


# A Study and Research Guide for Using Primary Sources

MODULE



**Early Modern**  
Explore a range of source materials curated by expert historians, and accompanied by chapters unique to this textbook.

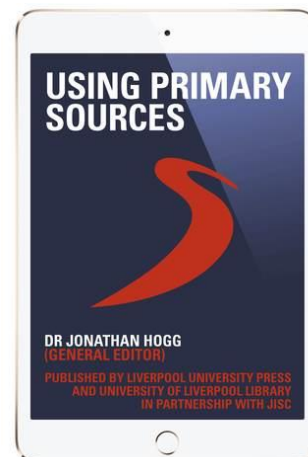
**Modern Sources**  
Part of the Open Access e-textbook 'Using Primary Sources' edited by Dr. Jonathan Hogg. Published by Liverpool University Press and University of Liverpool Library in partnership with JISC.

**Sources in Medieval History**  
Dr. Jonathan Hogg (General Editor), Using Primary Sources: A Practical Guide for Students (Liverpool University Press, 2017).

ANTHOLOGY

You can access the e-textbook via the Liverpool University Press website:

<https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/pages/using-primary-sources>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

This guide is designed to be used alongside your reading of chapters within *Using Primary Sources*. It is split into two sections. In class, you may be asked to spend a week on each section:

- |                                 |           |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| 1) Analysing a source           | pages 1-6 |
| Exercise 1: critical commentary | page 7    |
| 2) Using primary sources        | page 7-9  |
| Exercise 2:                     | page 10   |

### 1) Analysing a source

To begin, select one primary source of your own choice from the Biblioboard collection you are working on, or from a link you followed from the chapter. You will be using this particular source for the remainder of the worksheet.

By following this exercise, you will be building up a detailed critical appraisal of your source. **Remember:** some questions may be more relevant than others depending on the type of source that you have chosen. (**Tip:** this is a chance to show your judgement: how will you choose to emphasise and articulate relevant aspects of the source, and then relate these aspects to your overall aims?).

The first thing that we need to do is discover and compile key background information about the source before evaluating its potential flaws and weaknesses. Then, following a series of questions and exercises, you will be in a position to ‘critically evaluate’ the source.

Sources may have been created to serve a particular purpose, and very few arise solely from the desire to convey an unvarnished ‘truth’. They may be *designed* to inform, to influence, to communicate, to reflect, and to create particular meaning. They may also do this *unintentionally*. Sometimes, sources are adversarial and construct opposing accounts of the same event.

Look at questions (A-F) below, and note down your responses in the text boxes.

A) What **type** of source is it? (for instance, oral testimony, official report, diary entry, photograph, newspaper article, novel, item of clothing).

- What **problems** might be associated with this type of source? Find a quote from relevant secondary reading in the chapter (or related reading) to back up your assertion.
- Find specific examples of where such problems might be found in the source that you have picked.

B) How close is it, in both time and place, to the subject that it purports to describe?

- Is it based on first-hand testimony or is it a secondary account based on and negotiated through the testimony of others?
- **What does the source tell you in terms of basic factual information?** (times, dates, location, actors and agents). Do you think this information needs to be verified?

**c) What kind of agent, agency or institution generated the source?**

- Was it created by a private individual, a newspaper, a government department, another type of institution?
- Can you confidently judge for what purpose it was generated? Was it intended to entertain or educate, was it intended as art or as commerce?
- Who, if anyone, is the intended audience? (e.g. family members, the general public, government officials, children, academics).
- Think about whether your source is 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'.

**d) Do we know the specific 'author', 'narrator' or 'producer' of this source? If not, why?**

**Remember:** this may not be as easy as first assumed, especially in the case of visual or material sources.

- Does the author have any obvious or **explicit** motivations? For instance, do politics, religious outlook, social class, gender, race, personality or self-interest affect how we should view the source? Does the author acknowledge this issue at all?
- Can you be sure in your judgement the author's 'intention'? Are there multiple intentions?
- What extra research might you have to conduct to answer the above questions fully?

**Tip:** using online search facilities - such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* - can sometimes help when gathering details about individuals.

