



Questions for Primary Sources

Contextual Criticism

1. **Who is the author?** Consider the author's background, including gender and ethnic identities, religious and professional affiliations, and personal history. What factors shaped this author's understanding of the situation they're writing about? For example, 19-century women's rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton's earlier affiliation with the temperance movement might help explain the themes of moral regeneration in her 1848 speech in favor of women's suffrage.
2. **Who is the audience?** Who the author was addressing colors the meaning of their remarks. For example, the fact that Booker T. Washington delivered his 1895 "Atlanta Compromise" speech before a mainly *white* audience would influence your reading of his themes of southern black loyalty, humility, and hard work in the document.
3. **When was this written?** What concurrent historical events might influence the meaning and reception of this document? For instance, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton discusses the moral degeneracy of "war" in her 1848 women's rights speech, it would be useful to note that 1848 marked the conclusion of the *Mexican-American War*, which was particularly unpopular with opponents of slavery.
4. **What is the author's argument or objective?** Not all primary sources feature an explicit thesis, but they all have a purpose. What was the hungry indentured servant writing to his parents trying to *accomplish*, for example? How did he try to achieve his aims?
5. **Is the author's version of events credible?** Does the author's argument support or contradict other sources on this event? Does it seem to be leaving out important details or points of view? Tensions between the viewpoints of different primary sources are great starting points for interpretation.
6. **What genre does this document fall into?** Genres, or established modes of writing or speaking, can inform the historical meaning of the words in the document. Examples of genres include novels, manifestos, eulogies, campaign speeches, captivity narratives, and political pamphlets. When reading Mary Jemison's remarkably favorable account of her captivity by Native Americans, for example, you would want to consider how it departed from other examples of "captivity narratives" in the colonial era.
7. **How does this evidence relate to course themes?** Does the document confirm, extend, or even complicate themes you've been hearing in lecture or reading in your textbooks? Such relationships with other course themes may help you generate topics for your writing.

Textual Interpretation

8. What **key terms** does this author repeat? Did these terms have a special significance in this time and place? Does this language tell us something about how people in this era thought? For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's repetition of terms like "sin" and "righteousness" in her women's rights speech indicate she's using religious ideas to argue for women's political participation.

There seems now to be a kind of moral stagnation in our midst. Philanthropists have done their utmost to rouse the nation to a sense of its sins. [. . .] Our churches are multiplying on all sides, our missionary societies, Sunday schools, and prayer meetings and innumerable charitable and reform organizations are all in operation, but still the tide of vice is swelling, and threatens the destruction of everything, and the battlements of righteousness are weak against the raging elements of sin and death. Verily, the world waits the coming of some new element, some **purifying power**, some spirit of mercy and love. The voice of woman has been silenced in the state, the church, and the home, but man cannot fulfill his destiny alone, he cannot **redeem** his race unaided. There are deep and tender chords of sympathy and love in the hearts of the downfallen and oppressed that woman can touch more skillfully than man.

9. What **patterns** can you identify in the author's use of terms? Is the author working with an *analogy*, or constructing a *dichotomy*? In the above passage Stanton creates a dichotomy between sin and righteousness. War, drunkenness, and other maladies of male-dominated societies are grouped with "sin," while feminine sympathy and love are grouped with "righteousness." There is also an analogy: the connection between *purification* and *redemption* suggests women playing a Christ-like role in U.S. society. Stanton is making an analogy between women's capacity for "sympathy and love" and the redeeming mercy of the Christian savior.
10. **What does the document assume or imply?** What does the author seem to take for granted about their time or their subject matter? Marked differences between past and present ways of thinking are important starting points for analysis. Avoid assuming the author's audience would have shared YOUR values, however. Strive to understand what they were saying from the point of view of a reader from their time.
11. **How does the author construct her own persona and authority?** Does the author speak in the name of a particular social group? Do she use the personal pronoun "I," the collective "we," or a passive voice? Do she invoke the authority of sacred texts or abstractions like "humanity" or "religion"?
12. **What strikes you as surprising in the document?** For all of these questions, you should be alert to any ideas or assumptions that strike you as surprising—that contradict what you THOUGHT about how people believed and behaved in the past. What conventional view about the past does this document call into question?