# Teaching with Primary Sources in the History Classroom

To make sure that students can learn from the documents available at the Museum, we propose that you introduce them to a five-step approach to critical analysis of sources. In addition, before you have them read these texts, take time to ask your students what they already know about the Holocaust and what they would like to learn by looking at these primary source documents.

## Glossary

**Primary source document:** A document written by an actor in or witness to the events recounted. Examples include, but are not limited to, testimonies, travel literature, legal codes, letters, newspaper articles of the time, and inscriptions on tablets (stone, clay, or wood).

**Secondary source document:** A document written by a person who analyzes, comments on, or interprets primary source documents. Examples include, but are not limited to, works of non-fiction on historical subjects, novels, magazine articles, and websites.

**Fact:** Information that can be verified.

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

## 5 steps

### 1. Preliminary reading

The first step is to have students read the document and then locate the subject and the main topics of the document.

### 2. External analysis

External analysis of a document deals with the context in which the document was produced: the date, the identity of its author, his or her intention, the nature of the document. Students 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 in or a witness to the events recounted?

• For whom is this document written?

• For what purpose has it been written?

• Is this document an original or a translation?

• Is this a summary or a complete text?

### 3. Internal analysis

Internal analysis of the document focuses on its content. It should highlight the information and facts contained in the document. To do this, students answer 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 pursue their historical thinking in trying to make sense of the content and themes that they found. To do this, they answer the following questions:

• What was learned from reading the document?

• For what purpose could the document be useful?

• Does the document answer the questions we had about this historical event?

• Which questions does it answer?

### 5. Questioning and research

If you wish, you can use these documents as a basis for students to conduct historical research. From the topics identified in steps 3 and 4, students can formulate questions to go further in their exploration of the subject matter and then proceed with the research in order to find answers. In doing so, they identify the subtext of those letters and raise questions that will help them get a better overview of the historical event.

# Student Questionnaire

### 1. What is the context in which this document was produced?

Who is the author?

Who is it for?

Why was it created?

Is it an original or a translation?

Is it an excerpt or a complete reproduction?

### 2. What is the content of the document?

What is the main topic of the document? (in general terms)

What are the themes addressed? (in specific terms)

What do we learn about the author's quality of life?

Does the author use facts or opinions?

Use examples to back up your answer.

Is the content realistic? (Does it correspond to what we already know on the topic?)

Use examples to back up your answer.

What do we learn about the Holocaust through this document?

### 3. What is the historical value of the document?

Would you use this document as a source for a historical research project?

If you were conducting a historical research project on the Holocaust, how could this document be used?

What specific event or phenomena could it illustrate?