

Documents: Finding Clues to the Past

Documents can connect us to real people from the time, place, and/or event we are studying. Rather than relying on what people today say about history, information contained in historic documents allows us to learn about the past for ourselves, and draw our own conclusions about what really happened.

Suggestions for reading and interpreting documents:

1. Some historic documents can be very difficult to read. If you are having difficulty figuring out a particular word, skip it and read through the rest of document as best you can. Once you have a better sense of what the author is trying to say, figuring out difficult words will become easier.
2. Just as different sources today often give different information, authors from the past do not always agree with one another. Note any information that conflicts with other sources you have read.
3. Consider what biases this author may have.
4. Look for clues (names, locations, etc.) that will help you do additional research on this topic.

Questions to Consider:

1. What type of document is it (letter, ad, telegram, etc.)? How was it created (typewriter, computer, handwritten, etc.)?
2. Does it have a title and/or date?
3. Who created the document? What does the document reveal about its creator (job, location, family, interests, etc.)?
4. What/who was it created for – who was the intended audience? Is there any evidence that the document reached them?
5. Why was this document created?
6. What facts (names, numbers, other details) seem most important?
7. What opinions (if any) does the author present (likes, dislikes, concerns, etc.)? Might there be other points of view?
8. What is the author's tone or mood? What words suggest this?
9. What does the document tell us about life in Washington at the time it was created?
10. Is there anything else you notice?