

A POCKET GUIDE TO  
**Writing in  
History**

SIXTH EDITION

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be viewed as primary sources for the cultural and social history of the period in which they were made.

Because of the growing importance of film of all sorts, writing a film review is an increasingly common assignment. The suggestions provided in 3b-3 for writing a critique or book review also apply to a film review. In addition, you should do the following:

- Determine whether the film is a documentary or a feature film. Who is the intended audience, and for what reason was the film made?
- If the film is a documentary, note the academic credentials of the experts who provide the commentary. If it is a feature film, determine whether the filmmaker made use of professional historians as consultants.
- For documentaries and feature films, analyze the interests and concerns of the producer, director, and screenwriter. Note any other films they have produced, directed, or written that might help the viewer understand their interests and biases. In this context, it is useful to determine whether the people most responsible for the film have provided interviews or written commentary that might shed light on their work.
- Think about how the visual images presented in the film enhance our understanding of the subject and the period. Do the costumes and sets accurately portray the historical reality of the period? Does the film help us understand the material culture of the period?
- Analyze the cinematic techniques used to convey the story. Is the film shot in black-and-white or in color? How does the filmmaker use lighting to convey a mood or to make a symbolic point? How is one set of images juxtaposed with another to create an impression? What kinds of camera angles are used, and why?
- Analyze how the filmmaker uses sound. What kind of music is used in the soundtrack? Was it composed specifically for the film, or are classical or popular pieces used?
- Discuss the ways in which the filmmaker shapes the narrative. From what point of view is the story told? Does the film employ flashbacks or narrative voice-overs?
- If the film is based on a play or a specific text, compare the film with the original source. Are there

any themes or concepts portrayed more effectively in the film than in the text? Conversely, are there elements of the source that are eliminated or distorted in the film?

- Compare the film with other films, books, and articles on the same subject.

### 3b-5 Single-source analysis

As noted in Chapter 2, primary sources comprise the basic materials of historical research. Because examining and interpreting primary sources is so fundamental to the historian's craft, many professors ask their students to write an analysis of a single primary source.

A single-source paper can take many forms. You may be asked to analyze a book-length text, a shorter document such as a letter, an artifact such as a tribal mask, or an image such as a photograph. You may be assigned a particular source to analyze, or you may be allowed to write about a source of your choosing. Whatever the specifics of your assignment, a single-source analysis asks you to examine a primary source in depth, often without reference to the work of other historians, in order to determine what it can tell you about the people and the period you are studying.

In order to write an effective primary source analysis, you will first need to ask questions about the nature of the source itself: Who wrote this document or made this artifact? When was this source created, and why? The questions for evaluating primary sources listed in the Tips for Writers boxes in Chapter 2, pages 11 and 12–13, will help you begin to think about the fundamental aspects of your source.

Once you have answered the basic questions about your source, however, you must go beyond simple description and discuss the *significance* of the source: What can it tell us about the person who wrote or made it, or the time and place in which he or she lived? Can the source tell us anything about the structures and norms of the author's society? What a source can tell you depends on both the nature of the source itself and the questions you ask of it. Think of yourself as a detective interrogating a witness who is not very forthcoming. The source you are analyzing can tell you quite a bit about the period and people you are studying, but not all of that information is

obvious at first glance, and the “witness” might not volunteer everything it knows until you ask the right questions. In general, the quality of your source analysis will depend on the quality of the questions you ask; take enough time to read the document or examine the artifact carefully and extract from it every bit of information you can.

Finally, remember that a single-source analysis, like any other history paper, should focus on a thesis—the conclusion you have reached about the significance of the source as a result of your careful reading and analysis. (For more on developing and supporting a thesis, see 4c and 4d.)

