

Analyzing Primary Sources

Why Learn This Skill?

Did you ever witness or experience an event, only to discover that another witness remembers the same event very differently than you do? An eyewitness account of a place or event is a primary source. The advantage of a primary source is that it contains firsthand knowledge. Understanding the information primary sources present is a key skill in understanding and interpreting historical events.

Primary sources may include diaries, letters, memoirs, interviews with eyewitnesses, images, photographs, news articles, and even legal documents. Today older digital items such as email and even certain webpages could be considered primary sources. Often primary sources provide detailed accounts of events, but reflect only one perspective. For this reason, you must examine as many sources as possible before drawing any conclusions.

Learning the Skill

Follow these steps to analyze a primary source:

1. Identify the author of the source. This may take a bit of research. Understanding who the author is will allow you to note any biases or opinions expressed by the author or creator of the source.
2. Identify when and where the document was written. Understanding the time period the primary source is from will help you better understand the perspective it presents.
3. Read the document for its content and answer the five “W” questions:
 - Who is it about?
 - What is it about?
 - When did it happen?
 - Where did it happen?
 - Why did it happen?
4. Determine what kind of information may be missing from the primary source. Having a second primary source to use as a comparison will help here.

Practicing the Skill

Read the following excerpts below about the United States in Hawaii, and answer the questions that follow.

“The United States had manifested towards the Hawaiians a spirit of goodwill, and had maintained an attitude of neighborly respect in all official relations. The visits of their naval vessels had been generally helpful and encouraging; the purposes of their immigrants had been generally civilizing and progressive.”

—The Blount Report on Affairs in Hawaii, 1894–95

“MY GREAT AND GOOD FRIEND: It is with deep regret that I address you on this occasion. Some of my subjects, aided by aliens, have renounced their loyalty and revolted against the constitutional government of my Kingdom. They have attempted to depose me and to establish a provisional government, in direct conflict with the organic law of this Kingdom. Upon receiving incontestable proof that his excellency the minister plenipotentiary of the United States, aided and abetted their unlawful movements and caused United States troops to be landed for that purpose, I submitted to force, believing that he would not have acted in that manner unless by the authority of the Government which he represents.”

—Letter from Ex-Queen Liliuokalani to President Benjamin Harrison, February 1893

1. How do the two passages differ in their views on the annexation of Hawaii by the United States?
2. Which source did you find more believable, or valid? Why?

Applying the Skill

Working with a partner, choose a recent current event in the news and locate two firsthand accounts of the event. In what ways do the accounts support each other? In what ways do they differ? Use what you have learned to evaluate the validity and usefulness of each of the sources you have found. Then, write a short paragraph describing which account you found to be more believable, and why.