# How to investigate primary sources

A primary source is a document or object which was written or created during the time under study. It was present during an experience or time period and offers an inside view or firsthand account of a particular event. Primary sources are imbued with the spirit of the time in which they were written.

Secondary sources interpret and analyze primary sources.

## I. Record the following information about the document with which you are working; this information will help you build your citation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Creator</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position of author/creator (if ascertainable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date(s) of Document</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Information about manuscript/printed documents that will be helpful to note:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archive/Institution Name</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collection Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number (Box/Folder/Collection)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## II. Unique physical characteristics of books

**Binding style**
- What form does your book take: codex, scroll, other?
- Is this book bound? If not, can you account for its current form?
- If the book is bound, what story does the binding tell about the book’s production, use, circumstances?
- In what ways does the binding affect your experience of using the book?

**Illustrations**
- What illustrations are present?
- Number of illustrations?
- Size of illustrations—how important is the scale of the illustrations to your reading/use of the text? To the author’s thesis?
- How significant is the placement of the illustrations within the text of the book?
- How do the illustrations relate to the text?
How do the illustrations enhance (or not) your knowledge of the book’s subject?

Typefaces

What style of typeface is used in the book: Roman, Italic, Gothic, or ?

How many typefaces are used in the book? If there is more than one typeface used, what might be some reasons for the printer to use different typefaces?
Are there other ink colors used in the book besides black and to what effect?

Pagination

Which type of sequence mark(s) is used in the book? Where is it on the page? Follow the sequence mark(s); do you find any errors?

Some Helpful Hints regarding pagination in early printed books:

Foliation—numbering of the “leaves” in a signature. Signature marks can be letters, numbers, and sometimes symbols, usually located at the bottom of the first portion of gatherings; they were used to help binders assemble the sheets of a book into the right order.* When a printed book isn’t paginated, recto and verso are important to note. E.g. for an non-paginated octavo: signature A, leaf 3, recto side would be cited as A3r

Pagination—numbering of the pages e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4

Catchwords—Printed at the bottom of a page in books printed (roughly) 1500-1800, the catchword links the text at the bottom of one page with the start of the next.

III. Analyzing title pages and front matter of printed books for author and/or printer intention, context, audience, purpose: some things to look for:

Title (length)
Author(s)

Design:
Arrangement of title page elements
Typefaces, type size, use of italics
Decoration, color
Frontispieces

Preliminaries: Dedications and prefaces; Subscribers’ lists
IV. Questioning manuscript or printed documents

**Argument of the document:**

What is the document trying to do? How does the document make its case? What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal?

Who is the intended audience of the document? How might this influence the writer’s rhetorical strategy?

**Purpose of the document**

Why did the writer write/create the document?

Does the writer have a thesis? What is it? How important is it to your understanding of your research/topic?

**Bias of the document (writer):**

Do you think the writer/creator is credible and reliable? Why or why not?

What is the relationship of the author/creator to the events and issues described and does the author/creator have a stake in how the events/issues are remembered? What judgments or assumptions are imbedded in his or her choice of words?

What presumptions and preconceptions do you have as the reader?

How do you compensate for bias?
Context of/from the document:

How typical is this document for your research/topic?

How widely was this document circulated?

What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other documents you’ve examined about your research/topic?

The Ultimate Questions…

What do you know of your topic based on these documents? How do you know these things?

What problems do the documents help you to solve?

What question(s) are left unanswered?