How to examine historical sources effectively

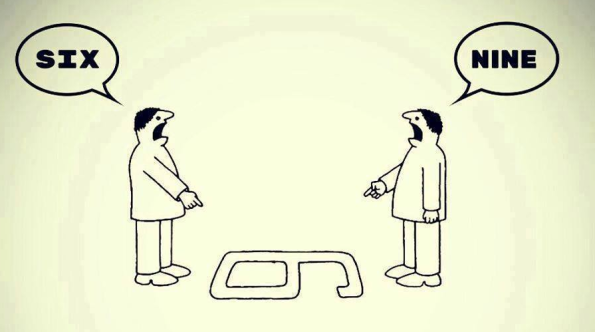
**Audience**

When analysing a source, it is important to realise that all sources were created for a particular individual or group of people. Therefore, knowing about the intended audience of a source can help you in evaluating it.

Understanding who the source is aimed at will allow you as historians to consider the intention of the author, for example, if the source is a petition to a King or a state, they are likely to want to reform current policies.

**The ‘type’ of source**

The type of primary source that you are facing will be key to its ‘usefulness’ within any historical enquiry. For example, **published documents** were likely to be intended for particular audiences and may be looking to convey a specific message, they may have also passed censorship. In contrast, **unpublished documents** are likely to be personal and therefore a reflection of their author. They were never intended for widespread circulation. **Remember** even photographs can be published for a specific audience.



Perspective is the 'point of view' from which the [creator](https://www.historyskills.com/source-criticism/analysis/source-creator/) of a source described historical events.

Every person sees and understands events differently depending on their age, gender, social position, beliefs and values. Even modern historians have their own perspectives which can influence how they interpret the past.

For example:

*T*wo groups of fans at a football match will see the same game differently. Fans of the winning side will have a positive view and will usually talk about how great their team's actions were. The fans of the losing side will be quite negative and may blame the result on referees or 'cheating' by the opposing team. How can two groups see the same event differently? The answer is 'perspective': they had a different point of view.

Perspective works the same in history. Two opposing in sides in war, or politics, or social struggles, will see the same event differently. They will talk about it with different language.



**The use of an ‘alias’ in historical sources**

As historians you must also consider whether the source is being framed through an ‘alias’ or an assumed identity, this may have been undertaken to prevent the original author from persecution or because the intended alias is believed to be a more effective proponent of the intended message.

Determining the true author of the source and looking past the alias is therefore crucial to determining the source’s usefulness.

On some occasions, the tone and style of the source can help to shed light on the actual author of the source. For example, a source that is written in consistent and accurate prose in the seventeenth century is unlikely to be the work of a poor uneducated towns person.

Equally crucial, is the level of understanding depicted in the source, for example if the content appears to show an understanding of internal politics it may suggest that the source is from a political aide or civil servant.

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| Criteria | ‘Poor man’s petition’ |
| Content (what is the key message of the source) |  |
| Author (check if they are using an alias and why) |  |
| Perspective (What is the author’s perspective? How may it have been influenced?) |  |
| Type (what type of source? Newspaper, diary etc.) |  |
| Audience (who was the intended |  |
| Time (when was it written?) |  |
| Limitations (is there any information that is missing?) |  |