is a primary document?

Primary documents are the “raw material” upon which historians rely in order to understand a situation or event, or find evidence for ideas and arguments about particular questions and issues. They are documents written *during the period being studied*, and as such often stand as “insider’s view” or immediate, raw, “first-hand” account of events. They are *not* shaped by secondary research or interpretations of events that follow and thus remain the same at all times, even if understandings of their meaning change over time. Examples of primary documents include: speeches and addresses, governmental charters (national or international), declarations, covenants, mandates, memoranda, policy papers, notes, discussion points, summaries, agency/office documents, and diaries.

How do you take on a primary document analysis?

To properly analyze a primary document and offer analysis on it, ask yourself some of the following questions:

1. What is **your** audience?

* For whom are you writing? (peers, professors, the general public?)
* Why are you writing this paper? ( to understand in depth what a primary document is about and to explore its relevance to the making of historical understandings, connect it significant ideas/themes in the course, and to communicate effectively important interpretations/meanings.)

1. Who wrote the document? (person? Ghost writer? Agency? Anonymous?)
2. Who was the intended audience at the time?
3. When was the document written and when was it disseminated?
4. Under which particular historical circumstances was it created? (i.e. the military, political, economic, personal contexts)
5. What is the author’s perspective on that context? Are their views clear?
6. Why was the document created? What purposes were believed important?
7. What is the tone or style of the document? What kind of language is used and what is its effect?

What format should the paper take?

Generally speaking, the analysis is designed like a research essay, even of their intention and focus is different.

* Start with an introduction about the relative importance of the document to the events/period you are examining. You can introduce some context here. A general thesis or theses about its impact/importance/controversy is useful.
* Provide a background summary of the document, answering some of the first few questions listed above.
* Elaborate on particular theses and arguments by provided information from secondary sources on its significance, what the document might teach us, and why it ties into ideas/themes relevant to the course you are taking.
* Conclude by talking about broader implications and the place the document has in the “grand sweep” of modern history. Avoid simply summarizing arguments you have already made.

FAQ

1. *Do I need to do secondary research?*

* Secondary research will almost always be needed to help “frame” your document in historical events and to better understand its significance. That said, you must keep in mind that the assignment is NOT a research essay, so focus must be on the primary document. The most difficult part of the analysis is trying to stay within the document itself, paying close attention to language, intent, timing, and other issues that shaped the meaning at the time it was written. In effect, you are trying to understand first how the document has informed secondary research over time, and then how secondary research has shaped the document retrospectively.

1. *How much secondary research is needed?*

* The answer depends primarily on what document(s) you are examining and how sophisticated your understanding of the context and interpretations about the document are, but overall you should be using no more than 3-5 good quality sources focused on the document (vs. general texts).

1. *Are citations needed?*

* As with every piece of scholarly work, citations are needed if you are discussing ideas/facts/interpretations that are not your own opinion or common knowledge. If you are summarizing the views of secondary research, citations are most definitely needed. If you are quoting directly from the document, citations are not essential, although many people will put them in to reflect the fact they used the document from a particular source (i.e. a documentary collection on line) as opposed to the original.

1. *What citation standard should we use?*

* While not mandatory, the Chicago Manual for Style is the preferred academic citation standard you should use for *all* work in history classes.

1. *Can I go over the length of the assignment?*

* No. The assignment is fixed for a reason. The task is to communicate effectively within a specific constraint, just as you have three hours on an exam, 20 minutes for a seminar presentation, or 3 minutes on a round of speed dating!! Think “tight”. Focus on a judicial use of language. Eliminate excess words. Get to the point!

1. *What if I am looking at more than one document for the assignment?*

* It makes no difference to the length or style of the assignment. You will simply be selecting from the documents more carefully with an eye on eliciting themes, drawing out comparisons and contrasts, and demonstrating a collective significance to the “grand sweep” of history.

1. *Can you recommend any other sources to help with the assignment?*

* There are many on-line sources to help with primary document analysis. Check some of these out:

<http://www.bowdoin.edu/faculty/s/smcmahon/courses/critical-analysis.shtml>

<https://academicskills.anu.edu.au/resources/handouts/writing-document-analysis>

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~rberkhof/studyaids/sourceanalysispapers.htm>

You are also very welcome to come speak to Dr. Kislenko or his assistants about this assignment at any time.

GOOD LUCK!