

Tips for Evaluating Historical Documents

When studying and interpreting historical documents, one should follow a general plan of approach. Sometimes, we are fortunate enough to have contextual information to support our understanding of a document, but at other times, we must try to make inferences about the past from scant written records. Here are some general areas for consideration and some possible questions to pose:

Source Information

- How do you know that this is truly an historical document?
- Did it come from a reliable source?
- How did the source happen to come by the document? (What is the document's provenance?)
- If it is truly an historic document, how do you know that its information is accurate or true?
- What is the historical context in which the document was created?

Author/Speaker Information

- Who are the writers?
- What was their function?
- What authority did they have to speak or write what they did?
- Do they seem reliable?

Reader/Audience Information

- Who was supposed to read this document?
- What was its intended effect?
- What was the reader supposed to think or do as a result of reading it?

Format Information

- What type of document is this? A personal letter? A government decree?
- Is the information likely to be more reliable or less reliable because of its format?

Topic Information

- What is the document saying?
- What is its tone?
- What problems of language do you have to overcome to understand the document?

See also the related document "Tips for Historical Interpretation of Visual Material" on the Society's Web site (<http://www.nhhistory.org/edu/support/nhsourcesindex.htm>). The document is also available on the Society's CD-ROM.