

THE 6 C'S of PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

CONTENT

Main Idea
Describe in detail what you see.

CITATION

Author/Creator
When was this created?

CONTEXT

What is going on in the world, the country, the region,
or the locality when this was created?

CONNECTIONS

Prior Knowledge
*Link the primary source to other things that you already know
or have learned about.*

COMMUNICATION

Point-of-view or bias
Is this source reliable?

CONCLUSIONS

How does the primary source contribute to our
understanding of history?

What questions do you have about this source?
What other source might you need to gain a deeper understandings of
the topic?

Name: _____

I worked with: _____

We looked at the following numbers: _____

Analyzing a Photograph

The camera records what is in front of its lens—but *only* what is in front of its lens, and only within the limitations of the photographic equipment being used. Photographs are a compelling partial record of a precise historical scene or landscape. They offer a way for us to get “inside the head” of people in the past by literally seeing what they saw. However real they may seem, images should not be taken for reality, nor should they be assumed to be neutral or inherently more trustworthy than text. Visual images record reality but they also convey stereotypes. The image’s composition, framing, and perspective all represent the imagemaker’s choices (conscious or unconscious). In our current digital age, old photographs can be digitized, enhanced and restored but also manipulated, cropped, altered or falsified. Being able to “read” a photograph is an important part of scholarly literacy. Photographs are not simply illustrations to texts, they ARE texts.

Notice not only the contents of the image, but think about what might be beyond the lens’s frame, i.e. what the photographer did not or could not include. Notice composition, color (black/white/gray are colors, too), focal points, and the source of light. What is the foreground, middle ground, and background? What is in focus, what is not?

Analyzing a Map

Maps are also texts that render culture into a single visual image, so many of the same considerations can apply as photographs. They represent reality on a two-dimensional surface using a system of symbols, similar to language. Here are six things you need to know when looking at a historical map:

Title	Grid	Scale
Orientation	Date it was made & why	Legend

Analyzing a Film Clip

Motion pictures began in the 1880s; they are similar to still photographs in that they depend upon the technology of a camera to record a moment in the past on film, but with the addition of time and movement, they bring the past to life in a unique way. When looking at historic films from 1890-1920, keep in mind that they were created using hand-cranked cameras mounted on large tripods. Movement is provided either by the motion of the object(s) being filmed, or sometimes a slow panning of the camera; unusual camera angles and camera movement came later in film history. Is this film telling a story or documenting its surroundings? Notice whether the film has been edited and where the cuts are. Film was silent then; has a soundtrack been added? How does that alter the meaning or mood of the film?