**E) In what social, political, economic or cultural circumstances was the source created?**

- How might these circumstances have affected the content and form of the source?
- Can you judge what sort of impact your source had within this historical context?

**Tip:** use your knowledge of secondary literature - or research the secondary literature further - to help with your answer).



**F) Again, utilising your knowledge of the secondary literature, are there any important details that your source *omits*? Is there anything from the previous exercises that may hint at why this is the case?**

- For instance, think about whether the source could have been censored (either through self-censorship in the case of the author or amended by an outside party)



You should now have a very good idea of what your source is, what it was attempting to do and how it may have manipulated language and information in order to shape the story it told. The majority of sources are in some way inaccurate, incomplete or tainted by prejudice or self-interest. The ability to critically evaluate and judge these issues in a concise and analytical fashion is a central cornerstone of good historical research. Now that you are aware of the weaknesses and points of criticism, you are better equipped to properly situate these concerns.

You may also want to take the following questions into account:

- Is the source *representative* of a particular perspective or worldview?
- What mentalities, arguments, ideas and values does the source reveal and are these typical of the period?
- How are concepts such as race, gender, class or citizenship presented in your source?

Here, you may want to consider the impact and circulation that the source might have had, the language that it used to describe key people, groups and events and the background and motivations of the author discussed earlier.

- Are there any examples in your source where the author's 'intended' meanings can be disputed, or is it possible to interpret this source in a way that is different from originally intended?
- Are there any competing interpretations or marginalised voices?
- Can you read anything *against the grain* in this source?

Have a look at one or two more primary sources from the collection in Biblioboard.

- Is your source challenging the ideas and conclusions in the others by bringing new evidence to light or are there points upon which all three sources agree?
- Do they share common (often implicit) assumptions?

This process is called 'triangulating' the source and you may wish to refer back to your knowledge of secondary reading in constructing your answer.

Think about *why* the source may agree or disagree with the others. For this, you may find it useful to ask the same questions of your two new sources that you have of your original source.

As you look to find a use for your source, you may find that many of its 'problems' are historically significant in themselves. Again, this may lead to a focus on the language of the source. For example, going beyond what we think the original 'intentions' of the source were - finding its *implicit* as well as *explicit* messages - can provide historians with some of their most salient arguments. Rather than focusing on 'what actually happened', historians are often interested as much in what people *thought* was happening, or how people made sense of what was happening, and then how they constructed those perceptions and ideas. For example, newspaper reports may be muddled or intended to mislead. Their effect on public opinion can be sizable regardless of these inaccuracies.

**Exercise 1:** Summarise the questions above and from your notes **compose a 500-word critical commentary on your chosen source.**

**Remember:** this process is time-consuming. But, when constructing research projects it is very important to show rigor, judgement, analysis, and broad awareness of the different ways in which we might assess the significance of source materials. Every source should be approached differently. Your tutor will offer you further advice in relation to specific sources.

## 2) Using primary sources

How and why are sources *useful* for historians? This is a very difficult question to answer. We know that historians use sources in many different ways, for many different reasons, and with very different outcomes.

In this section we are going to think about four things:

- A) Acknowledging your position in relation to the source
- B) Methodology
- C) Research questions
- D) Using primary sources

The section will culminate in an exercise, which will ask you to expand your initial source commentary into a broader argument.

### A) Acknowledging your position in relation to the source

We have now examined the features of your source in detail. It is now time to think reflexively about your own processes as a researcher. Think about why you picked the source you did in the first place. By what process of selection did you choose your original source?

Did you pick the source because:

- You felt it may have been easy to analyse?
- It was put there for you?
- There weren't many other sources to choose from?
- You felt most comfortable with this particular type of source?
- You felt that it most suited your own existing views and conceptions on the wider topic and/or that it may have been most likely to strengthen your existing argument?

Evaluate the personal reasons behind your choice of source. The more emotive the topic, the more **cultural baggage** you may carry. This may have a significant effect on the questions you asked of the source in the first place.

Write a short summary of how your own interests and motivations as a researcher may have skewed the process of selecting a source. You may want to think about what effect this may have had on the overall historical picture that you were able to build.

