

PRIMARY HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Primary sources are the original or “raw” materials that will serve as evidence to support your claim. Historical primary sources originate in the time period that you are studying (Turabian, 2018, section 3.1.1). For example, The Gettysburg Address is a primary source but a documentary on Abraham Lincoln is not. Primary sources can be written materials, or even objects like clothing.

This resource focuses on primary sources in historical research. However, primary sources can be written in the present as well.

HOW TO ANALYZE PRIMARY HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

In order to fully understand the meaning of a source, identify the following features of it:

1. **Subject** – What is the source explicitly about? What is the literal meaning of the source?
2. **Audience** – Who was intended to see the document? How might this audience’s point of view have affected how the author presented the source?
3. **Point of View** – What beliefs or experiences did the author have that might have created biases in the author’s presentation of this information?
Note: Religion, nationality, class, occupation, gender, and political position all affect an author’s point of view and biases.
4. **Purpose** – Why did the author create this source? What was he or she trying to accomplish? Identify whether the source is **prescriptive**, stating the way that something *ought to be*, or **descriptive**, stating the way that something *is or was*, from the author’s perspective.
5. **Historical Context** – What events and themes surrounded the author at this time? How might these have shaped the author’s focus? You might benefit from researching the major events of the time surrounding your document.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Suppose you were given the Gettysburg Address to analyze.

1. **Subject** – The speech dedicates the Soldiers' National Cemetery and addresses the Union soldiers lost in the Battle of Gettysburg and their legacy: “a new birth of freedom.”
2. **Audience** – Lincoln addressed a supportive crowd in Pennsylvania, most of whom had lost a loved one in the ongoing war. For this reason, his audience likely agreed with his positions.

3. **Point of View** – Some factors that may have affected Lincoln’s point of view are his religion, his position as President, and his poor, Northern upbringing. In your analysis, you would explore each of these points.
4. **Purpose** – Lincoln dedicated the cemetery and also argued against slavery in his speech using the Declaration of Independence as the central piece of evidence rather than the Constitution. The speech provided a **descriptive** application of the Declaration of Independence to slavery. In doing this, Lincoln attempted to increase support for the Union and reassure the public that the great losses were not without cause.
5. **Historical Context** – The dedication of the cemetery followed the Battle of Gettysburg, a turning point in favor of the Union, but the most bloody battle in the entire war. Though it was a Union victory, tens of thousands were killed on each side; this was a solemn speech, not a celebratory one.

NOTE: You may have to pull information about the document from outside sources to fully analyze it. For example, the text of the speech did not mention the Battle of Gettysburg, but this is a key event that surrounded this speech. You can even pull historical context from the date and location of the primary source.

Turabian, K. (2018). *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (9th ed.). University of Chicago Press.

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