

How to Read a Document

Learning to read a historical document is much like learning to read a map. It is important to ask the right questions and make the right assumptions. But unlike the real journey the map makes possible, the journey that is made with a historical document is one of the imagination. It is not so easy to put your finger on the past. You will have to learn to test your assumptions and to sharpen your ability to ask questions before you can have any confidence that you are on the right road. As with anything else, mastery of these skills takes concentration and practice. You will have to discipline yourself to ask and answer questions about the document on three levels.

Level One

The first set of questions that need to be addressed are those for which you should be able to find concrete answers. The answers to these questions will give you the basic information you need to begin the process of interpretation. Although “level-one” questions are seemingly straightforward, they contain important implications for deeper interpretation. If you do not consciously ask these questions, you will deprive yourself of some of the most important evidence there is for understanding documents. Train yourself to underline or highlight the information that will allow you to answer the following questions.

1. *Who wrote this document?*

In the first place, you need to know how this document came to be created. Written historical records were created by individuals in a specific historical setting for a particular purpose. Until you know who created the document you have read, you cannot know why it was created or what meanings its author intended to impart by creating it. Nor is it enough to simply learn the name of the author; it is equally important to learn about authors as people, what social background they came from, what position they held, to what group they belonged. Although you will learn the identity of the author from the introductory notes, you will learn much about that person or group from the document.

2. *Who is the intended audience?*

Identifying the intended audience of a document will tell you much about its language, about the amount of knowledge that the writer is assuming, even sometimes about the best form for the document to take. The relationship between author and audience is one of the most basic elements of communication and one that will tell you much about the purpose of the document. Think of the difference between the audience for a novel and that for a diary, or for a law and a secret treaty. In each case, knowing the intended audience determines your view of what to expect from the document. Knowing the audience allows you to begin to ask important questions, such as, “Should I believe what I am being told?”

3. *What is the story line?*

The final “level one” question has to do with the content of the document. You now know enough about it in a general way to pay attention to what it actually says. To learn the story line, you must take some notes while you are reading and underline or highlight important places in your text. The more often you ask yourself, “What is going on here?” the easier it will be to find out. No matter how obscure a document appears at first, deliberate attention to the story line will allow you to focus your reading.

Level Two

If “level one” questions allow you to identify the nature of the document and its author, “level two” questions allow you to probe behind the essential facts. Now that you know who wrote the document, to whom it is addressed, and what it is about, you can begin to try to understand it. Since your goal is to learn what this document means, first in its historical context and then in your current context, you now want to study it from a more detached point of view, to be less accepting of “facts” and more critical in the questions you pose. At the first level, the document controlled you; at the second level, you will begin to control the document.

1. *Why was this document written?*

Everything is written for a reason. You make notes to yourself to remember, you send cards to celebrate and sympathize, you correspond to convey or request information. The documents that historians traditionally study are more likely to have been written for public rather than private purposes, but not always. Understanding the purpose of a historical document is critical to analyzing the strategies that the author employs within it. A document intended to convince will employ logic; a document intended to entertain will employ fancy; a document attempting to motivate will employ emotional appeals. In order to find these strategies, you must know what purpose the document was intended to serve.

2. *What type of document is this?*

The form of the document is vital to its purpose. You would expect a telephone book to be alphabetized, a poem to be in meter, and a work of philosophy to be in prose. The form or genre in which a document appears is always carefully chosen. Genre contains its own conventions, which fulfill the expectations of author and audience. A prose map of how one travels from Chicago to Boston might be as effective as a conventional map, but it would not allow for much of the incidental information that a conventional map contains and would be much harder to consult. A map in poetry would be mind-boggling!

3. *What are the basic assumptions made in this document?*

All documents make assumptions that are bound up with their intended audience, with the form in which they are written, and with their purpose. Some of these assumptions are so integral to the document that they are left unsaid, others are so important to establish that they form a part of the central argument.

Level Three

So far, you have been asking questions of your document that you can learn directly from it. Sometimes it is more difficult to know who composed a document than who the intended audience was. Sometimes you have to guess at the purpose of the document. But essentially questions on level one and level two are questions with direct answers. Once you have learned to ask them, you will have a great deal of information about the historical document at your disposal. You will then be able to think historically—that is, to pose your own questions about the past and to use the material the document presents to seek for answers. In level three, you will exercise your critical imagination, probing the materials and developing your own assessment of its value. “Level three” questions will not always have definite answers; in fact, they are the kind of questions that arouse disagreement and debate and that make for lively classroom discussion.

1. ***Can I believe this document?***

To be successful, a document designed to persuade, to recount events, or to motivate people to action must be believable to its audience. For the critical historical reader, it is that very believability that must be examined. Every author has a point of view, and exposing the assumptions of the document is an essential task for the reader. You must treat all claims skeptically. One question you certainly want to ask is, “Is this a likely story?”

2. ***What can I learn about the society that produced this document?***

All documents unintentionally reveal things that are embedded in the very language, structure, and assumptions of the document that can tell you the most about the historical period or event that you are studying.

3. ***What does this document mean to me?***

So What? Other than for the practical purpose of passing your exams and the course, why should you be concerned with historical documents? What can you learn from them? Only you can answer those questions. But you will not be able to answer them until you have asked them. You should demand the meaning of each document you read: what it meant to the historical actors – authors, audience, and society – and what it means to your own society.

Now that you have seen how to unfold the map of a historical document you must get used to asking these questions by yourself. The temptation will be great to jump from level one to level three, to start in the middle, or to pose the questions in no sequence at all. After all, you probably have a ready-made answer to “What does this document mean to me?” But if you develop the discipline of asking all your questions in the proper order, you will soon find that you are able to gain command of a document.

Source:

Kishlansky, Mark A. *Sources of World History*, Volume 1, Third Edition. New York: Longman Publishers, 2003