

621: Modern Japanese History

【 Reading a Primary Source 】

What are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are sources that were created *during* the historical period that you are studying. Just about anything that existed or was created during that time period can count as a primary source—a speech, census records, a newspaper, a letter, a diary entry, a song, a painting, a photograph, a film, an article of clothing, a building, a landscape, etc. Primary sources are documents, objects, and other sources that provide us with a **firsthand account** of what life was like in the past.

Why Primary Sources?

In short, primary sources allow you to be your own historical detective, piecing together the puzzle of the past by using materials created by the people who lived it. When you start reading primary sources, you stop just *learning* history and start *doing* history.

There is no better way to understand events in the past than by examining the sources—journals, newspaper articles, letters, court case records, novels, artworks, music or autobiographies—that people from that period left behind. Primary sources provide you with windows into the past — a chance to catch a glimpse at the world you’re trying to understand through the words, pictures, artwork, and objects of the people who lived in it. This window is especially important for historians because, unlike other scholars who study people and societies such as psychologists, sociologists, or anthropologists, historians can’t use direct observation and experimentation to *prove* their arguments. Instead, historians must rely on the records left behind by the people we’re trying to understand.

The questions on the following page should get you started in the kind of

detective work that historians do with primary sources.

Basics: 5W1H

Who?

- Who created the source? For whom?

What?

- What is the source? Is it a diary, government report, newspaper article, poem, work of art?
- What is said? What is not said?
- What is the content of the source? What information is conveyed? What of it is intentional/explicit? Incidental/implicit?
- What opinion/argument/information is the author trying to communicate?
- What opinion/argument/information is the author trying to *conceal*?

When?

- When was the source created?
- What was the historical context?

Where?

- Where was the original created?
- If you are reading a reproduction, how about that?

Why?

- Why was this source created?

Advanced Interpretation

- Prescriptive or descriptive?
- Does it describe ideology and/or behavior?
- Does it tell you about the beliefs/actions of the elite, or of “ordinary” people? From whose perspective?
- What historical questions can you answer using this source?
- What questions can this source *not* help you answer?

Sources

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/745>

<https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/history/resources/study/primary/>