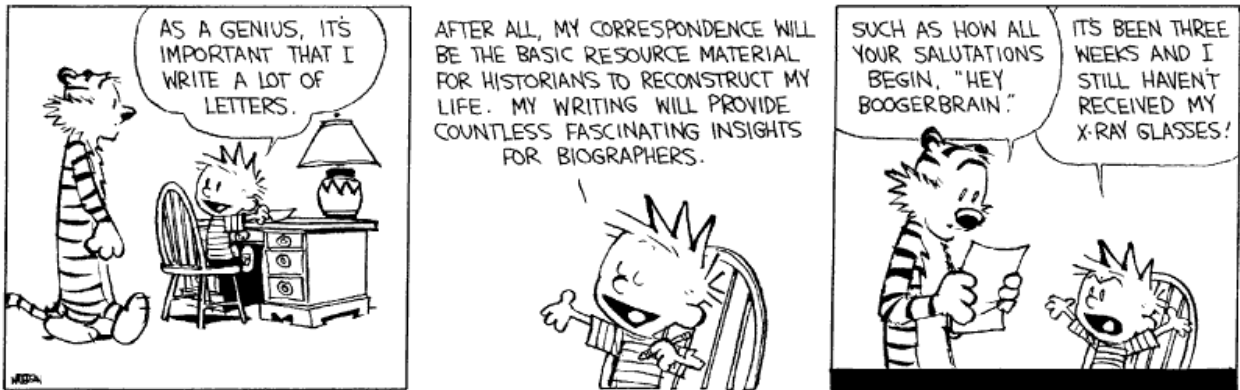


Primary Sources

Primary sources are the "materials on a topic upon which subsequent interpretations or studies are based, anything from firsthand documents such as poems, diaries, court records, and interviews to research results generated by experiments, surveys, ethnographies, and so on."*

Primary sources are records of events as they are first described, without any interpretation or commentary. They are also sets of data, such as census statistics, which have been tabulated, but not interpreted.



Secondary Sources

Secondary sources, on the other hand, offer an analysis or a restatement of primary sources. They often attempt to describe or explain primary sources. Some secondary sources not only analyze primary sources, but use them to argue a contention or to persuade the reader to hold a certain opinion.

Examples of secondary sources include: dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, and books and articles that interpret or review research works.

Reading a primary source

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past. To help you interpret primary sources, you should think about these questions as you examine the source:

Place the source in its historical context

1. Who wrote it? What do you know about the author?
2. Where and when was it written?
3. Why was it written?
4. To what audience is it addressed? What do you know about this audience?

Classify the source

1. What kind of work is it?
2. What was its purpose?
3. What are the important conventions and traditions governing this kind of source? Of what legal, political, religious or philosophical traditions is it a part?

Understand the source

1. What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
3. What evidence does the author give to support the thesis?
4. What assumptions underlay the argument?
5. What values does the source reflect?
6. What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
7. What action does the author expect as a result of this work? Who is to take this action? How does the source motivate that action?

Evaluate the source as a source of historical information

1. How typical is this source for this period?
2. How widely was this source circulated?
3. What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
4. What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?