

QUESTIONS TO ASK IN YOUR RESEARCH USING ARCHIVES

Doing research in the archives is a little different from research with library materials such as books and journal articles. Archives are usually unpublished, primary source material that document the activities of an organization or an individual.

Here are some questions to ask when examining a document from the archives:

WHAT KIND OF DOCUMENT IS IT? Knowing the type and form of a document helps you understand the kind of information it contains and does not contain. Is it personal correspondence, an interview transcript, a government record, a memorandum, a record of a transaction, or something else? Remember, for example, that a census record will contain only the information that the census taker was required to include; similarly, a diary contains only the information the author chose to record.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF THE DOCUMENT'S CREATION? Every document was created for a reason. Who created the document? Why was it created? What function did the document serve?

WHO WAS THE INTENDED AUDIENCE FOR THE DOCUMENT? What was the relationship between the document's creator and the intended audience? The answer to this question will help you understand the information contained in the document as well as the document's function. A letter written by an individual to a politician will be different than a letter written to a family member.

IN WHAT HISTORIC OR SOCIAL CONTEXT WAS THIS DOCUMENT CREATED? What was happening in the world, country, and city when the document was created? How are historical events reflected in the document?

IS THE DOCUMENT UNIQUE OR PART OF A LARGER SERIES OF SIMILAR DOCUMENTS? Is it possible that more than one copy exists? Can you compare it with similar documents in the same archival collection? Unique documents are valuable but may also be more difficult to assess in terms of reliability and usefulness.

HOW RELIABLE IS THE DOCUMENT? Is the information accurate? Is there a strong bias or prejudice present? What do the answers to these questions say about the how reliably the document represents historical facts? Was information deliberately falsified or obscured?

IS THE DOCUMENT FORMAL OR INFORMAL? Formal and informal documents, depending on the intended audience, can be quite different in their tone and content, even when referring to the same event or person.

WHAT IS THE PHYSICAL FORM AND CONDITION OF THE DOCUMENT? Is the document heavily worn? A document that has been folded over and over was probably important to someone. A document in extremely good condition may have been so important it was rarely handled, or so unimportant it was never used. What do the paper, ink, handwriting, etc. tell you about the document and the information it contains?

WHAT CLUES IN PHOTOGRAPHS CAN HELP YOU DATE AND LOCATE THE SUBJECT? Look for buildings, landmarks, geographical features, vehicles, signs, advertisements, clothing, etc. to help you determine the location and time period. Also consider whether the background was intentional or coincidental; the presence of the photographer; whether the photograph was candid or staged, etc.

WHAT GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS MAY BE MISSING FROM THE ARCHIVES? It is also important to think about silences in the archives. What voices may be missing from the document or the archives relating to a particular time period or event? Where would you find evidence of underrepresented or illiterate groups relating to the time period or events under investigation? What do the silences tell you about the historic or social context in which the document was created, and about the document itself?

SOURCES:

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