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Analyzing Primary Sources

What are primary sources?: Primary sources are materials produced by people who either participated in or observed firsthand a historical event or development. These materials are what historians study in order to interpret the past and make informed arguments about what happened. Primary sources can be written documents, such as letters, diaries, and newspapers, as well as sources that are not written, including architecture, furniture, art, clothing, music, and interviews.

Things to keep in mind as you analyze a primary source:

1. **Creator:** Who created the source? What was their background? Why did they create the source? What personal, class, ethnic, religious, gender, or cultural beliefs and assumptions might have influenced the source?
2. **Audience:** For whom was the source created? Did the creator have an audience in mind? Was the creator speaking to (or representing) a particular audience? Were they trying to silence another audience? How did the intended—or unintended—audience receive the source?
3. **Reliability:** What can the source tell you about the past? How useful is it for understanding the past? How trustworthy is the source? Does it exclude, downplay, or ignore evidence or issues that you can verify through other sources?
4. **Authenticity:** Are there reasons to doubt the source? Was it possibly a forgery? Has it been altered in any way? Has it been edited? Who was the editor? If it is a transcription of someone else's words, who was the scribe? What role might an editor or scribe have played in shaping the source's tone or content?
5. **Influence:** How important or influential was the source in its own day and age? By what standards can one measure the source's significance? Was it widely disseminated? Was it more personal? Did the source's circulation or reception have anticipated or unanticipated consequences?
6. **Vocabulary:** How would a contemporary reader have understood the vocabulary of the document? Did certain words have a different meaning than they do today?
7. **Relationship to Other Source and Course Themes:** How does the source relate to the course's main themes? What kinds of connections can you draw to other primary or secondary sources and lectures?

When considering a material culture source (furniture, tools, clothing, etc.), you should also consider:

1. **Materials:** How was the artifact made? What materials did the creator use? Are the materials indigenous to the region where the artifact was made or located? What is the shape, size, texture, weight, color, etc. of the artifact?
2. **Design:** For what purpose was the artifact made? What would this object invite someone to do? How could someone use this object?