

Analyzing Primary Sources

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The writing of history entails more than thinking about past events and creating stories based on those thoughts. Historians use evidence from the past, and the work of other historians, as the basis for their accounts.

This tutorial examines the sources that historians use, and how they use them, in four parts:

1. Primary vs. Secondary Sources

A wide range of tools are available to historians when they write history. Evidence from a number of sources—including oral interviews, posters, newspapers, laws, census data, pictographs, novels, political cartoons, maps, and journals—is consulted and relied upon during the process.

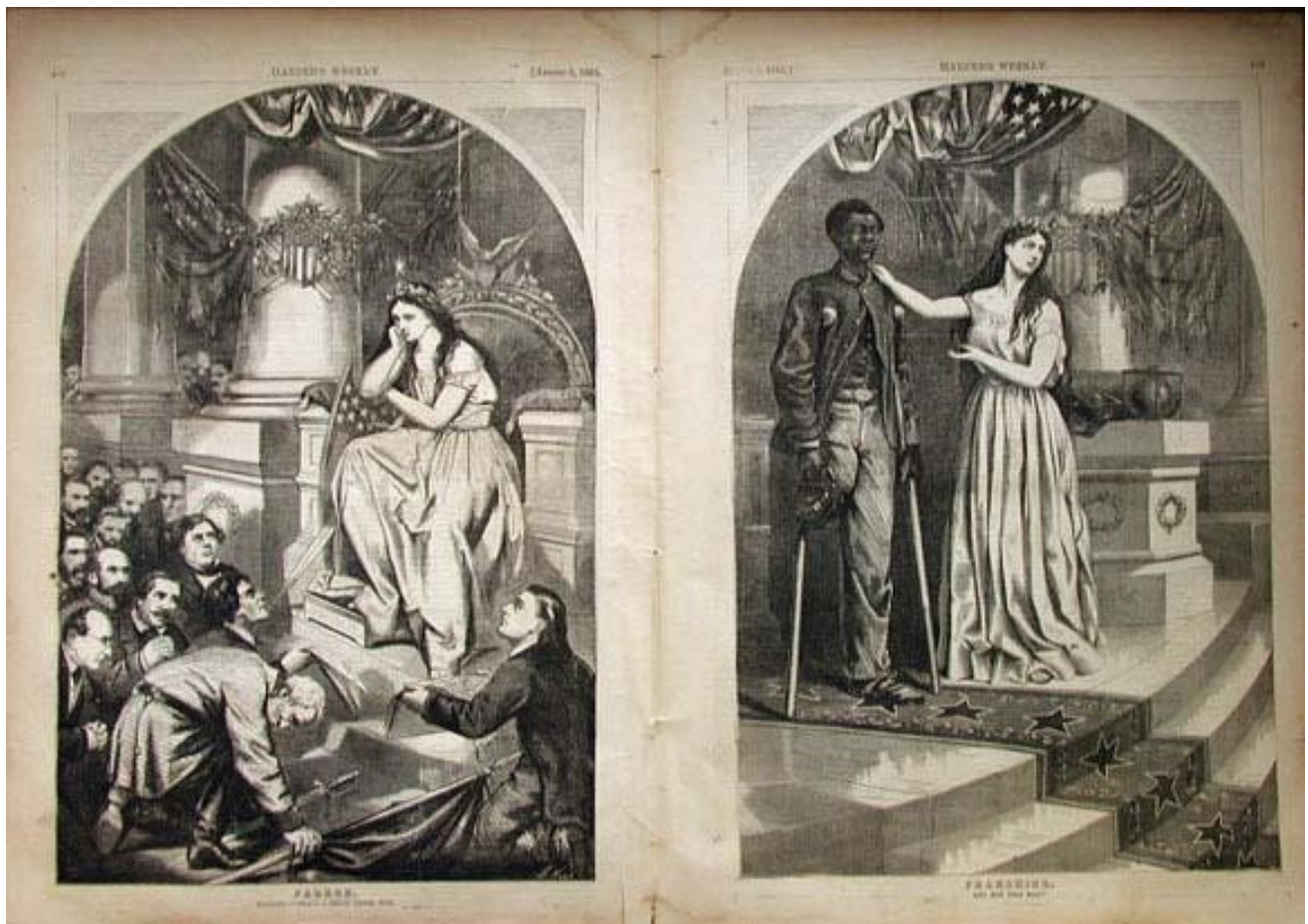
All of the sources mentioned above are **primary sources**: firsthand accounts and other evidence from the time period being investigated. Primary sources provide the foundation of all historical narratives.



