



History Department

**Answering primary
source analysis questions**

What is a primary source analysis answer?

A primary source analysis answer is a short analytical comment on an extract from a historical document. You are expected to wring the maximum possible historical understanding from the extract you choose to comment on. It is NOT an essay - the answer should be brief and well focused whilst packed with useful historical analysis. Remember that in the exam the two primary source analysis answers count for one essay answer.

How should the answer be structured?

Your answer should situate, analyse and evaluate the extract. The best answers tend to be cover each of these aspects, although originality of approach is also encouraged:

1. Context (Situating the source): What type of document is it? Who is the author? Why was it written and for whom? When was it written? What is the tone of the text? You must place this information within its wider historical context.
2. Analysis: Here you need to really scrutinize the text for meaning. Pay close attention to the language used and explain the focus and significance of the content.
3. Evaluation: What is the historical significance of the extract and the document it is taken from? How does it relate to the general themes of the course? How useful is the source to the historian? Are there any problems with it of which we should be aware?

Things to do....

Focus on the extract

The answer must first and foremost deal with the specifics of the extract in front of you. Don't write a waffley answer about the document as a whole, or the topic that it's concerned with, if you know nothing about the extract itself.

Keep it relevant

Relate what you say to the extract in front of you. When you discuss the wider document, how does this contrast/complement the extract? When you discuss other sources, how do

they contrast/complement the extract? When you relate the answer to the historiography make sure that the historians you refer to are relevant to the themes that emerge from this extract.

Include details

Details are important – avoid vague statements. Show that you've got a good knowledge of the module.

Be succinct

Every sentence counts in such a short piece of work. Avoid wordiness/irrelevance.

Know your sources!

The weakest answers misunderstand the nature of the extract, or – at worst – entirely mistake their contents. If you're not absolutely sure to what the extract refers then choose another one.

Things to avoid....

Formulaic answers

It *may* be that you need to think about issues of reliability but don't assess 'reliability' in a formulaic way. Get out of the A-level mindset.

Similarly when thinking about limitations of the source, don't churn out formulaic answers. For example:

'This source is limited because it doesn't tell us about XYZ...' Of course it doesn't – it's only two sentences! But what do you know about XYZ that might illuminate the extract further?

'This source is limited on its own; the historian also needs to look at other sources to get a fuller picture.' Of course the historian should look at more sources – and you'll have looked at dozens on your module – so do so.

Don't paraphrase the source

...or quote extensively. A maximum of two or three words may sometimes be quoted if they're important to what you're saying, or if you think it's necessary to specify

which part of the extract that you're discussing.

Don't hypothesize

'It may affect this...' did it?

'This might have resulted...' did it?

Don't look at the extract in isolation

This exercise *isn't* an exercise in comprehension. Think about everything you know about the course – themes, other documents, specific details, key events, people.

You're aiming to make an informed answer in the light of everything you know about the course as a whole.

Checklist

Does the answer...

- Engage with the specific details of the extract?
- Demonstrate knowledge of how the extract fits within the source as a whole?
- Consider the nature of the source (date, authorship, provenance, nature of the intended audience etc.)?
- Cross-reference other related primary sources?
- Relate the extract to wider themes in the course?
- Cross-reference secondary sources that have either used the source or which relate to pertinent debates.

Does the answer avoid...

- Wordiness/irrelevance?
- Mere paraphrasing?
- An over-broad discussion in which the focus moves away from the extract concerned?
- A misunderstanding of the nature of the extract?