### 3b-6 Historiographic essays

As noted in Chapter 1, historians frequently disagree about how to interpret the events they study. For example, some historians have interpreted the Magna Carta, a charter signed by King John of England in 1215, as a revolutionary declaration of fundamental individual freedoms; others have seen it as a conservative restatement of feudal privilege. These differences in interpretation reflect the varying approaches that historians take to their subject. For example, individual historians might be primarily interested in social, cultural, political, economic, legal, or intellectual history. They might approach their work from a Marxist, Freudian, feminist, or postmodernist point of view. Such orientations and affiliations affect the ways in which historians explore and interpret the past; thus, historians interested in the same historical event might examine different sets of sources to answer the same question. For example, in studying the causes of the French Revolution, Marxist historians might focus on economic and class issues, while intellectual historians might concentrate on how the writings of the philosophes (a group of French Enlightenment writers) affected political thought and practice. Moreover, since the historian’s work is embedded in a particular social and cultural context, historical interpretations and methodologies change over time. For example, the growth of the civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960s led to a greater interest in African American and women’s history. In order to

make students aware of a variety of interpretations and allow them to enter the exciting world of historical discussion and debate, some instructors ask their students to write historiographic essays.

A historiographic essay is one in which the writer, acting as a historian, studies the approaches to a topic that other historians have taken. When you write a historiographic essay, you identify, compare, and evaluate the viewpoints of two or more historians writing on the same subject. Such an essay can take several forms. You might be asked, for example, to study the work of historians who lived during or near the time in which a particular event happened—for example, to explore the ways in which contemporary Chinese historians wrote about the Boxer Rebellion. A different kind of historiographic essay might require that you look at the ways in which historians have treated the same topic over time. For example, to examine how historians have treated Thomas Jefferson, you might begin with two pre-Civil War biographies—Matthew L. Davis’s *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* (1836–37), which provides a scathing critique of Jefferson, and Henry S. Randall’s contrastingly positive *Life of Jefferson* (1858)—and end with the most recent studies of Jefferson. Yet another such assignment might ask you to compare the views of historians from several historical schools on the same event. You might, for example, be asked to compare Whig and Progressive interpretations of the American Revolution or Marxist and feminist views of the French Revolution. Historiographic essays may be short or quite lengthy. In any case, a historiographic essay focuses attention not on a historical event itself but rather on how historians have interpreted that event.

A historiographic essay combines some of the features of a book review with those of a short essay or research paper. You should begin with a critical reading of the texts containing historians’ interpretations, keeping in mind the questions you would need to answer if you were going to write book reviews about them (see 3b-3). You should not, however, treat the historiographic essay as two or three book reviews glued together. Rather, you should synthesize your material and construct an argument in support of a thesis. The following thesis is from a student’s essay on historians’ interpretations of the colonial period of African history:

evidence. To get the most out of your reading of secondary sources, you will need to study a variety of interpretations of historical events and issues.

You can find general advice about critical reading in Chapter 3 (see pp. 20–23); the following sections provide specific suggestions for evaluating both primary and secondary sources.

### 2b-1 Evaluating primary sources

Since primary sources originate in the actual period under discussion, we might be inclined to trust what they say implicitly. After all, if the author is an eyewitness, why should anyone doubt his or her word? Alternatively, we might lean toward dismissing primary sources altogether on the grounds that they are too subjective; as any police investigator could tell you, eyewitnesses see different things and remember them in different ways. In fact, historians steer a middle ground between these two approaches. Although primary sources comprise the basic material with which they work, historians do not take the evidence provided by such sources simply at face value. Like good detectives, they evaluate the evidence, approaching their sources analytically and critically.

Historians have developed a variety of techniques for evaluating primary sources. One such technique is to compare sources; a fact or description contained in one source is more likely to be accepted as trustworthy if other sources support or corroborate it. Another technique is to identify the author's biases. For example, the historian Polydore Vergil asserted in his book *Anglica Historia* that King Richard III killed his nephews. Since Vergil was a contemporary of Richard III, you might accept his account at face value, unless you were also aware that the book was commissioned by King Henry VII, an enemy of Richard III who had organized a rebellion against him, killed him in battle, and seized his throne. Taking this fact into consideration, you would want to approach Vergil's work with a more critical eye, considering whether his loyalty to his employer led to any bias in his history. Historians also read their sources carefully for evidence of internal contradictions or logical inconsistencies, and they pay attention to their sources' use of language, since the adjectives and metaphors an author uses can point to hidden biases and unspoken assumptions.

