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**Primary Sources**

**What are primary sources?**

\* Primary sources are “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.”1

\* Written documents, furniture, art, music – and any other items produced at a specific time and place. \* Essential building blocks for the historian to reconstruct a moment in time and build his or her arguments.

**Reading primary sources**

\* First read for CONTENT

* What does the document say?
* What is the story?
* What are the main events, ideas, and arguments?
* It can be helpful to summarize the document in your own words. \* Reread for CONTEXT
* Authorship
* Who is the author?
* What is his or her background?
* Why did the author write the document? What were his or her motives?
* What assumptions or beliefs may have influenced his or her writing?

 These may include, but are not limited to, class, ethnicity, religion, nationalistic,   
gender, or cultural beliefs.

* Audience
* For whom was the document intended?
* Did the audience have any effect on the document’s content?
* Was the author attempting to silence another group?
* How was the document received?
* Language
* What do the language, vocabulary, and rhetoric tell you about the period?

1 Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (New York: Bedford Books, 2006), 3.

* What does the language say about cultural assumptions?

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* Have word meanings changed over time?
* Was the document translated into English?
* Could the translator have altered the meaning, tone, or content?
* Reliability
* What can the source tell you about the past?
* How useful is it for understanding the past?
* Does it exclude or downplay evidence or issues verified through other sources?
* What did the author leave out?
* Authenticity
* Is there any reason to doubt the authorship of the document?
* Was it possibly a forgery?
* Has it been altered?
* Was it transcribed by anyone other than the author? Who?
* What role might a scribe have had in shaping tone and content?
* Influence
* How important or influential was the document at the time it was written?
* Was it widely distributed and read (like a pamphlet)?
* Was it personal (like a diary)?
* Be careful here – some people intended to publish their diaries
* What were the consequences of publication (both intended and unanticipated)?
* Relationship to the class
* How does the document relate to the course themes?
* What kind of connections can you draw to lectures and other primary and secondary sources?

**Writing essays based on primary sources**

\* Review the assignment

* Follow the guidelines set down by your professor
* Keep the assignment’s goals in mind as you read sources, develop a thesis, outline, and write

\* Develop a strong thesis statement

* What is the main question you are trying to answer with this paper?
* With what point do you want the reader to come away from the paper?
* You may have a question assigned.
* If this is the case, make sure you address the question fully.
* You may have permission to focus on a particular theme or topic.
* If this is the case think about the unifying ideas.
* This is particularly important when writing about multiple documents.
* Your thesis should be **argumentative** NOT descriptive.
* Example of a **descriptive** thesis: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine presented his views on why the American colonists should break with Great Britain.
* No one would disagree with this – it simply states a fact.
* Example of an **argumentative** thesis: Thomas Paine’s use of plain language, biblical analysis, and themes of equality explains the enormous appeal of *Common Sense*.

 Note that this sets up the rest of your paper – you would discuss each of the three

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points in individual paragraphs. \* Analyze, do not summarize!!

* Primary source essays should NOT summarize or restate the contents of the document.
* Instead analyze or dissect the meaning of the text.
* The questions at the beginning can give you ideas on how to analyze. \* Use strong topic sentences
* The first sentence of the paragraph should announce both the subject of the paragraph and the significance of the information which follows.
* Place your strongest sentence at the beginning.
* Do not let your reader wonder why he or she is wading through all of the evidence you provide. \* Quote wisely
* Introduce quotes in your text, do not just drop quotes into your paper without explanation.
* Do not overuse quotes, it limits the space for your analysis, which is the most important part of your paper.
* Develop your arguments
* Refrain from block quotes unless absolutely necessary
* Quotes longer than four lines should be in block format
* Block quotes are single-spaced, indented, and do not have quotation marks
* Provide citations for all quotes
* Do not take words, phrases, or sentences out of context

\* Note the information in italics at the top of the documents in *Envisioning World Civilizations* is background information. It is not part of the document.