



WORKING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES IN HISTORY

Recognizing evidence in a primary historical text.

In order to use a primary text effectively you need to be able to tell what constitutes evidence that you can build into your argument about the text. An effective essay about an historical event uses specific references from primary and secondary sources to support the argument. Here are some things that you can use as evidence from the primary sources.

1. Dialogue and Speeches

- Someone makes a public announcement or speech.
- Someone says something about someone else.
- Someone tells about an event he/she witnessed.

Use direct quotations rather than paraphrasing. Quotes let the person say it in his/her own words. This is a very effective strategy when you are building your argument. When quoting what a person says, be sure to place the quote in context. Tell the reader who said it, to whom the person said it, when it was said and to what it refers. Be like a journalist, and answer the six “wh” questions: who, what, where, when, why and how.

2. Excerpts from a contemporary letter, diary, or newspaper

- Author comments on events or actions of the time.
- Author comments on common ideas or thoughts of the time.
- Author talks about his/her own reactions to events.

The author of a contemporary letter, diary or newspaper may have a different perspective than official commentators of the time. Therefore, when quoting from these sources, you need to keep this perspective separate from other perspectives on these events. What is the author saying about the mores of the time, and what is he/she saying about his/her own particular perspective? Is this a misapprehension of what is really happening? After quoting or summarizing the author’s statements, you should explain the implications of this perspective to the general sentiment of the time or how it shows the author’s frame of mind or bias.

3. Use descriptions of

- A person
- A place or geographic location
- An object

It is often very useful to quote the exact words of a description from the primary source. This is because the words of the description convey the mood or feelings of the people who are observing the thing being described. When quoting a description of a person, place or thing, place this description in context. When was it described, why was it described in this way and who was observing it in this way?

4. Events

- A contemporary author describes an event from gathered materials.
- A witness describes an event from his/her first-hand experience of it.

You may summarize, rather than quote, the accounts of events that are described in a text. However, be careful only to summarize accounts of those events that are directly related to the point you are making in your essay. Don't get lured into the trap of simply retelling the events that are recounted by the author of the source. What exactly does the event prove about the motivation, feelings or character of the people involved in that event? What are the consequences of the actions of the people involved?

Working Primary Evidence into your Essay:

1. MINOR ORGANIZATION:

- Look at all the evidence you have gathered and begin to put it all into related categories. This pre-organization technique will prevent you from using the same piece of evidence more than once in your essay, and will also help you get the best fit between the evidence and the point you are trying to make about the text.
- Create a working thesis: what theme seems to link all these points together and make them say something in answer to the assignment?

2. MAJOR ORGANIZATION:

- Create an outline of your essay. This will involve organizing the piles according to the organizing principle that seems most appropriate. It could be according to chronology of the primary source, or according to importance, or perhaps as part of a comparison with another event or the actions of another person involved in that event. However you decide to organize the points of your essay, make sure that that organization is apparent to the reader.
- Begin to write! Sometimes the best fit for all the pieces of information that you have gathered does not become apparent until you actually begin writing. Don't forget, though, if you do change direction, make sure that your organization is still clear to the reader.

When inserting evidence into your essay, follow three guidelines of "fit, form and function"¹. This means that you should use only those pieces of evidence that fit with the point you are trying

¹ Joanne Buckley, *Fit to Print* 5th Ed. Toronto: Harcourt. p.

to make; the form of the quote should fit with your own sentence structure; and the function of the quoted or summarized evidence is to support the point you are trying to make --- not to state that point for you.

FIT

People act and write about events for a variety of reasons. Therefore, you will need to find more than one piece of evidence in order to support any suppositions that you make about motivation. Select text that shows evidence of what the central participants in an event are thinking, or what others think about their actions or their motivations.

FORM

Every statement you make about an author or an event must be supported by evidence from either a primary or secondary source or an historical opinion about the text you are examining. There are several forms that your evidence can take in the essay. You may paraphrase, use a direct short quote, a direct long quote, or a quote within a quote (i.e. what the author quotes someone else as having said).

FUNCTION

All evidence that you use from the primary source must be direct, bounded and documented.

Direct: The best evidence is the evidence that is taken directly from the text. If you are trying to prove implications or interpretations, you must have something specific from the text that you are interpreting. Let the reader know exactly to which words in which passage you are referring.

Bounded: You need to let the reader know where the ideas of the source text end and your interpretation begins. There have to be explicit rhetorical boundaries between the two so that the reader is in no doubt about who is saying what. In the case of quotations, the quotation marks help form the boundaries, but you also need to use words to form that boundary. At the beginning of the borrowed idea, let the readers know whose idea it is. Use introductions such as: "Dickinson says", or "According to Smith," or "As Brown has noted" or "Frye suggests that." At the end of the summary or paraphrase, you should put in the footnote. This gives the reader the page reference and other information linking it to the Bibliography.

Other useful verbs are:

insists	compares	notes	rejects
argues	confirms	observes	reports
admits	contends	points out	suggests
claims	declares	reasons	agrees
believes	denies	asserts	thinks

Documentation

Check with your professor as to which Documentation format to use in your History paper. Most historians use Chicago documentation format for referencing within the text. Every quote, paraphrase and summary needs to have its own footnote or endnote.