Interpreting documents

This section provides advice on how to interpret sources. This is a challenge that is faced by all historians, and is a key aspect of what it means to do history.

We'll begin by discussing the types of source that you might encounter. We'll then consider some of the key approaches that historians take. The guide will then discuss some of the questions that you might ask while conducting research, and some of the approaches you might employ while analysing the information you find.

Types of source

The type of source you are using is of crucial importance. For each document you encounter, you should consider who wrote it, why it was produced, how it was used and who read it. We will discuss these considerations in more detail below. But for now, let's consider the types of source we find:

- written sources
- still images
- film and video
- sound

Within these basic categories, we can find lots of different types of item. Here is a small selection of examples:

- Letters
- Diaries
- Government records
- Business records
- Church records
- Photographs
- Television recordings

- Amateur video footage
- Music and radio recordings
- Oral history recordings

The huge diversity of possible sources is one of the most important challenges that historians face, and is one of the ways that history is distinctive from other subjects which depend upon written source material, such as English literature.

Why is all this variation a challenge? Because often it's necessary to understand how a particular type of source was produced in order to analyse it effectively. Most sources that we find in archives were not produced for the convenience of historians, but to serve particular purposes in certain historical contexts. It is very important to appreciate this, and we will discuss some ways that you might try to deal with this issue below.

Approaches

There are two common approaches to interpreting sources:

- **qualitative approach:** trying to use your intuition to understand what sources are telling us. Your approach may involve comparing sources, studying the text of a source very carefully, or trying to weave together content from different sources to build an argument.
- **quantitative approach:** this approach involves attempting to *quantify* the source material. This usually means trying to create or analyse numerical data which you have derived from documents.

Some people tend to see the qualitative approach as being all about personal interpretation, and the quantitative approach as being all about hard numerical data. This is a very questionable judgement. After all, once you've used a quantitative approach to study some source material, you may still want to interpret the results that you've found. And as we will see, decisions you make about which source material to use, and how to analyse it, can have an important effect on your quantitative results.

There are some sources which tend to be associated with a particular analytical approach. A quantitative approach, for instance, is the most obvious choice when analysing census data or the financial accounts of a business. Letters and diaries, on the other hand, are ideal sources for a qualitative interpretation.

But we don't always need to stick with the most common approach. It is perfectly reasonable to attempt to quantify poetry or art, or to try to read census data in a qualitative way.

When you do your research, you don't necessarily have to think about all this jargon. But it is important to think about what approach you are taking, and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

Questions to ask

What type of source is this?

All historical records are produced in their own specific contexts, and this can significantly affect how we can interpret them.

There are several ways to think about the production of a source. We can think about the particular individual who wrote it. Or we can consider the audience for which it was intended. But perhaps the first question to ask is: What type of source is this?

Each source is unique, and categories of source such as letters or diaries can themselves contain a great deal of very different documents. Thinking about the basic type of source that you are dealing with can help you to begin to unravel how and why it was produced.

Take, for instance, a source such as the 1841 census. It was produced for a very specific purpose: to enumerate the population of Britain, and to collect data on occupations and ages. This profoundly influenced the way it was created. Census enumerators were employed, and had to enter their findings into printed forms. These forms were then collated and analysed elsewhere. This is important, for the following reasons:

- The census enumerators had to work to quite a strict set of rules. People 'missing' from the census may have been staying elsewhere on the day it was carried out
- The forms required everyone to have an age and address. This did not work well for streets without clear house numbering. Many people did not know their age, which meant that many of them were rounded up or down to ages such as 20, 50, 80, etc.
- Some people lied about their age, for example to conceal births out of wedlock
- Many people were resistant to the census, and refused to be counted

As a consequence, what the census tells us about the past differs quite considerably from the evidence available in other sources. Even other official sources, such as baptismal registers or tax records, might give quite a different account of local population.

This is why it's often worth considering the type of source you are dealing with, and how it was produced. If you want to find out more about the sources that you are using, the following guides may be helpful:

- J. Armstrong, 'An introduction to archival research in business history', *Business History* 33 (1991), 7-34.
- E. Danbury, *Palaeography for Historians* (Phillimore, 2000).
- P. Edwards, *Rural Life: Guide to Local Records* (Batsford, 1993).

- J. Foster and J. Sheppard, *British Archives: A Guide to Archive Resources in the United Kingdom* (Macmillan, 1989).
- D. Hey, *Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (Oxford University Press, 1996).
- J. Orbell, *A Guide to Tracing the History of a Business* (Business Archives Council, 1987).
- W. B. Stephens, *Sources for English Local History* (Phillimore, 1994).

Who wrote it? Why was it produced?

Once you've considered the type of source you're dealing with, you should consider how it was produced.

Some sources have a clear author. Documents such as correspondence (both personal and official), diaries and other personal papers will fit into this category. If this individual was a historically notable person, you may be able to discover something about them. Sources which were produced by companies or government departments can also be investigated in this manner.

There are several ways that you might begin to examine the authorship or provenance of a source. Firstly, many archives record this information. It is standard practice for entries in their catalogues to give contextual detail about the origins of a source. Secondly, many local studies archives maintain person and subject card catalogues, which contain references to documents concerning particular individuals and organisations. You may, therefore, be able to track your author through these. Thirdly, you can conduct your own research. Some good places to start trying to find out about individuals are set out in the following table.

