

Analyze Archival Sources

Let's look at some introductory strategies that researchers, instructors, and students can use to analyze and interpret the types of sources found in an archive.

Archives and Archival Sources

An archive is “a physical or digital collection of historical records.” Archives can be housed by formal institutions, such as the National Archives, or in informal surroundings, such as family heirlooms or photo albums. They can be devoted to a single topic or cover a broad range of subjects.

Formal archives are created and arranged intentionally. Each item and collection in an archive has been selected, collected, preserved, catalogued, and made discoverable by archivists and librarians. Because archivists and scholars have actively selected these materials over time, archives themselves have a history and reflect biases, prejudices and priorities of the era in which they were created.

Archives often contain an expansive array of material types, including diaries and correspondence, photographs, manuscripts and galley proofs, newspapers, audiovisual recordings, maps, artifacts, and works of art. Each of these formats presents challenges and opportunities for research, but whatever its specific features, every archival item needs to be engaged through a critical approach. Scholars use a variety of questions to explore and interrogate archival documents.

Questioning an Archival Source

Historical documents do not speak for themselves. Scholars from various disciplines interpret sources by considering the context in which they were created and then applying their own contemporary theoretical lens. These basic questions will allow researchers to begin to render a document legible:

1. When was this source created?
 - a. If it is not dated, are there clues that allow for an educated guess?
2. Who created it?
 - a. Does it reflect the perspective of an individual or an institution?
3. Who is the intended audience?
 - a. What rhetorical strategies are being used to persuade potential readers?
4. How has the meaning of the source changed over time?
5. What scholarly questions might this document begin to answer?
 - a. How would a researcher use it as part of a larger project?
 - b. What further resources would be necessary to make it more fully legible?

To download an exercise/worksheet for your own work, please refer to the handout on “Exercise: Analyze Archival Sources”.

Additional Resources

- Access to Columbia's entire catalogue of Digital Library Collections can be found here:
<https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/>

 - Here are some other digitized archives that are useful for research and instruction:
 - W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, records related to history, sociology, and civil rights, at UMass Amherst:
<https://bit.ly/DuBoisPapersB2B>
 - George Grantham Bain Collection, a collection of early 20th century photographs at the Library of Congress:
<https://bit.ly/BainCollectionB2B>
 - Independent Voices, An Open Access Collection of Alternative Press:
<https://bit.ly/IndependentVoicesB2B>

 - Librarians and scholars have collaborated on an in-depth examination of primary sources and primary source literacy. To learn more about their findings, and the process, follow this link:
<https://bit.ly/PrimarySourceGuidelinesB2B>

 - Working groups of librarians and scholars have begun to examine opportunities and issues relating to teaching with digitized primary sources. This page offers an overview of their work:
<https://bit.ly/TeachingWithPrimarySourcesB2B>
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