TERM TO KNOW

Primary Source

Firsthand accounts/evidence from the time period that a historian is writing about or studying. For example, let's revisit Reconstruction, specifically the months immediately following the surrender of Confederate forces in 1865. During this time, Americans debated whether and how the Southern states would be readmitted to the Union. People disagreed over the fate of Confederate political leaders and military officers, including Confederate president Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee. We know this through primary sources, including government documents, newspaper articles, and political cartoons.



This image, titled “Shall I trust these men, and not this man?”, is a political cartoon by Thomas Nast, published in Harper’s Magazine in August of 1865. In the left panel, Columbia (a representation of the United States) considers requests for pardon by former Confederates, among them Robert E. Lee (center, kneeling and holding a flag) and Jefferson Davis (to Lee’s left, presenting pardon papers). In the right panel, Columbia gestures towards an African-American Union Army veteran with an amputated leg, symbolizing the contributions that Black men made to the Union war effort. On the pedestal behind Columbia is a ballot box, symbolizing the right to vote, which African Americans did not have at this time.

If a historian were investigating the pardoning of former Confederates following the Civil War or Black suffrage, he or she would search for primary sources similar to this and write an account based on the evidence. Primary sources can be found in a number of places. Libraries and archives are obvious choices, but historians also find primary sources in courthouses, federal offices, and historical societies. Primary sources can also be located on the Internet.

DID YOU KNOW

A digital version of the image above is available online through the Library of Congress. Historians find and examine primary sources in order to develop narratives about past events. They pose questions as they conduct research to critically examine and understand those events. Thomas Nast created the cartoon above to influence opinion. But who was Thomas Nast? Was the cartoon aimed at a Northern or a Southern audience? Does the way that Columbia is depicted reveal anything about Nast’s bias toward the pardoning of former Confederates or Black suffrage? These are just a few of the questions that a historian might ask while researching primary sources.

Unless a historian is studying an obscure subject, it's likely that someone else has studied it—and written about it—previously. Historians also rely on **secondary sources**, or works by historians and other writers that interpret primary sources. Secondary sources are another source of information that historians use to develop their interpretations of historical events.



TERM TO KNOW

Secondary Source

Pieces of work that contain analyses of primary sources that relate to events that have already taken place in the past.

Secondary sources are the textbooks, history books, or articles in peer-reviewed history journals that historians use to learn about, fact-check, and broaden their view of the historical period in question. A historian might read Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* before writing his or her own history of Reconstruction. A historian who was using the image above for a history of political cartoons might refer to Fiona Deans Halloran's *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoon* to learn more about Nast and the time in which he lived.



DID YOU KNOW

Thomas Nast was one of the most influential political cartoonists in the United States during the late 19th century. He is credited for drawing the first modern representations of Santa Claus, the Democratic Party's donkey, and the Republican Party's elephant.

Interpretations of past events change over time. The most accurate and informed secondary sources are often those that were published most recently. Secondary sources can also include movies, documentaries, magazine articles, and websites, but not all secondary sources are created equal. Historians most often rely on secondary sources that have been created by other historians.



THINK ABOUT IT

Are these tutorials a secondary or a primary source? Why?

2. How to Read a Primary Source

One reason that historians take secondary sources seriously is that primary sources cannot always be taken at face value. Oftentimes primary sources are biased. “Biased” sources aren’t “bad” sources. A biased source is simply one that has been created from a particular perspective; one that may not be objective, without prejudice or persuasive intent. When someone creates a primary source, that person’s background and personal beliefs, as well as his or her intended audience and purpose for writing, may introduce bias into that source. In addition to potential bias, the source may be received in different contexts. Sometimes there isn’t a clear idea on how to use a primary source.