Source	Coverage
Dictionary of National Biography	People (all deceased) of national importance
Who's Who	Notable living individuals. Archive available for previous subjects.
Subject specific reference works	Generally focused on particular topic, e.g. *Grove Dictionary of Artists*
Trade directories	Published locally. Individuals had to pay to be listed, hence coverage likely to very incomplete. May also be useful for local businesses.
Poll books, rate books, electoral registers	Limited to local taxpayers or people who could vote. Not available for all time periods.
Census	Every 10 years from 1801, but not available to consult after 1911.

Newspapers	Many are digitised, even more can be consulted in archives or local studies libraries.

There may be many other sources that you can use to try to contextualise the material that you are dealing with, beyond the obvious starting points listed above. This is one reason why it is always worth making contact with an archivist or other individuals who are knowledgeable about the sources that are available.

Remember, however, that not all authors had a free hand to write as they wished. Some sources were produced within particular contexts which greatly influenced the way they were written. The census, described above, is a good example of this. But even sources which appear to have been relatively freely written can actually be somewhat formulaic. A good example of this is the witness statements which survive amongst the records of many of Britain's courts. These often have the appearance of being an accurate transcription of what the witnesses said when they reported a crime to a magistrate. But we know that sometimes these testimonies were essentially written in advance, or contained large sections of 'boiler plate' content copied from elsewhere.

This again highlights why it's important to understand the type of source you're dealing with.

In these cases, investigating authorship may not be worthwhile. It might, however, still be worth investigating the particular context in which a source was created. If a document was created by a company, for instance, then you might ask what that company made, how it managed its correspondence, and what other sources to do with it survive.

What was the audience for the source?

Considering the audience of your source can be another way to help you understand its contents. Was your source written to persuade or convince? Was it aimed at a particular person, or at group of people?

This is where investigating the historical context of a particular source may be useful. Take, for instance, the following source:

20 December 1712. I lodge [up] two pair of stairs, have but one room, and deny myself to everybody almost, yet I cannot be quiet; and all my mornings are lost with people, who will not take answers below stairs; such as Dilly, and the Bishop, and Provost, etc. Lady Orkney invited me to dinner to-day, which hindered me from dining with Lord Treasurer. This is his day that his chief friends in the Ministry dine with him...

This is a transcription from a diary. You might think, therefore, that its contents are private, and can be relied upon as a truthful and honest account of the author's actions. This may be

true in some cases, but this diary was actually written to be read by somebody else – a woman named Esther Johnson, a friend of the writer Jonathan Swift.

Survivals and losses

If your source is part of a collection or series of documents, it's important to consider whether any of the other sources in that collection have been lost. It is quite common, for instance, for court records from before the Victorian era to be incomplete. Similarly, it is not unknown for families to destroy certain letters or diaries before depositing family papers with a local record office!

Sometimes missing documents can merely be frustrating or disappointing. But in some circumstances, this can be a serious issue that you need to negotiate very carefully. For instance, if we are dealing with a collection of letters that has been very selectively weeded by individuals who want to hide certain facts, then we need to be very careful about how we interpret the sources that have survived.

How do we try to resolve this problem?

There is no catch-all solution. One approach is simply to be cautious with our analysis. We can be honest about what we don't know, and consider this carefully when we try to draw conclusions.

Another approach is to build links with other sources, so we can examine the differences between them. Through this comparison, we can better understand what survives and what's missing. If we were examining crime in England in 1820, we might have several collections of sources available:

1. manuscript accounts of trial proceedings and outcomes in local record offices
2. registers of convicted criminals kept in The National Archives
3. newspaper articles about trials

Source (1) is likely to have incomplete coverage. But how do we know how incomplete it actually is? Newspapers regularly reported the results of trials. Furthermore, after 1805 the Home Office collected records of criminal convictions, which have been digitised for the use of family historians. By comparing reporting in sources (1), (2) and (3), we can get a better sense of the coverage of each. This can help us to have a much clearer understanding of how these sources should be handled.

Triangulation

A similar approach can be applied to the use of factual evidence taken from sources which may have problems with their reliability. Source A, for instance, may claim that an event happened on 1 January 1930. But how do we know that Source A is correct? To increase our level of confidence, we can try to find other sources which support this claim. If these

sources were produced independently of Source A, then we might treat the 01/01/1930 date with more credence.

When trying this 'triangulation' approach, it's particularly useful to think about the origins and audience of your sources. Let's say, for instance, that you have a source that was written from a particular political perspective. Is it sensible to triangulate that source with documents written by people of similar political sympathies? The answer is probably 'no', since these other documents might be very likely to be influenced by similar prejudices or opinions.

If you can triangulate a source with documents written from a very different perspective, then all the better. Using a different *type* of source is also a worthwhile approach. For instance, if you're concerned about the reliability of a source such as the census, what do diaries and letters written by the subjects of the census themselves have to say? And does the information that you have found in these sources match up with baptism and burial records from the parish in which your person lived? If so, then you can be reasonably confident about the information in the original source.