**How to analyze primary sources**

In their search for an improved understanding of the past, historians look for new evidence — written documents or visual artifacts. When they encounter a written or visual primary source, historians ask certain key questions. You should ask these questions too. Sometimes historians can’t be certain about the answer, but they always ask the question.

**Analyzing a written document**

**• Who wrote the document? Is it a specific person or someone whose identity you can merely infer from the context of the document (for example, a parent writing to a child, a traveler writing home)?**

**• When and where was it written?**

**• Why was the document written? Is there a clear purpose, or are multiple interpretations possible?**

**• Who was, or who might have been, its intended audience?**

**• What point of view does it reflect?**

**• What can the document tell us about the individual who produced it and the society from which he or she came?**

**Analyzing a visual source**

**• Who made the image or artifact, and how was it made?**

**• When and where was the image or artifact made?**

**• Who paid for or commissioned it? How can you tell?**

**• For what audience might it have been intended? Where might it have originally been displayed or used?**

**• What message or messages is it trying to convey?**

**• How could it be interpreted differently depending on who viewed or used it?**

**• What can this visual source tell us about the individual who produced it and the society from which he or she came?**