The way to gain the most value from primary sources is to think about them critically and historically. Historians think about primary sources in a variety of ways, but one straightforward, easy-to-remember way to investigate these sources is to ask yourself the “Five Ws” (and one “H”):

- **Who** created this source? Who is it about? Who is the audience?
- **What's** going on in the source? What's the purpose?
- **Where** was it created or presented?
- **When** was it created?

- **Why** does this source exist?
- **How** is this source constructed? Does the ordering of the ideas tell you anything about points it may be trying to make?

These questions will help you to understand a source's historical context, intended audience, perspective ("bias"), and purpose. Some of these questions can be tricky, such as those in the *How* category. This is why secondary sources are useful: They help you understand the context in which a source is written. In doing so they increase your familiarity with the author's perspective and voice and make these questions less complicated.

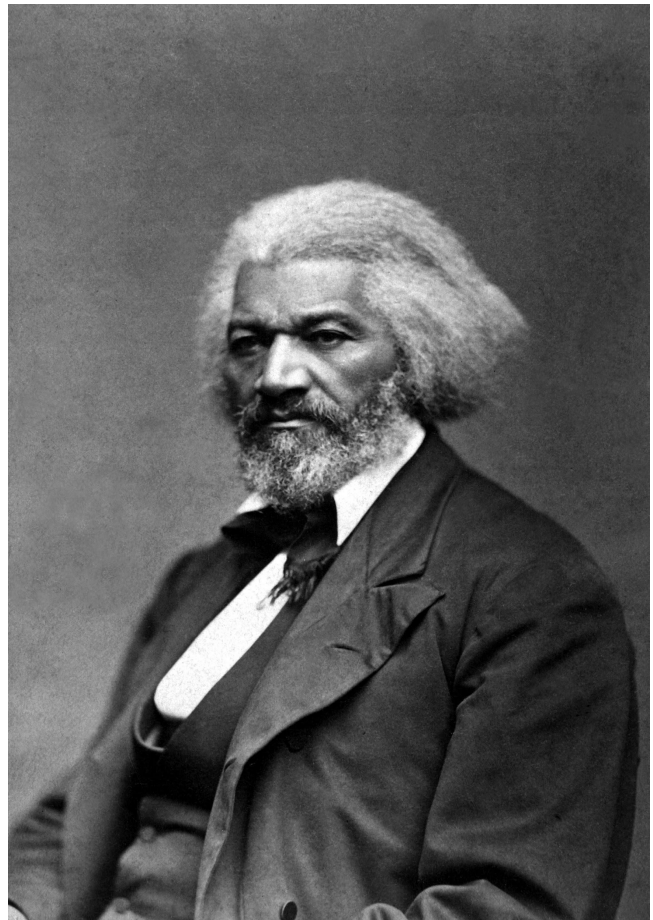
3. Reading a Primary Source

To learn how to read a primary source, let's consider a speech by Frederick Douglass, who was born into slavery and later became a prominent opponent of slavery and an advocate of Black equality at the time of the Civil War.

This selection is from "What the Black Man Wants." Douglass gave this speech in April of 1865, during the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Boston.

Frederick Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants"

"I have had but one idea for the last three years to present to the American people, and the phraseology in which I clothe it is the old abolition phraseology. I am for the 'immediate, unconditional, and universal' enfranchisement of the Black man, in every State in the Union. [Loud applause.] Without this, his liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of the mob, and has no means of protecting himself."



Portrait of Frederick Douglass, ca. 1879.

At first glance, this seems like a straightforward request for the right to vote to be extended to African Americans, many of whom were formerly enslaved. Douglass indicates that he had advocated this cause for at least 3 years. However, when you consider his words in the context of the Civil War and **militant**

abolitionism, other facets of Douglass's argument and motives come into focus.



TERM TO KNOW

Militant Abolitionism

Advocated for the complete and immediate elimination of slavery from the United States on moral grounds.

