

## Reading Primary Historical Documents

Reading primary documents can be exhilarating, but it can also be a frustrating experience. Primary documents offer readers a direct connection to the past, but it is also the case that people in the past—the people who produced and read these documents—may have lived in a world very different from the one we now occupy. They may have regarded as common sense things that we no longer believe to be true (that the sun and stars rotated around the earth, for example); they may have brought very different kinds of background knowledge to their reading of the documents—so that items that are puzzling to us were simply common knowledge to them. The meanings of everyday words, too, may have changed. Take the word “liberty,” for example. We nowadays regard liberty as a virtue; we associate it with freedom and other basic rights. In medieval Europe and Japan, however, liberty was a word associated with criminals: people who took unwarranted advantage of others, who did not recognize society’s rules, but acted only in their own interest.

**In short, reading primary documents requires some care and patience. The following practices will help guide you through the experience of reading these pieces of the past.**

1. As a first step, **skim** the document. Read the beginnings and endings of the paragraphs, and try to get an overall sense of the ideas. Then read the entire text carefully.
2. Read slowly, and stop after each sentence, paragraph, or group of paragraphs. Try to **paraphrase or summarize** for yourself what the author is saying. During these pauses in reading, write notes for yourself.
3. Note words or phrases which are different from contemporary English. If you need to understand these in order to read the document, look them up (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary is a good choice). You may not be able to look up every unfamiliar word, so use your intuition to identify the important ones.
4. Try to follow **context clues** to understand new words and phrases. Some vocabulary may be defined, or partially defined, within the document. If there are terms from other languages, check whether they are mentioned in the glossary or index of your textbook, or in your lecture notes.
5. As you are reading, keep in mind whatever you know about the author and the historical context. What might have been this author’s **purpose** or agenda? What events does the document refer to? And what events might the author have had in mind, even if they’re not directly mentioned?
6. Who was the intended **audience** for this document? How does knowing the audience affect the way we view this text, or the information we can take from it? Why/how did this document survive?
7. Consider the document’s **implications**. What is not stated directly but can be logically understood by following clues in the text?

8. What can you **infer** (logically deduce) about the values, belief systems, and social relations of the society that produced this text? Check that your ideas can be supported with specific quotations.
9. Consider the author's **underlying assumptions**. What do you think this author believed, even if it's not stated directly in the text? What does the author seem to assume is true and also expect the audience to believe? What clues led you to your answers?
10. Focus on one paragraph that seems significant. Why is it a **key passage**? How does it relate to the document as a whole? How does this passage connect to what you've learned in lecture? to other primary documents you've read?
11. Take note of any **numerical** data in the document. What is its source? What point is it used to emphasize? Also, what do you know about the way numbers were used in the society and time period you're studying?
12. Are there **narratives, repetitions** or other **patterns** in the writing that may be significant? Are there statements that might be intended **figuratively** or **symbolically**, rather than **literally**? Also, what do you know about the way language was used in the society and time period you're studying?
13. Pay attention to **introductions** or **notes** that go along with the primary document. Some oddities of language may be due to translation, editing, or later additions to the document. You may not be able to figure out certain word usages, so just move on and save your questions for your instructor.

### **Distinguishing the Roles of Editors, Translators, and Authors**

The primary documents you encounter in class often involve the work of several people. There is the author of the original text, the person from the time who wrote the primary document. There is also an editor (sometimes described as a "compiler") who selected the document and provided the introduction and notes. If the text was originally in a language other than English, there may also be a translator. Sometimes the editor and translator are the same person, but frequently they are not.

It's important to distinguish between the original author of the text and these other contributors. Editors play a particularly important role. Through their notes and introductions they provide you with necessary information to make sense of the primary text, but they also inevitably interpret the text for you—guiding you towards a particular understanding of that the primary document means. Try to get in the habit of asking yourself whether you agree with what the editor tells you about the text. Does the original document seem to you to support his/her interpretation?