

Teaching with Primary Sources in History Classroom

To make sure that students are learning what the documents made available here can offer, we propose a five steps approach on critical analysis of sources that you can achieve with them. However, before reading these texts, take time to ask your students what they already know about the Holocaust and what they would like to know by looking at these primary documents.

Glossary

Primary document:

The primary document is written by an actor or a witness of the events recounted (narrative, travel book, legal code, letter, newspaper article of the time, listing on shelves, etc.).

Second-hand document:

The second-hand document was written by a person who analyzes, comments or interprets primary documents (book on a historical subject, novel, magazine article, website, etc.).

Fact: Information that can be verified.

Opinion: A personal perspective, often arbitrary and volatile, not based on facts.

1. Preliminary Reading

The first step is to conduct a first reading of the document in which students are asked to locate the subject and the main topics of the document.

2. External analysis

External analysis of a document concerns the context in which the document was produced, that is to say the date, the identity of its author, his intention, the nature of the document. Student must then answer the following questions:

What is the date of this document? (When was it written?)

Who is the author?

Is the author an actor or a witness to the events recounted?

To whom this document is written for?

For what purpose has it been written?

Is this document an original or a translation?

Is this an abstract or a full reproduction?

3. Internal analysis

The internal analysis of the document focuses on its content. It is therefore to highlight information and facts contained therein. To do this, the student answers the following questions:

What is the main subject of this document? (general)

What are the topics? (more specific)

Does the author present facts or opinions?

Is the content reliable? (Does it match with what is already known on this subject?)

4. Interpretation

Once the review is complete, students can continue their historical thinking in trying to make sense of the content and themes emerged. To do this, they answer the following questions:

What was learned from reading this document (or documents)?

For what purpose could this document be useful?

Does the document answers to the questions we had about this historical phenomenon?

To which questions does it bring any answers?

5. Questioning and research

If you wish, you can use these documents as a basis for historical research conducted by students. From the topics identified in steps 3 and 4, students can formulate questions to go further in understanding of the subject and then they do the research in order to give answers. In so doing, they identify what is not said in those letters and they raise questions which would help them to have a better overview of the phenomenon.