

# How to Read a Primary Source Like a Historian

Gks 11/18

History is constructed out of primary sources—documents that provide first hand evidence of the topic at hand. These primary sources include documents that are contemporay with the events under study, such as newspaper articles, trial transcripts, diaries, letters, reports, legislative documents, etc. They also include first hand accounts at a distance to the past, such as memoirs and oral history interview transcripts. They include imaginative works, such as novels and poems, visual works, such as photographs and paintings, complex creative works, such as films and music, material culture, such as jewelry and pottery, and more.

We say that his is “constructed” out of primary sources, because the sources don’t make for history in and of themselves. They have to be analyzed, that is, read, examined, and interpreted.

Jacob Burckhardt, in the introduction to his classic, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (orig. 1860), noted that another historian might have looked at all the same sources and come to very different conclusions. He wasn't saying that his study of the Renaissance was just a work of pure imagination. His point was simply that one could find many different things in his rich and varied sources.

You should read your primary sources with an open mind, ready to be surprised by what they may offer up. But you need to do more than this. You need to read your sources with questions in mind, questions that will lead you back to your overriding historical question.

## **To begin with, there is a set of questions that you should ask of any source.**

- \* What kind of source is this? What does it purport to be? What can you tell from the appearance of the source?
- \* Who is the author? What is their background? Where are they coming from?
- \* When was the source produced? And where? What was its context?
- \* Who was the intended audience of this source?
- \* How was the source received in its time?
- \* What is the basic point being made here?

## **Now you can go a little deeper, to develop your own perspective**

- \* How does the source work? How is it constructed? What is its internal logic?
- \* What views or assumptions are revealed here?

- \* What is missing here? Are there important silences? Or obfuscations?
- \* What does the source reveal about its author?
- \* What does the source reveal about the context in which it was written?
- \* What do historians say about the source? Do you see something different in it? What?

These questions should guide your reading and your note-taking, as well as the reading that you do outside of your primary source (in reading to contextualize your source, for example). With this analysis in hand you can develop your historical interpretation of your primary source. Typically, this will focus on one central insight about the source and will be built upon evidence in the source that supports your analysis.