Douglass made this speech in April of 1865, at the end of the Civil War. Two years earlier, on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which signaled the end of slavery in the United States. By April of 1865, major fighting in the Civil War had subsided and, like many Americans, Douglass wanted to know what was in store for those who had been freed. Although he supported the Emancipation Proclamation, freedom was not enough for him. By insisting on “the ‘immediate, unconditional, and universal’ enfranchisement of the Black man”, Douglass asserted that the right to vote for African Americans must accompany the end of slavery in the United States.

In making this speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which was among the most prominent abolitionist groups, Douglass attempted to enlist the support of abolitionists for Black suffrage. This is evident in his reference to “the old abolition phraseology.” Prior to the Civil War, militant abolitionists agitated for the “immediate, unconditional, and universal” end of slavery in the United States. Now, in April of 1865, with slavery ending and Union victory assured, Douglass urged abolitionists to apply the same rhetoric (and the reasoning behind it) in support of Black voting rights. Contemporary speech transcripts indicate “Loud Applause” during Douglass’s statement, suggesting that many in the Massachusetts abolitionist community supported this cause.

On the surface, Douglass’s argument in favor of Black voting rights seems straightforward. When the context and audience are taken into account, however, a clearer and more complete picture comes into view. The time at which it was given is crucial to understanding Douglass’s speech: it reveals his hopes for a national post-war policy. By addressing an abolitionist audience, Douglass attempted to mobilize a mass movement on behalf of Black suffrage.



TRY IT

Try to apply the Five Ws to the political cartoon below. It addresses another issue that we will examine during this course: immigration. First, answer as many of the Five W questions as you can by referring only to the image. Next, use the Internet to find answers to other questions you might have.



4. How to Think like a Historian

You can begin to think like a historian by applying the Five Ws to primary and secondary sources. Primary sources can be complex, so use historical thinking and **critical thinking** skills when examining them. Critical thinking is hard to define, but it fundamentally indicates the use of a clear, self-directed, and evidence-based process to form a judgment on a topic. In other words, when creating accounts of the past, historians must take a responsible approach to judging available evidence and create a narration based on it.



TERM TO KNOW

Critical Thinking

Clear, self-directed, and evidence-based judgment on a topic.

One way that historians do this is by thinking historically about an event and its related primary sources. This can be accomplished through a variety of intellectual channels. An easy one to remember is to think in terms of the Five Cs (Andrews & Burke, 2007):

- **Change Over Time:** History happens over a period of time. During any given period of time, people, events, and ideas can change.
- **Context:** Think about historical events and about primary source evidence in terms of their greater context. Anything you read that was written in the past was not created in a vacuum. Similarly, anything that happened in the past was not isolated from the social, cultural, economic, and political setting in which it occurred. That context informs the ways we should think about historical events, or about primary source evidence, today.
- **Causality:** All events have multiple causes and effects. For example, the American Civil War did not occur out of nowhere. Before the first shot was fired, a long history of conflict and debate set the stage. Primary sources were also caused by something or somethings.
- **Contingency:** This means that everything is related. Similar to context and causality, the historian understands that nothing happens on its own. Historians think about how later events or historical trends are influenced by earlier ones. In the same way, historians think about the ways a primary source is related to other primary sources and identify connections between multiple pieces of evidence and historical scenarios.
- **Complexity:** We live in a complex world. For example, no single cause started the Revolutionary War. Historians understand this and create historical narratives that reflect a world of different meanings and perspectives.



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the tools that historians use when creating accounts of the past. They locate primary-source evidence, critically examine it, develop questions, consider it in light of secondary sources created by other historians, and develop a narrative. Throughout the research and writing process, historians use the Five Ws and the Five Cs to account for bias and to write objective interpretations of the past.

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Andrews, T & Burke, F. (2007, Jan). What Does It Mean to Think Historically? Ret Oct 2016, from bit.ly/2i1vENK

Douglass, F. (1865). What the Black Man Wants. Ret Mar 10, 2017, from teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-the-black-man-wants-2/



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Shall I trust these men, and not this man?](#) | Author: Thomas Nast | License: Public Domain
- [Frederick Douglass](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Immigration](#) | License: Public Domain



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