**Primary Source Critical Analysis and Interpretation Lesson Plan**

**Introduction:**

In historical research, critical analysis of primary sources is the process of determining authenticity and credibility of evidence. Essentially, a primary source is the subjective interpretation of a witness to an event. Unlike secondary sources, a primary source generally documents an action, activity, or event rather than a subject. Your job as the researcher is to try, as best you can, to uncover the “truth” from the testimony of the past. Critical thinking is also a process of using your deductive reasoning skills in examining and analyzing information. As one historian wrote, “Documents do not reveal their secrets easily.” You must learn to **question** the evidence like an attorney in a courtroom – from different angles, from different perspectives, relentlessly, suspiciously. Even an account written by an individual of unimpeachable honesty can be marred by error and half-truth. It is the historian’s job to separate the true from the false.

**Summarize the Content:**

Before you can analyze a document, you should carefully read and understand the “literal” meaning of the document. What point or argument does the author make? What conclusions does he/she want you to understand? You should summarize, or “paraphrase,” the content of the document in your own words. In this way, you avoid plagiarism and begin the process of writing the thoughts that will form the basis of later interpretation.

**Logical Deduction:**

What can you infer from the information in the document? To infer means to “conclude or decide from something known or assumed; derive by reasoning; draw as a conclusion.” For example, if on Monday morning you discovered your car low on gas, you might conclude that your sister took it for a drive all weekend. This inference based on the evidence may be right or wrong. Inference is an important component of the critical analysis of primary sources, since your inferences will become the basis for later interpretation.

**Establish and Confirm the Context of the Document Creation:**

Establishing the historical context of the document’s creation determines whether the information is relevant to your research query. When and where was the document written? Who wrote the document? Answering these questions confirms whether the observer of the event was present and competent to record his or her observations.

**Analysis of the Information:**

Critical thinking and analysis involves a process of questioning. For each primary source, the historian should ask a series of questions designed to help determine the authenticity and credibility of the evidence.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Primary Source Learning Objectives** (SAA [*Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*](https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Souce%20Literacy%20-%20FinalVersion%20-%20Summer2017_0.pdf)):

* 1. Assess the appropriateness of a primary source for meeting the goals of a specific research or creative project.
  2. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
  3. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.
  4. As part of the analysis of available resources, identify, interrogate, and consider the reasons for silences, gaps, contradictions, or evidence of power relationships in the documentary record and how they impact the research process.

**Activity:**

For this assignment, you will conduct a critical analysis of two documents from the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company records maintained by the Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives.

1. Review a [brief history](https://uparchives.nmu.edu/CCI/History.html) of the iron mining industry in the Upper Peninsula and the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company (CCI).
2. Review the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company [collection finding aid](https://nmu.lyrasistechnology.org/repositories/3/resources/286).
3. Review a summary history of the [*Progressive Era*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Era#State,_local,_gender,_ethnic,_business,_labor,_religion) (1896-1916) in the United States.
4. Conduct a critical analysis of two letters from the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company records using the Document Analysis Worksheet.
5. Write a one page report of your analysis of the documents. Consider the following questions.

* Are the documents authentic, credible, and do they provide reliable evidence? Why or why not?
* What did you learn from this document that you might not have learned elsewhere?
* What other documents or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?
* What historical problem or question might the evidence provide by these two documents answer or resolve? Explain.

**Evaluation:**

Assessment Rubric of Primary Source Analysis

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. **Learning Objective** | **Minimal** | **Fair** | **Good** | **Exemplary** |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Assess the appropriateness of a primary source** | Makes a very brief or erroneous attempt at identifying the basic characteristics of the sources. | Offers only a basic description of the sources and may include errors. | Describes most of the elements of the sources correctly. | Thoroughly and accurately describes elements of document, photograph, and finding aid |
| **Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source** | Does not acknowledge or identify any bias, prejudice or factual errors | Does acknowledge and identify some bias, prejudice, or factual errors | Acknowledges and identifies appropriate bias, prejudices, and factual errors | Acknowledges and identifies appropriate bias, prejudices, and factual errors AND explains how these problems raise questions about the credibility of the evidence. |
| **Situate a primary source in historical context** | Is not able to place any of the sources in a broader historical context. | Offers one example in which a source is placed in a broader historical context. | Explains and gives examples of the meaning and usefulness of more than one but not all of the sources, placing them in a broader historical context. | Explains and gives examples of the meaning and usefulness of all of the sources and places them within a broad historical context. |
| **Identify, interrogate, and consider the reasons for silences, gaps, contradictions, or evidence of power relationships in the documentary record and how they impact the research process** | Does not offer any additional information about the source besides what is already provided. | Asks questions about one source regarding its validity, limitations, and strengths. | Able to ask questions about more than one but not all of the sources regarding their validity, limitations, and strengths. | Able to ask questions about all of the sources regarding their validity, limitations, and strengths. |

1. Information taken from Furay, Conal and Michael J. Salevouris. The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide. Harlan Davidson, Inc., Arlington Heights, Ill, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)