

Thinking Historically and Using Sources

How to use historical sources to prove an argument.

Need for an argument

- In general, most students come into college with a basic ability to report on what they have read and summarize the materials.
- What is often missing is the ability to make an argument and support that argument with specific historical sources.
- As one study looking at high school level writing, “Instead of organizing source evidence around a claim, some students simply list or display these ideas; they insert quotes, facts, or data from the sources without elaborating this evidence or offering warrants that link the source ideas they cite to the claims they have made.”

How to create an argument

- A historical argument is a complex idea.
 - "When Europeans arrived in the 'New World,' they brought with them diseases that decimated entire groups of Native Americans" is a fact, not an argument. You can list examples to show this happened, but you are not making an argument.
 - If you instead say the following, you have a basis for an argument. "When Europeans arrived in the 'New World,' they brought with them diseases that proved to be the main factors in the downfall of Native American civilizations."

What am I looking for in an argument?

- If your paper does not have an argument, then it is simply an “information dump.”
- Your argument proves to me that you understand the assigned material.
- To prove this, you must demonstrate that you can use and apply the material assigned to make a strong argument.
 - Level 1: You can do this by going beyond simple quoting of material and elaborating on how the source relates to the argument.
 - Level 2: You can also critique the material, pointing out how it does and does not support the argument you are making.
 - Level 3: Finally, you can pose a counter-argument and show how it is incorrect.

Evaluating the evidence

- In writing in this class, I have narrowed down what you are allowed to use, but you still have to evaluate which evidence is appropriate.
- To choose which evidence works for your paper, you will have to look at what evidence is appropriate to your argument.
- Not all evidence works equally well, and part of what you have to do is pick the best sources for your own purposes.

USING AND CHOOSING EVIDENCE

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Primary sources include firsthand accounts, works of literature, historical documents, eyewitness reports, and the like. They are contemporary to the events and/or people described.

Secondary sources are produced after the events and/or people described. They include a summary of the event, a historian's account of the past, a critical reading of the material, and the like.

7 Steps to Understanding Primary Sources

1. Who wrote the document?
2. Who was the intended audience?
3. What was the story line?
4. Why was the document written?
5. What type of document was it, or what was its purpose?
6. What were the basic assumptions made by the author?
7. Can I believe this document?
8. What can I learn about the society that produced this document?
9. What does this document mean to me?

Who wrote the document?

Until you know this, you really know very little about the document. Sometimes you can figure out the author from the document itself.

- Was the author a political or private individual?
- Was he educated or not?
- Was it a joint author?
- Was there no single author, but is the document something that evolved over time?

Who was the intended audience?

This will tell you about the author's use of any specific language or concepts and the knowledge that he assumed on the part of the audience. It is no revelation that a document intended for a five-year-old child will be different than something intended for a mature adult.

What is the story line?

- What is going on in the document?
- What is the information in the document?

Why was the document written?

Everything is written for a reason. Is the document just a random note, or a scholarly thesis?

What type of document is this, or what is its purpose?

A phone book is different than a diary, and both are different than an inscription on a grave. Thus, one can expect to extract different kinds of information from different kinds of documents.

What are the basic assumptions made by the author?

For example, did the author assume that the reader could understand certain foreign or engineering terms in the language?

Can you believe this document?

- Is it reliable?
- Is the information likely or reliable?

What can you learn about the society that produced this document?

This is what you will be concentrating on in this class. All documents reveal information about the people who produced them. It is embedded in the language and assumptions of the text.

- Your task in this course will be to learn how to "read," or analyze, a document to extract information about a society.
- You might wish to analyze each document in terms of various aspects of a society (economic, political, religion, social structure, culture, etc.).
- This is not something that comes easily, but with practice you will be able to uncover what is really in a document.

What does this document mean to you?

You might also consider this as the "so what does it mean to me" question, but it still requires an answer even if the answer is going to be a resounding, "who cares."

What does this mean for us?

In using primary sources, one must be on guard for differences in outlook.

- The point is not to say who is right and who is wrong.
- The point is not to take our own assumptions for granted.
- To project our worldview onto the past tells us more about ourselves than about history.