Thinking about your own position in relation to the source is always important: it is crucial when using some types of source materials, interviews for example. When thinking through these issues, you should consult readings that help define the methodological challenges that you might face. It is to these challenges that we now turn.

## B) Methodology

Historians are imaginative in the ways they choose to use sources. Sometimes historians are very clear about the justification for their use of sources, and will explain their **methodology** - or methodologies - at length. Rather than simply explaining why a set of sources was analysed in a particular way, extended reflections on **methodology** might provide deeper theoretical or historiographical justifications for a particular approach.

So, at the start of a book, a historian might explain why she has chosen to conduct **quantitative analysis** of a source set, for example. Maybe this has never been done before, or perhaps doing this in a new way serves to challenge a historiographical consensus based on **qualitative analysis** of the source set. Or, maybe the historian believes quantitative analysis is always the preferred way of approaching source sets, so she always would have approached them in this way. Either way, we would want to know her justification for that approach, because it influences how the sources are analysed and then used to arrive at a particular argument. It is good practice to explain the strengths and weaknesses of a methodological approach.

Sometimes, choice of methodology might be heavily influenced by one particular **theoretical framework**. For instance, some historians use the work of **Michel Foucault** to justify a methodological approach that privileges **discourse analysis** as a method of analysing sources. You should think about these issues: what are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and do you think the theoretical framework serves to illuminate or obscure the broader meaning of the sources under analysis?

It is also worth noting that the discourses, ideas and information inherent in sources are not uncritically absorbed by their users or readers. There are a wide range of potential reactions and a source's audience should be understood as active interpreters instead of passive absorbers.



### C) Research questions

At a basic level, sources can be used to suggest and then answer **research questions**. But how do we know which research questions to ask? How do we know if we are asking relevant, good or important research questions? When approaching a topic, we need to develop a strong working knowledge of the surrounding historiography. Hopefully, this will highlight new research possibilities, or gaps in existing historical knowledge. Research questions might arise through combinations of the following:

*new sources --- new approaches --- new research questions*

*new sources --- old approaches --- new research questions*

*old sources --- new approaches --- new research questions*

*(it is less likely that 'old sources' linked with 'old approaches' will generate new research questions)*

Knowledge of the wider historiography might suggest that new approaches to old sources is needed, or analysing newly found sources using old approaches could be fruitful. Ever since the cultural turn, certain types of source are viewed as legitimate, such as visual sources, or fiction. Analysis of newly legitimate source sets might disrupt old approaches or interpretations. Framing analysis in a different way - for instance privileging gender as a conceptual category of analysis - might disrupt old approaches or interpretations. Adding new sources to interpretations of old sources might support or contradict previous historical interpretation. It is up to you to explain and justify your research question - you need to think about what sources you are looking at (and why), and which approaches you are adopting (and why). You should do this with explicit reference to the broader literature.

**Class discussion:** Do you think that research questions that combine old sources with old ideas are likely to be effective and cutting-edge? Explain your answer.

### D) Using primary sources

In the last section, you wrote a 500-word critical commentary on your chosen source. Now we will focus on linking that critical commentary to a broader argument or theme, or, in other words, how to use the analysis you have conducted. This will culminate in an expanded version of your commentary.

**Exercise 2:** Expand the 500 word commentary you wrote in Exercise 1 to 750 words. Articulate how your source either a) strengthens or contradicts existing arguments in the historiography b) advances an argument of your own, or c) furthers our knowledge of the topic by introducing new evidence.

**Remember:** We eventually want to use sources to support and illustrate a systematic and coherent argument. Describing primary sources is not enough: in writing up our research we use sources to build and develop arguments and interpretations.

Refer back to the e-textbook chapter that you have just read through for guidance and advice. You may also find the following texts of use:

- Chapter 3 in M. Abbot (ed.), *History Skills: A Student's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- Chapter 4 in J. Black and D. MacRaild, *Studying History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- M. Donnelly and C. Norton, *Doing History* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- K. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- Chapter 7 in L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold, 2006).
- T. Loughran, *A Practical Guide to Studying History: Skills and Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- Chapters 4 and 5 in J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (London: Routledge, 2015).

*Created by Dan Warner and Jonathan Hogg.*