



Historians analyze historical sources in different ways. First, historians think about **where, when and why** a document was created. It's important to consider whether a source was created **close in location and time** to an actual historical event. Historians also think about the **purpose** of a source. Was it a personal diary intended to be **kept private**? Was the document prepared for the **public**?

Some primary sources may be judged more reliable than others, but **every source is biased in some way**. As a result, historians read sources **skeptically** and **critically**. They also cross-check sources against other evidence and sources. Historians follow a few basic rules to help them analyze primary sources. Read these rules below. Then read the questions for analyzing primary sources. Use these rules and questions as you analyze primary source documents yourself.

---

### **Time and Place Rule**

To judge the quality of a primary source, historians use the **time and place rule**. This rule says the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to an event in the past, the better the source will be. Based on the time and place rule, better primary sources (starting with the most reliable) might include:

Direct traces of the event;

- Accounts of the event, created at the time it occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
  - Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
  - Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by people who did not participate or witness the event, but who used interviews or evidence from the time of the event.
- 

### **Bias Rule**

The historians' second rule is the **bias rule**. It says that every source is biased in some way. Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened, or perhaps only what the creator wants us to think happened. As a result, historians follow these bias rule guidelines when they review evidence from the past:

Every piece of evidence and every source must be read or viewed skeptically and critically.

No piece of evidence should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered.

Each piece of evidence and source must be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

---

### **Questions to Use When Using Primary Sources**

Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?

Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the recorder report what others saw and heard?

Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?

Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?

Was the source meant to be public or private?

Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?

Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?

### **Source:**

American Memory from the Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/types.html>