The work of the historian, and the student of history, is done principally through the interpretation of primary sources. This writing guide will help the student of history better prepare and produce an assignment using primary source documents. It is divided into three sections: 1) critical reading, 2) writing guidelines, and 3) revision.

A primary source may be a government document, a letter or diary, a pamphlet, a newspaper or magazine article, visual materials (pictures, drawings, cartoons, etc.), audio materials (speech, oral history account, etc.) a doctor's or social worker's report, a novel or autobiography, or even a scholarly article as long as it is from the period under investigation.

Since we all bring different assumptions and analytic skills, it is quite possible (and common) for historians to draw opposing conclusions from the same source. There is no one "right" interpretation of any document. However, there may be wrong interpretations! A convincing analysis of a primary source must be grounded in (1) an understanding of the document itself, and (2) knowledge of its historical context.

I. Critical Reading

Critical reading is the starting point for good writing. You must understand the document and be able to critically assess its value. Critical reading requires you to evaluate the document on multiple levels.

Level 1: This level should provide factual information that allows you to assess the nature of the document. When reading a document or viewing an image, you should train yourself to be able to answer the following types of questions.

a. Who wrote the document? What was the author’s background, what groups did the author belong to (e.g. class, race, gender, nationality, etc.)? When and where was the document written or picture taken?

b. Who is the intended audience? Was the document intended for public consumption or a limited audience? What knowledge does the author assume the audience shares and how might that affect the presentation of materials?

c. What is the basic story line of the document? Do you understand what is going on in the document? Who are the important people or details? Can you identify the author’s thesis, and what proof he/she offers to support the thesis?
Level 2: In this level, you will move beyond the basic facts of the document and begin to interpret the document in a wider context.

a. Why was the document written? Was it intended to convince the audience (that you have already identified) and if it was, what logic or argument does it employ? Are you convinced? If the document was written to entertain or motivate its audience, how did the author attempt to accomplish this? Were you entertained or motivated?

b. What assumptions does the author make? Are these assumptions explicit or implicit? What does the author leave unsaid? Sometimes what not there may be just as revealing as what’s there.

Level 3: By now you should understand the document and be able to interpret the author’s intentions. Your ability to answer the following questions will form the heart of your essay or response to the assignment.

a. Can you believe this document? Is there another side to the story? What knowledge do you possess that the author lacks, ignores, or suppresses?

b. What can you learn about the society that produced this document? Everyone is influenced by the historical period in which they live and social and cultural environment. How is the author a product of his/her environment and how is this reflected in the document?

c. What does this document mean to me? Every document had meaning to the society that produced it and for you. Does the document mean the same thing to you as it did the author’s audience? Can you account for similarities and differences? Are they significant?

II. Writing Guidelines

Once you have critically read and answered as many questions as you can about the document (you cannot consider all of them with every piece), you need to begin to craft an analytical essay. Writing, like critical reading, is a multi-sided operation. You will need to consider multiple factors in crafting your essay.

1. **Write several drafts.** You want to hand in a paper with a clear and consistent beginning, middle, and end. However, even the most experienced writers cannot sit down and write a clear and consistent piece from beginning to end. As you write, you will develop and refine your own ideas and argument. This is a good thing. However, you must make sure your introduction is in accord with your conclusion. After completing your first draft, revise your introduction and possibly even middle so that it is alignment with your conclusion.

   a. **A useful technique might be to take your first draft’s conclusion and re-write it as an introduction and then write a new and more forceful, definitive conclusion.**
2. **Use an appropriate title.** A title should reveal the central purpose of your paper. A title can help you begin the writing process and help you focus and be consistent. If you can’t come up with a title it may be an indication that your ideas are confused or inadequately focused.

3. **Use quotations carefully.** Quotations certainly bolster the impact of your argument, but overuse can weaken it. An insightful quotation lends considerable weight to the effectiveness of your argument, however, too much quoting may look like you are padding your essay or do not fully understand the document. Avoid quoting a secondary source as a conclusion or critical point in your argument. Use your own words to fashion your own argument and conclusion. When you do quote, it is a good rule to identify the original author in your text.

4. **Keep Citations Consistent.** When you quote or paraphrase ideas, arguments or specific references that are not your own, you must cite the source. It is not necessary to cite common knowledge.
   a. Exact wording from a source. When you use a direct quote from a source, use quotation marks or set the quote apart from the rest of the body of the text. Direct quotations should be used judiciously.
   b. Paraphrasing from a source. In this instance, you are using your own words to convey the meaning of another. There is no need to use quotation marks but you must still use a footnote, endnote or other approved citation method (check with your professor to be sure) to indicate where the information came from.

