

Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

Archival collections consist of many categories (textual, visual, multimedia) and can include many types of primary sources. Letters, city planning records, sound recordings, out-of-print books and pamphlets, personal diaries, government documents, maps, and video testimony are just a few of the primary sources you may encounter in an archive. Archival items are primary sources—that is, unmediated, original materials that emerge from a unique and specific historical context. Researchers draw on primary sources in order to develop interpretive secondary sources such as scholarly articles and books. Whether you visit a physical or a digital archival collection, the following worksheet will help you prepare for independent research by guiding your analysis of a primary source that interests you.

- Identify the format of the primary source with which you are working. For example, if it is a document, is it a newspaper article? Map? Letter? Telegram? Press release? Advertisement? Pamphlet? Government record? If it is in another media category, is it a photograph? Sound recording? Video testimony? Website?
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- Describe the item. What is its topic or theme? What are some unique characteristics of the item? If it is a document, is it hand- or type-written? Does it have any seals, stamps, or notations? Does it feature any people, acronyms, organizations, or institutions that you can learn about in a quick online search?
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- Where did the item originate? Who created the item? When was it created, and why?
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- Does the item have a clear creator or author? To what audience does the item appeal? How can you tell? What features of the item provide clues?
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- List three things you find particularly striking or important about the item.
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- What questions do you have about the item? What information might you seek in order to gain a fuller understanding of the item?

- How does the item relate to topics or readings you have encountered in class? How does it reinforce, contradict, or raise questions about scholarly interpretations you have read or heard?
