

# SOURCING - INTRODUCTION

## Purpose

Sourcing—the act of understanding who wrote a document, where they wrote it, and why they wrote it, for the purposes of analysis or interpretation—is integral to the work of a historian. Without properly understanding an author’s purpose and perspective, it’s difficult to properly interpret a document. In this first activity on sourcing, you will learn how to discover how an author has framed that event, and how that then impacts your interpretation of it.

## Practices

### *Reading, claim testing*

It’s nearly impossible to source something without reading it first. Not all sources are based on text, so in this course we consider reading more broadly and include video, artifacts, infographics, photographs, art, and other data representations all part of reading. In order to adequately make sense of a source, it’s important to understand the author, their background, and how this might have impacted what they produced. This connects to one of our claim testers—authority. Understanding what kind of authority the author has helps us interpret their point of view and also assists us in determining if their account is credible or trustworthy.

## Process

Consider this scenario:

*Imagine that you are a police officer who has been called to the scene of a car crash (multiple vehicles were involved), and you are trying to figure out who is responsible for this accident. You’ve interviewed many people who witnessed the accident, and unfortunately, you’ve received a lot of conflicting accounts about the event and who ultimately caused it. Note: Everyone you’ve spoken to has told the truth about what they think happened.*

Now, pair up with one of your classmates and answer the following questions:

1. Why might there be different stories if no one is lying?
2. What are the different types of people who may have witnessed the accident? For example, those involved versus witnesses.
3. What might make one person’s story more plausible or believable than another person’s?

Once you’ve answered the questions above, be prepared to share your answers with the class.

Now, imagine that three people really stood out to you from the interviews.

- A 15-year-old straight-A student who lives far away from school, and has a special drivers’ permit to get back and forth. She has no other way to get to school if she loses her permit.
- An uninsured motorist who was involved in the accident.
- A shopkeeper who witnessed the accident in front of his store. The shopkeeper has a reputation for complaining about kids driving too fast in the neighborhood.

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Now that you have a bit more information, as a group, discuss the following questions:

1. Do any of the people interviewed have a particular motivation or reason to avoid blame, or place blame on someone else for the accident?
2. Is each person's story believable and trustworthy?
3. Do stories change over time?
4. Is there any physical evidence that might point to what actually happened?

Now that you've talked about all this with your class, can you see how this applies to history?

Remember, the way that people interpret historical events can be wildly different depending upon their circumstances, point of view, trustworthiness, evidence, perspectives, and time and place in relation to the event. That's one of the reasons we can read two interpretations of the past and find them at odds, and also the reason we spend time trying to tease out an author's intent or purpose, and try to find evidence that might help us make sense of what actually happened. It is also the reason that in this course we often refer to articles and essays as "historical accounts" or "historical interpretations." Everything we read in history is someone's viewpoint on a particular topic, which can result in varying accounts or interpretations of that topic. Our stories about what happened in the past are reconstructions of events based on our perspective and the evidence we use to support our stories. Differences in stories don't make people right or wrong – they are simply viewing things from different perspectives!

Due to these differences, it's important that we have all the tools in place to make sense of the history we encounter. One of the chief ways we do this is through sourcing, which we define as the process of understanding who wrote a document, where they wrote it, and why they wrote it, for the purpose of historical analysis or interpretation.

It's important to source everything you encounter in this course. You'll really start to dig into this practice in the next activity on sourcing.

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**Directions:** Before you read, look at the “Think about” column. Once you’ve finished reading, answer the questions. Answer any of the questions you’re able to, based on the material provided. Some sources and documents won’t have enough information for you to answer every question.

Article Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Era #: \_\_\_\_\_

Article Author: \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson #: \_\_\_\_\_

Date source was written: \_\_\_\_\_

## Step 1: Summarize

Think about...	
Reason for sourcing	What is the question, idea, or frame you are using this/these document(s) to evaluate?
Major claim / thesis	What is the main idea of this document? If you’re sourcing more than one document, provide the main idea for each.

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## Step 2: Source

Think about...	
Author	What, if anything, do you know about the person who wrote this/these?
Place	Where was the document created? If you're sourcing more than one document, provide the location for each.
Purpose	Given the information available, what do you think the author's purpose was in creating the document? If you're sourcing more than one document, provide the purpose for each.
Audience	Who was this created for (that is, was this published for anyone to read or was it published privately, for one specific person or group)? If you're sourcing more than one document, provide the audience for each.
Perspective	How does what you know about the author(s) impact your understanding of the document(s)?

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## Step 3: Analyze

Think about...	
Significance	Why does this/these document(s) matter to history or to the question you are evaluating?
Support	What from the document(s) confirms what you already knew about the question you are evaluating?
Extend	In what ways did this/these document(s) deepen your thinking about the question you are evaluating? <i>This document added to my understanding of ... by...</i>
Challenge	How did this document change or challenge your thinking about the question you are evaluating? <i>At first, I thought... now, I think.... Or, My thinking on... changed when...</i>
Everything else	What other information would give you a fuller understanding of this time in history?