

SOURCE ANALYSIS HELP SHEET

What is source analysis?

In history, it is important to understand the nature of a given source as well as what it tells us. For example, an advert, newspaper article or even a book might give us a lot of information – but unless we know *who* wrote or produced the source, *where* and *when* they did so, and –importantly - *why* they did it, it's hard to know exactly how accurate the source is.

Historians perform a source analysis to find out the answers to these questions, so that we can understand a source in its proper context.

Key questions for source analysis

There are 6 key points to consider when doing a source analysis – often it's not possible to answer all 6, but the more you can learn, the better!

Who?

Who wrote the source, is in the picture, made it, used it, whose opinion does it show.

Where?

Was the source produced, OR - where does the source show or discuss – place, room, site, country

What?

What is the source, a newspaper, a magazine, an artefact? Where did it appear, was it used for, was it expensive? Even with paper sources, there are physical considerations – is it printed on cheap paper, was it mass produced?

When?

Amanda Wilkinson's Victorian Occupations

When was it made/used, does it show a specific event? Does it have a date of publication? Is the source an original or a reprint?

How?

Was it used, painted, written, made, circulated.

Why?

Why was it made? Is it trying to convince the reader? Does it fulfil a specific function?

Source Bias

Much of the time, your source analysis will give you reason to suspect that the source you are using has a specific bias – usually this is no problem, but beware of relying too heavily on one source. In fact, almost all sources are biased to some extent – this is why historians like to draw on as many sources as possible in order to give a balanced view.

Even if you are working with just one source, it's a good idea to “fact check” key points where you can.