

By this point in the semester you are gaining familiarity with how to explore a focused question and what to “do” with historical documents and other primary sources. Now you’ll do the same thing on a slightly larger scale for this project, which is a 5-page essay based on two primary documents that have something in common.

Choose TWO sources from the *For the Record* reader which share some kind of historical connection. Develop a question for historical investigation, using these two documents as evidence. Your question shouldn’t be just a question of fact (“what happened?”) but rather of interpretation (“How? Why? What did it mean?”). You will use and quote from the primary sources in order to answer your question. In your paper, correctly and completely cite the documents you use.

Schedule

Oct 6	Choose your documents and formulate your question
Oct 8	Begin writing a draft of your paper
Oct 13	Rough draft due in class for self and peer review
Oct 20	Final essay is due in class in hard copy (or uploaded by Digital Dropbox BEFORE class). The paper is worth 10% of your final grade

Begin your paper by **ASKING** the historical question you investigated. This does not have to be in the actual form of a question. (1/2 page)

Then **DESCRIBE** each of your two historical sources, placing them each in its historical context, answering some of the “A” and “B” questions from the attached list. This part is similar to what you do in your Document Responses each week. (2 pages)

Then **ANSWER** your question, **USING EVIDENCE** from the two documents – in the form of quotations, summary, description, or comparison. Remember to “frame” your quotations (no orphans!) to make it clear which document they come from. (2 pages)

Provide a **CONCLUSION** that summarizes your argument and the relevance of these documents to it. (1/2 page)

Total length = 5 pages. Use footnotes (as we do in the weekly DRs), or put the Works Cited at the end of your document but not on a separate page by itself, if possible. No need for a cover page, but do make sure your paper has a useful & interesting title (not “Primary Source Project”).

Some helpful transition & argument phrases:

This suggests that...

As [author’s name] argues...

[Document A] provides evidence of... (Point to...)

In contrast to [Document A]...

[Document A] offers a glimpse into...

Contrary to popular wisdom, the historical evidence shows that...

Some Questions to Ask Primary Sources

Primary sources do not speak for themselves—they have to be interpreted. You do not just simply read about the past, you must investigate the past by asking questions. You must be the detective, and interrogate the document. Ask it questions, like:

A. Historical context

Who wrote it? What do you know about this person?

Where and when was it written?

How much time has lapsed between the document's creation and the event it portrays?

Why was it written? Was it meant to be public or private?

Who was it written for? What do you know about its audience?

Did the author have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or did he/she report what others saw and heard?

B. Understanding the document

What are the key words and what do they mean?

Does the author wish to inform or persuade others? Check the words – they may tell you whether the author is trying to be objective, or persuasive.

What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis. Can you restate it in one sentence?

What evidence does the author give to support this thesis?

What assumptions does the author make?

Was the author a neutral party, or did she/he have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded? Does the author have reasons to be honest or dishonest?

C. The document as a source of historical information

Is this document similar to others from the same time period?

How widely was it circulated?

What problems, assumptions, and ideas does it share with other documents from the time period?

Why are you looking at it now?

How might you verify the information in this document?

All sources have biases and limitations. Their reliability and usefulness are determined by the questions asked of them. If your source can't be trusted to tell you facts, ask about opinions. For example, if someone swears that Elvis was abducted by Martians, the question you should ask is not, "Was 'The King' really snatched by space invaders?" but rather, "Why would an American living in the 1990s want to believe this story?" What does the existence of such a belief tell us about the individual, the society, or the era?

Resources:

Wisconsin Historical Society, "Using Primary Sources," <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/primarysources.asp>

"How to Read a Primary Source," www.ups.edu/faculty/wbreitenbach/how'to'prmy.doc

Library of Congress, "Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources" <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/studqsts.html>