Writing in History: How Do I Evaluate Sources?

Text-Based Primary Sources

- **Who is the author?**
- When was the source composed?
- **Who was the intended audience?**
- What is the purpose of the source? (Note that some primary sources have a central theme or argument and are intended to persuade; others are purely factual.)
- **How do the author's gender and socioeconomic class compare to those of the people about whom he or she is writing?**
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- **What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?**
- What biases are detectable in the source?
- **How do other contemporary sources compare with this one?**

Special considerations for editions/translations

- Is the source complete? If not, does the text contain an introductory note explaining editorial decisions?
- If you are using a document in a collection, does the editor explain his or her process of selection and/or translation?
- Are there notes introducing individual documents that provide useful information about the text?
- Are there footnotes or endnotes that alert you to alternate readings?

Text-based Secondary Sources

- **Who is the author?** What are his or her academic credentials?
- **When was the text written?**
- Who is the publisher? Scholarly, or popular?
- **Who is the intended audience for the text (scholars, students, general reading public?)**
- What is the author's main argument or thesis?
- **Does the author use primary sources as evidence to support his or her thesis? Is the author's interpretation of the primary sources persuasive?**
- Is there primary source evidence that you are aware of that the author does not consider?
- **Does the author contradict or disagree with others who have written on the subject?**
- Does he or she acknowledge and effectively address opposing arguments or interpretations?
- **Do the footnotes/endnotes and bibliography reference other important works on the same topic?**
- Does the author build his or her argument on any unsubstantiated assumptions?