### Tips for Writers

#### Questions for Evaluating Text-Based Primary Sources

- Who is the author?
- When was the source composed?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the purpose of the source? (Note that some primary sources, such as letters to the editor, have a central theme or argument and are intended to persuade; others, such as census data, are purely factual.)
- How do the author's gender and socioeconomic class compare to those of the people about whom he or she is writing?
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?
- What biases are detectable in the source?
- Was the original text commissioned by anyone or published by a press with a particular viewpoint?
- How do other contemporary sources compare with this one?

#### Special considerations for editions and translations

- Is the source complete? If not, does the text contain an introductory note explaining editorial decisions?
- If you are using a document in a collection, does the editor explain his or her process of selection and/or translation?
- Are there notes introducing individual documents that provide useful information about the text?
- Are there footnotes or endnotes that alert you to alternate readings or translations of the material in the text?
- Are you using an edition or translation that most accurately reflects the current state of scholarship?

**Thinking about editions and translations.** As an undergraduate, you will probably not have the opportunity that professional historians do to work with original documents in their original languages. Instead, you will likely be relying on published, translated editions of primary sources or, increasingly, on documents posted on the Internet.

Using modern editions of sources in translation is an excellent way to enter into the worldview of the people you are studying. Be aware, however, that any edited text reflects, to some extent, the interests and experiences of the editor or translator. For example, the process by which

## Tips for Writers

### Questions for Evaluating Nonwritten Primary Sources

#### For artifacts

- When and where was the artifact made?
- Who might have used it, and what might it have been used for?
- What does the artifact tell us about the people who made and used it and the period in which it was made?

#### For art works (paintings, sculpture, etc.)

- Who is the artist and how does the work compare to his or her other works?
- When and why was the work made? Was it commissioned? If so, by whom?
- Was the work part of a larger artistic or intellectual movement?
- Where was the work first displayed? How did contemporaries respond to it? How do their responses compare to the ways in which it is understood now?

#### For photographs

- Who is the photographer? Why did he or she take this photograph?
- Where was the photograph first published or displayed? Did that publication or venue have a particular mission or point of view?
- Are there any obvious details such as angle, contrast, or cropping that suggest bias?

#### For cartoons

- What is the message of the cartoon? How do words and images combine to convey that message?
- In what kind of publication did it originally appear (newspaper, magazine, etc.)? Did that publication have a particular agenda or mission?
- When did the cartoon appear? How might its historical context be significant?

#### For maps

- What kind of map is this (topographical, political, military, etc.)?
- Where and when was the map made? What was its intended purpose?
- Does the map contain any extraneous text or images? If so, what do they add to our understanding of the map itself?

#### For sound recordings

- Who made the recording and what kind of recording is it (music, speech, interview, etc.)?
- Was the recording originally intended for broadcast? If so, why was it broadcast and who was the intended audience?

#### For video and film

- What kind of film is this (documentary, feature, etc.)?
- Who is the director, producer, and screenwriter for the film? Have they made other films to which you can compare this one?
- Who is the intended audience? Why was the film made?
- Does the film use particular cinematic techniques that convey a particular mood or tone? (For more on analyzing film, see 3b-4.)

the editor of a document collection selects which documents to include and which to leave out involves interpretation: the collection, as it appears in print, reflects how the editor has understood and organized the material and what he or she sees as significant. Similarly, excerpts from long documents can be useful in introducing you to the basic content and flavor of a document, but it is important to note that in the process of choosing excerpts, the editor of a document is making a judgment about what aspects of the source are important. You should read the whole source, if possible, rather than excerpts, in order to understand the significance of the entire document and the context of any portions of the source that you wish to discuss or quote. Finally, translation always involves decisions about word choice and grammar that can range from inconsequential to very significant.

**Note:** Often, the introduction to an edited volume, or the short headnotes that introduce individual texts in a collection, will not only provide useful background information about the text but also alert you to the editor's choices and intentions.

Primary documents require both careful and critical reading in order to be effective research sources. When you analyze a primary source, keep in mind the questions in the Tips for Writers box on page 11.