When citing sources, you must be consistent in form. It is recommended as a student of history you learn the proper format for footnotes and endnotes.

Examples of sample footnotes:

1) **Book by a single author:** Sample sentence from body of text.¹


   Subsequent references to the same source can use this format:


2) **Journal Article:**


   Or ² Thorne, “Indochina,” 75-77.
5. **Eliminate Mechanical Errors.** Spelling and grammatical errors distract the reader from the argument you are trying to make. Mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar create the impression that you do not care. Remember that your computer is no substitute for proofreading your work. Ultimately, you are responsible for the finished product. If it is full of careless errors and silly mistakes, you can expect a poor grade. (For a list of common errors to avoid and pet peeves, see Pet Peeve Page.)

III. Revision
The key to good writing is effective revision. After you finish your paper, you still need to review and revise your work. It is best to do so after a period of time away from the paper, so planning ahead and completing the drafts prior to the deadline is necessary. When you’ve completed your drafts, make sure you can answer the following questions about your essay:

1. Thesis. Does my paper have a clear and effective thesis statement in the opening paragraph? Is my thesis persuasive, original, exciting?
2. Organization. Is the paper logically consistent? Does the introduction, body and conclusion reflect a common theme or argument? Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that summarizes the main idea and mini-conclusion emphasizing its importance?
3. Evidence. Do I use relevant examples and quotations effectively? Do I have enough evidence from the source to prove my points? Do I explain the connection between the evidence and those points?
4. Transitions. Does the paper flow from one idea to the next, or is it a collection of facts and independent paragraphs? Do I use linking phrases and transitions between paragraphs to create a seamless progression towards the conclusion?
5. Conclusion. Is it consistent with the evidence presented? Does it build upon and enhance the thesis? Does it include the significance of the paper?
6. Mechanics. Have I thoroughly proofread for spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc? Do I need to check for grammar and sentence structure problems?
7. Style. Does the paper flow smoothly? Is my writing lively and engaging? Are my ideas clear to the reader, not just me?
8. Citation of Sources. Do I give proper, consistent citations for every source that I use? Did I include other author’s ideas without proper citation?
Common Errors and Pet Peeves

1. Active versus Passive Voice. Avoid the passive voice as much as possible. The active voice strengthens the tone of your argument, while the passive voice weakens or obscures it.

   Passive voice: Gettysburg is considered the decisive turning point of the Civil War. By whom? This statement lacks force and critical information.

   Active voice: Most military historians consider Gettysburg to be the decisive turning point in the Civil War. This statement is clearer and more informative.

2. Past versus Present tense. You should mainly use the past tense in history papers. When referring to a text and the author’s views, it is acceptable to use the present tense. Example: Karl Marx writes that capitalism alienates workers from the products of their labor. However, it is preferable to say that Marx wrote what he wrote and keep the tense consistent throughout your paper. This will make it easier for you to avoid confusion.

3. Punctuation in a Quotation. Periods and commas go inside the closing quotation mark. Colons and semi-colons, however, follow the quotation mark.

   Passive voice and improper punctuation: In Fukuzawa’s article, it is said that “under no circumstances should a man be deprived of his rights”.

   Active voice and proper punctuation: In his article, Fukuzawa writes, “under no circumstances should a man be deprived of his rights.”

4. Silly Statements. Avoid making grand or silly statements that cannot be defended. Do not open your paper or essay with a global statement such as "since the beginning of time…” or "throughout history". These phrases are so broad that they are meaningless. Similarly, watch out for “Americans believed…” or “Everyone agrees.” In is highly improbable that there is any belief that every American holds, or every person agrees with.

5. Who versus that. Use who to refer to people and that to things. Example: The student who just left my office wrote a paper that is spectacular.

6. Its versus it’s. Its is the possessive of it and does not have an apostrophe. It’s is the contraction of it is or it has and does not have an apostrophe. Its’ does not exist.

7. Then versus than. Never, ever confuse them. Use then to indicate progression in time. Example: First I will make dinner, then I will wash the dishes. Use than to make comparisons. Example: The History Department is far better than all other departments.
8. *Less versus fewer.* Use *less* with a singular noun (e.g. less gas, less influence) to indicate degree or amount. Use *fewer* with plural nouns (e.g. fewer people, fewer accidents) to express number.

9. Page numbers. Make certain to number your pages!

10. Full names and titles. The first time you mention a person or title of a book, article, etc, you should provide the full name or title. Example: After reading Nakae Chomin’s book, *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government,* and Fukuzawa Yukichi’s essay, “On De-Asianization,” I better understand contemporary Japanese intellectual’s views on modernization.