

20 Questions to Ask a Primary Source

Analyzing primary sources can be tricky. These questions are meant to serve as prompts to help you get started. Not all questions will be relevant to all sources, and new questions may arise as you go!

1. What is it? (Photograph, art, government record, etc.)
2. What stands out visually about the primary source (if anything)? Are there any unusual images, doodle, or handwritten marks?
3. Who created it?
4. What is the creator's background?
5. When was it created?
6. How was it created? (Think about material)
7. Where was it created?
8. What major events, themes, or peoples distinguish the era or period in which the source was created?
9. What is the purpose of this source?
10. Who was the intended audience?
11. How might the intended audience affect the reliability of the source? (Think about bias)
12. How trustworthy is the source?
13. Has the source been altered or edited in any way?
14. Who or what is the source about?
15. How does the primary source contribute to our understanding of history?
16. What can this source tell us about the particular event/person/place/topic under study?
17. What is missing from this source? Who or what is left out?
18. What other primary sources might corroborate or refute this document's interpretation?
19. Where can you look for additional, related sources?
20. How does this primary source relate to other sources you've already discovered or learned about?