

Close, critical analysis of texts produced in the past (primary sources) is a fundamental skill for a historian. Types of “texts” not only include published or unpublished words on a page, but also photographs, artworks, maps, film, and sound recordings. Even sources that purport to be “unbiased,” like Census tables or street maps, can be revealing in what they include, what they leave out, and how they present their data.

Reading primary texts takes you directly to the source, allowing you to form your independent assessment of the past rather than having someone else interpret it for you. It allows you to assess the “expert” interpretations of the past and to become an “expert” yourself. The close reading of primary sources takes you closer to the people who lived in the past and gives you the tools to interpret their voices.

Writing a paper that is a “close reading” of a primary source is analogous to writing an analysis of a work of literature (like you might do in an English course), but it is not exactly the same. The key elements of a written analysis are a **THESIS STATEMENT** that opens the paper with a succinct summary of what you have concluded about the document, a **SUMMARY DESCRIPTION** of the source and its elements, placement of the source in its **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**, and a **EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS** of the source’s point of view, reflection of its period, and alternate ways it might be read. (For a short paper of less than 5 pages, you will want to devote no more than two paragraphs each to the source description and context, and the remainder of the paper to analytic discussion. Longer papers should feature a road map at the start for what will be argued by the paper, and should break up the argument into no more than three subsections of the paper. For additional guidance on style and structure for papers of any length, see my handout on paper-writing on this web site.)

STEP ONE: Read the primary source closely.

Questions to ask as you examine the document:

- What are the main elements of the document? What is its focus?
 - For a manuscript: What is its main argument[s]? Is it narrative (telling the facts) or persuasive (making a case)? Is it serious or is it satirical?
 - For a photograph, print, or map: What are the strongest visual elements of the piece? What does the creator want us to focus upon?
- What is the document’s point of view?
 - For a manuscript: What biases are present? Are these made explicit or are they implicit? How do these points of view reflect the period in which s/he was writing?
 - For a photograph, print, or map: What is the creator’s vantage point? How is s/he framing the image? What does this include, and what does it leave out? Is s/he manipulating the medium to present “reality” in a particular way?
- What can the (original) titles or captions of the document tell us about how the author wants us to interpret it?
- What is missing? What might be included if the author was of another class/race/gender? What might be included if s/he was trying to make a different argument?
- How might different social groups read this document? Would people interpret this document differently depending on their class background, their ethnicity or race, their political affiliation, or their gender? Why?
- What is surprising in this document? Why is it surprising?

STEP TWO: Contextualize the document.

- Where did the document originally appear?
- What do we know about the author/photographer/illustrator/publisher? What might we deduce about their background from the document itself?
 - Was this a published document? Why did the author have the influence/authority to get it published?
- What do we know about the intended audience for this document? What might we deduce about the audience from the document itself?
 - Was this document circulated widely? Was it presented in contexts where it is accessible only to certain groups of people (those who can read English, those who read other languages, those who have the money to purchase newspapers or magazines)?
- When was this produced? How is the document reflecting what you already know about its historical context? What new things does this document teach you about its historical context?
- Why was the document produced?

STEP THREE: Outline your written analysis.

1. The paper should begin with a **THESIS STATEMENT**. This should appear no later than the first paragraph of the paper. It should present a case rather than merely describe. It can be more than one sentence. Be sure to reference the source in your thesis.

- Not a thesis statement: “The Birds-Eye View of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 shows the fairgrounds with the city and Mount Rainier in the background.”
- Also not a thesis statement: “The Birds-Eye View is an idealized portrait of the fairgrounds and the city.”
- Nope: “The Seattle World’s Fair was designed to sell a new image of the city to outside audiences.”
- Here we go: “In its idealized depiction of city and landscape, the Birds-Eye View of the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition reflects how Seattle’s middle-class leaders aspired to show the world a city that was sophisticated, orderly, and in harmony with nature. The reality was quite different.” (Note: the thesis statement doesn’t need to say **everything** about the document; it can pick up only one theme. Just make sure it is a theme that is central to the document’s context and significance.)

2. **SUMMARY DESCRIPTION**: The paper should describe the document and its immediate context. Draw upon the answers you gave to the first questions in Step One.

3. **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**: Draw upon the answers you gave in Step Two.

4. **ANALYSIS**: Draw upon the answers you gave to the remainder of the questions in Step One.

STEP FOUR: Write your analysis.

For assistance, please refer to my paper-writing style sheet “Some guidelines for writing American history papers,” found on the student resources page on my website. There, you’ll also find resources for students elsewhere at the UW and links to comprehensive research and writing guides compiled by historians at other colleges and universities. I encourage you to browse these sites for answers and inspiration.

MY STUDENT RESOURCES PAGE

<http://faculty.washington.edu/momara/Resources.html>