



Analyzing Written Original Sources  
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A common challenge when teaching students to analyze written documents is their urge to leap ahead to make meaning, before adequately taking inventory of a document's contents. The following exercise is one way to slow students down and have them reflect on the complexity of any single source. Consider – where possible – undertaking this process as class discussion the first time you do it. This will then act as a model for students when they do this work in pairs, small groups, or on their own throughout the rest of the course.

- a) Select a written document that complements the content of the assigned reading for the day.
- b) Tell students not to read the whole document, but only to tell you who wrote it, when, and what kind of document it is (newspaper article, letter, diary entry, legislative act, ship's manifest, excerpt from an account book, poster, etc.). Ask why these particulars are important.

A note on bias: students generally come to college classrooms understanding the concept of bias – but equally, they often believe that bias makes a source untrustworthy or unusable. Consider dropping the word 'bias' from your discussion of sources and replacing it with 'perspective.' This requires that students do all the work necessary to critically read a source – to consider the influence of politics, religion, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and occupation on a writer – but it discourages students from dismissing sources out of hand. It also helps them to see that all sources – and indeed, all critiques of sources – are rooted in someone's very particular experience of time and place. This facilitates an examination of themselves, and the presumptions and cultural knowledge they bring to historical work.

- c) Ask students (given their answers to your who, when, and what questions) to consider the intended audience for the document. How does that audience shape the body of the document they will soon read?
- d) Have your students read the document and then summarize its contents. Their goal is not to interpret the document at this point, but simply to report back on what it says. This is the step students tend to skip – they want to make meaning from the document immediately, and that meaning can be terribly flawed if they don't first check that they have understood the document's contents.



This is a great moment to collate a list of vocabulary that might need further investigation. Words like spinster or vagrant, for example, have different meanings in different places, times, and cultures. Write such words on the board and come back to them later.

e) Ask students to tell you which evidence in the document helps them understand why it was created.

This is not about building context – if students bring in prior knowledge, point out that the goal is to work only with the evidence in the document itself. This, again, is about slowing students down and forcing them to deal with the document on its own terms.

f) Contextualize the document – ask students what else was going on in the United States at the time the document was created. Be expansive – welcome any and all suggestions. Discuss the connections between local, regional, and national events and this one piece of evidence.

g) Brainstorm questions that are left unanswered by the document and by your contextualization so far. If you have time and opportunity, make students responsible for answering their own questions, either during class time (by taking them to the library or to a computer lab) or as homework.

### A Concrete Example

a) The document:

A BILL TO PREVENT NEGROES AND MULATTOES FROM COMING TO, OR RESIDING IN OREGON (Enacted by the Oregon Territorial Legislature, 1849)

Sect. 1 Be it enacted by the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Oregon that it shall not be lawful for any negro or mulatto to enter into, or reside within the limits of this Territory. Providing that nothing in this act shall ....apply to any negro or mulatto now resident in this Territory, nor shall it apply to the offspring of any such as are resi-dents....

Sect. 2 That Masters and owners of vessels having negroes or mulattoes in their employ on board of vessel may bring them into Oregon Provided that in so doing such master, or owner, shall be responsible for the conduct of such negro or mulatto....and shall be liable to any person aggrieved by such negro or mulatto.

Sect. 3 No negro or mulatto shall be permitted to leave the port where the vessel upon which they are or may be employed shall be lying without the written permission of such master or owner....



Sect. 4 That it shall be the duty of masters and owners of vessels having brought negroes or mulattoes into Oregon as aforesaid to cause such negro or mulatto to leave this territory with such vessel upon which the shall have been brought into the Territory, or from some other vessel within forty days.

Sect. 5 If any master or owners of a vessel having brought negroes or mulattoes as provided for in the second section of this act into this Territory, shall fail to remove and take the same with them when leaving the Territory.... shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor....and on conviction, shall be fined and imprisoned at the discretion of the court; Provided that the fine in no case shall be less than five hundred dollars.

Sect. 6 If any negro or mulatto shall be found in this Territory, except as hereinbefore provided and except such as may now be permanent residents, it shall be the duty of any Judge or Justice of the Peace to....to issue a warrant for the apprehension of such negro or mulatto, directed to any sheriff or constable....to arrest....such negro or mulat-to....

Sect. 7 If any negro or mulatto shall be found a second time unlawfully remaining in this Territory he shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and shall....upon conviction be fined and imprisoned at the discretion of the court.

Sect. 8 The Governor of this Territory shall cause this act to be published in some one or more of the California newspapers and such other newspapers as he may think necessary in order to carry out the spirit of the same.

Sect. 9 This act to take effect and be in force from and after its passage.

b) This document was written by the Territorial Legislature of Oregon in 1849. It's a legal document; a legislative record.

c) The audience for this document, most broadly interpreted, would be the occupants of Oregon. More narrowly, it would be of particular interest to individuals within the legal system – lawyers, judges, legislators, and officers of the law.

Laws tend to be passed at moments of change – something is happening that legislators want to happen differently.



d) This document prohibits African Americans from emigrating to Oregon after this date, although it permits African Americans who already live in Oregon to remain there. The document stipulates what the consequences will be for anyone who disobeys the act – as an African American, or as someone who made it possible for that African American to get to Oregon – and states that notices about the act should be published in California newspapers.

There are words that might be time and place-specific: vessel, Negro, and Mulatto.

e) The document suggests that African Americans are coming to Oregon via ship, and staying in the territory. Shipping is singled out as the means by which this is happening – unless 'vessel' was a word that could also encompass overland wagons.

f) The California Gold Rush began in 1849, which might explain why the legislature wants notices about the act published in California newspapers – immigration is coming from the south.

The Mexican-American war ended in 1848, bringing enormous amounts of new territory under the control of the United States. Oregon, which had previously been somewhat isolated, was now connected to the rest of the United States in a way it hadn't been before.

Whether that territory would come into the Union as slave or free territory was of major concern to Americans all over the country. Sectional tensions had been growing since the ratification of the constitution – by 1849 they had reached a new pitch because of the end of the Mexican-American war.

Ideas about race in America were extremely complicated – individuals could be anti-slavery but deeply racist. The Know Nothings had gained strength throughout the 1840s – the idea of excluding African Americans from northern states was not new.

All of these considerations have the potential to explain why this document was created when and where it was.

g) Were other states and territories excluding African Americans at this time? Had there been slavery in Oregon? Was there slavery in Oregon in 1849? How many people were moving to Oregon from California? Did the legislature pass other laws excluding other non-white people, or was this specifically aimed at African Americans? What was the status of Native communities in Oregon at the same time? What did most people in Oregon do for a living? How many African Americans lived there?