EVALUATING PRIMARY SOURCES
CAREFULLY EVALUATE AND ANALYZE

- understand each document's value and limitations,
- detect the biases embedded in each document,
- and glean the information that you need from each source.
TO UNDERSTAND THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS

• Try to answer the following questions:
  1. Is this source a firsthand account, written by a witness or participant?
  2. Was it written at the time of the event or later?
  3. Is the account based on interviews or evidence from those directly involved?
BE ALERT TO THE BIASES EMBEDDED IN PRIMARY SOURCES

• Every document is biased, whether deliberately or unconsciously, by the point of view of the person who wrote it.

• Determine as much as possible about the author of the document and his or her relationship to the events and issues described.
  • Did the author have a stake in how an event was remembered?
  • Did he or she want this issue to be perceived in a particular way?
FOR WHOM WAS THE DOCUMENT CREATED?

- Was the author writing for a specific audience?
- Was the document meant to be:
  - private, like a diary;
  - to communicate with a small audience, like a letter or internal report;
  - or to reach a bigger audience, like a speech or a published autobiography?
TAKE NOTE OF THE AUTHOR'S VOCABULARY

• What judgments or assumptions are embedded in his or her choice of words?
• Again look for biases
COMPARE THE ACCOUNTS

• of one event provided by different primary sources to evaluate the reliability of each document.

• When sources conflict, consider possible explanations for the differences.

• When they concur, the account provided may be more accurate - especially if the authors have different points of view.
DO NOT ASSUME

• That one type of document is necessarily more reliable than another.
• A published newspaper article, for example, may reflect the biases of a reporter or editor.
• An impassioned speech may contain kernels of factual information.
A WINDOW INTO OTHER WORLDS AND TIMES

- Working with primary sources offers a remarkable window into other worlds,
- as well as an opportunity to construct your own vision of the past.
- Careful evaluation and interpretation of those sources is at the core of the historian's craft.
REMEMBER TO ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WHEN EVALUATING PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIALS:

1. How does the author know these details (names, dates, times)? Was the author present at the event or soon on the scene?

2. Where does this information come from – personal experience, eyewitness accounts, or reports written by others?

3. Are the author's conclusions based on a single piece of evidence, or have many sources been taken into account (e.g., diary entries, along with third-party eyewitness accounts, impressions of contemporaries, newspaper accounts)?