

Analysing primary sources

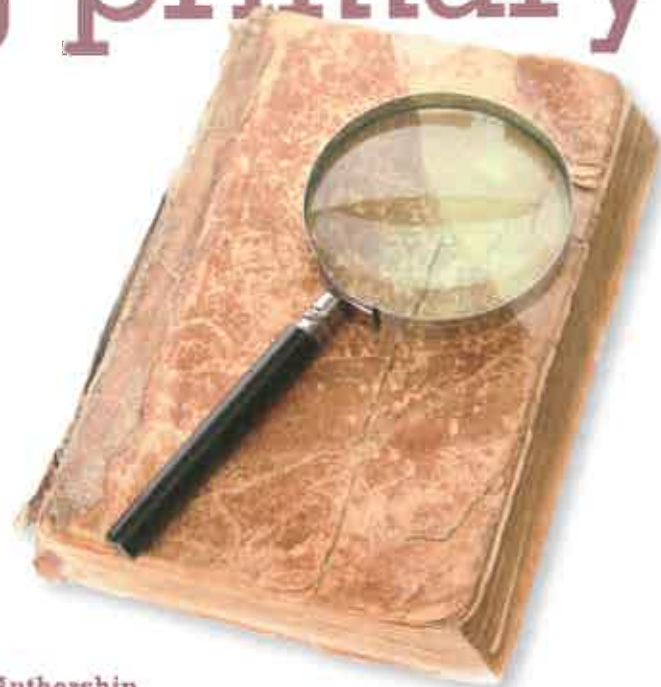
Sarah Ward gives some important tips on how to approach source analysis in your AS exam

Whichever exam board you're with, whatever topic you're studying, it's certain that one or both of your AS exams will involve the use of primary sources. A-level source exams are quite different from their equivalents at GCSE. You need detailed knowledge of the period, an understanding of the problems and advantages of using primary evidence, and a knack with source technique.

Criteria for source analysis

It is important to note that the criteria below are just some ideas for places to start with source analysis. They aren't exhaustive, and different sources can be analysed in a range of ways.

However, these three properties — authorship, nature and purpose, and date — are all important, and are all generally provided in your exam, in a sentence above or below the source. Depending on the source, you'll probably refer to one property more than others, and that's okay — you have to respond to and analyse the source, not force it to fit a question or approach that you've already planned!



Authorship

The author, authors or producers of the source will be identified in the information you are given about it in the exam. So, if you are studying OCR's AS Enquiries paper on Hitler and the German State, you could be told that the author or producer was Adolf Hitler, or a newspaper supporting the Nazi Party, or the German Social Democratic Party opposing the Nazis. You may be looking at Britain, 1830–85, as part of Edexcel's Unit 2 module on Conflict and Change in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain. Here you might be told, for example, that a source comes from a local newspaper, evidence given at the trial of a radical leader, or a printed account from an eyewitness of events.

So what might you do with this information? Think about the following points:

- What was the standpoint of the person, group or institution that produced the source concerning the issue in the question?
- Is there anything about their background, religion, job, political beliefs or location that might affect what they write in the source?
- Remember: the above might affect the reliability of the source, but they could still be useful as evidence of how the person or group viewed the event.

Nature and purpose of the source

This isn't always clearly stated in the information about the source, but you can frequently infer it from the provenance information or from the content of the source.

AQA's Unit 2 uses primary and secondary sources. In Unit 2Q on the USA and Vietnam you could be dealing with a statement from Ho Chi Minh or a speech from a president. In OCR's Enquiries paper on the topic of the English Civil War and Interregnum you might be looking at an official government document from the Protectorate, a speech by Charles I or Oliver Cromwell, or a record of a historical debate. These are all very different documents and the nature or

purpose of each is different. A speech was intended to be delivered verbally so may lack the detail and explanation that an official document might have.

Consider the following points:

- What type of source is it?
- Might the source type have had an effect on the content of the source (e.g. what was included or what wasn't)?
- What was it created for? Was it intended to inform, persuade, educate people, create an image or impression? Or a mix of different purposes?
- How would its audience and purpose affect it as evidence? Would they make it less reliable but more useful, for example? Why?

Date

Wherever possible, the source information will include a date or approximate date when it was created. The exam board does this so that you will be able to situate this document in the historical context in which it was created. If you know the date and have a good knowledge of the period you will be able to tell a lot more about the source — events that might have prompted the author to write, or affected what they wrote, and how. You can tell what else was happening at the time the source was written and that enables you to infer more from the source.

Sometimes we don't know precisely when a source was created. In these cases the exam board will give you as much information as they can, so that you can still make use of the historical knowledge you have built up over the year.

When considering the date of the source, think about these points:

- Was this a significant date in your period?
- Was it just before or just after a significant date or event?
- Was the source produced in the context of a debate about an issue, action or event? If so, which side does the source take? Why?

Top tips

These three categories provide some ideas to get you started with sources. As you progress, you will find that you can move beyond them and judge the sources on the basis of their content as well,



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with a greater and more complex understanding of their implications and inferences. Each source is different, and you will need all of your knowledge of the period to analyse them effectively.

Finally, here are some tips for what to do and what not to do with sources:

- Read the sources carefully. When you open the exam paper, read the sources once quickly, then read the question, then go back and read the sources carefully. This way both the content of the sources and the question will be established in your mind when you start to plan your answer.
- To avoid reading a source incorrectly, read it out loud. Obviously you can't do this in the exam but you can read it word by word silently, imagining you're reading it out loud. This makes it harder to miss crucial words or phrases and thus interpret the source incorrectly.
- Highlight or underline key phrases relevant to the question.
- Use your own knowledge to read between the lines of the sources and to draw inferences from them.
- Avoid simple or 'stock' evaluation. Try to avoid very basic comments, such as 'This source is biased because it was by Hitler/Cromwell/President Kennedy', 'This source is from long after the event so people would have forgotten what really happened'. These are not useful or generally focused on the question.
- If asked to compare sources be sure to make it obvious what you're doing. Use linking words, for example 'Source A was written in January 1960 whereas Source B was produced a little later, in March of the same year. This makes a crucial difference because...'
- Always use the criteria above to make a clear point that is relevant to the question. There is no point in describing the date of the source — you also need to comment on its relevance to the question you've been set.

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