

Interpretation and critique of sources

“The most important material is not in the sources, but without sources nothing we have to say about the past matters.”
Gustav Droysen, 1858

Watch out! Don't believe everything that a source appears to tell you at first glance!

An old file can contain, for example, purposely falsified data, through which the writer intends to deceive others. Or someone has simply cut off half of a photograph, so that a particular person just isn't there any more. Or your grandmother wrote things in her diary many years ago, which she could not have known were untrue.

So what does that mean today? It's simple: Every source has to be **interpreted** and **held up to scrutiny**. You do that by asking certain questions when considering a source:

1. First, clarify your own **research goals**:
 - What do you want to learn from the source?
 - What time frame, event, or person is the focus of your interest?
2. In the second step, you have to **describe the source** and understand:
 - What kind of source is it?
 - Who is the author?
 - Where and when was the source generated (which historical epoch, for example) and in which context did it arise (how and why)?
 - Does it related to recent events, or events of the more distant past?
 - To whom is the source addressed? Is there an intended recipient noted?
 - What information does the source contain, and in what ways is it limited?
 - Are there contradictions in the content?
 - Do you need additional tools in order to understand the source (such as a dictionary)?

Research goals

Describing and understanding the source



3. Then you have to **critique the source**. That doesn't mean you should say whether you find it good or bad. It means you have to ask a few critical questions about the source, such as these:
 - Is the source believable?
 - Can you recognize the purpose for which the source was created? Does the source provide information about its creator's agenda?
 - What was the context in which the source was created? What happened before the source was created? What happened afterward? What might the creator of the source have known when he or she created it? And what could he or she not have known?

4. Finally, you can estimate the **value** of this source for your own research:
 - What historical questions were you able to answer with help from the source?
 - Did you have to consult other historical sources in order to be able to understand this one?
 - Can one link, compare, complement, check, or confirm this source using other sources?

**Criticizing
the source**

**Evaluating
the source**

Steps 1–4 must be carried out with every source. The individual questions may vary depending on what kind of source you have. A photo will raise other questions than those raised by a letter, for example.