

## A Basic Guide on “Analyzing” Primary Sources for PARC By David Dawson, *PARC Leader*

**What is a primary source?** *A primary source is defined as something created/made during the time you are studying.* Anne Frank’s famous diary, for example, is a primary source for studying the Holocaust, because it was created during and contains the experiences of someone living through those dark and barbaric events. Your textbook, a scholarly article, and even your professor are secondary sources, *not* primary. Secondary sources often analyze both primary sources and other secondary sources.

### The Guide: Basic Questions to Ask When Approaching a Primary Source

**Who:** who created this primary source? What kind of person was he/she/they? Do we know anything about their beliefs, their job, their role, their feelings? Who did they create the source for/did it have an intended audience? Was it intended to be, for example, a private letter, or a widely circulated critique of something? Did someone order that this source be created? If so, why? **Is this person possibly biased, or prejudiced against something or someone?** If a well-known supporter of slavery writes a book about the treatment of slaves, we should probably worry that his source contains some misinformation or distortions. That said, bias doesn’t make a source useless - quite the opposite. Now we have an interesting source that tells us how supporters of slavery thought, saw, and wrote about the treatment of slaves. Moreover, we know he felt compelled to write something defending slavery - what made him do that?

**When:** Obviously, you’ll want to know when the thing was produced. Historians are interested in “change over time,” so if we see, for example, a lot of people talking about something in 1870 but not in 1890, we have to figure out why that topic is no longer so interesting/concerning to people at the time. That’s just one example of why chronology matters - so always look for a date!

**What:** What’s in the primary source, and what type of source is it? There’s a difference between a poem and a government record of a police incident, so determine exactly what it is you’re looking at. What is the person/people who made it trying to say or accomplish? Do they have an argument/claim?

**Where:** Sometimes it matters where something was made - historical context isn’t all about time, but also location. People live very different lives and think very different thoughts in separate areas, right? If you discovered, for example, that two people were saying very similar things about George Washington during the Revolutionary War, but one of them lived in England and one of them lived in NEW England, that’d be pretty interesting, right?

**How:** How was this source made (sometimes, if it’s a letter for example, it’s obvious, but other times you might want to consider the process of making the document.) Was it written down by the actual author, or was it dictated/originally said out loud? Was it written all at once, or over the course of several days, weeks, months, or years? If, for example, you’re reading a document written by a newly freed slave, you might question how they learned to write, or wonder if someone had written it down for them. If it’s the second one, is it possible the writer distorted or changed in some way the words of the slave (and that goes back to the “Who” part of the process).

**Why:** The most important part, and the one that links to all five of the previous parts. Try to tie it all together - why this kind of person make this kind of source? Why is this person biased or not biased, and how did they become biased? Why then? Why make it for this or that purpose? Why make it here and not there? Why use this word or this tone and not another? Perhaps most importantly, you should be answering the biggest question of all: why should we care? What new information or understanding does this source give us about a person, time, or place?

**Important note: there's a difference between "summary" and "analysis."** Your professor is not interested in a list of observations or just a description of what's happening/being said in the source. Always remember that you should be answering "why" (why this is useful for historians, why the creator of the source might have made this source the way he did, etc). If you ever find yourself describing something without considering the "why," it's time to stop and consider if you're just summarizing rather than analyzing.