# Who is the author?

You might not always work with a document that includes an author’s identity. However, the answer to this question is never, “I don’t know who this author is.” The answer is, “I don’t have the author’s name, but there are many points that I can discern about who this author is.” First of all, you might assume that an author is literate. That is a reasonable assumption, and is not always true. Did someone dictate what should be written? The author remains who did the dictation.

What else might we learn about an author, simply from reading her or his words? We might discern political, social, or religious prejudices. We might be able to tell profession or social status from looking at word choices or what subject is being addressed. We might be able to tell if someone is well-traveled by descriptions. Does this make sense?

The point is, any and all of this might influence the perspective of the person responsible for the document, and perspective is important if any of this is going to be useful. So when answering this first question, with or without an author’s name, you will also want to indicate what you have learned about the author based on the primary source document. This is not a place to re-hash what the author has said, only what you might determine about her or him from the writing.

# 2.  When was the document written?

As readers of history, we are always dying to know when something was written. The why of this is obvious – we want context. What caused what is described in the document to happen, and chronological order becomes important. If we do not know when something happened, how can we determine its historical significance? When analyzing causation, do not focus on generalities. What specifically caused the author to write what is in the document.

Most often we *will* know when something was written. But sometimes we do not. However, the answer to this particular question is never, “I don’t know when this document was written.” You should make some effort to make a reasonable estimate. For instance, if you know the author you at least have a time frame for her/his writing. If you would like to be a little closer than that, it is probably not a document that was written in the first fifteen or twenty years of someone’s life. So you can narrow it down a bit.

Consider the event or events being addressed, or even the content of the document in general. Is the author writing about the American Revolution? Then clearly the writing could not have occurred before the Revolution began. That part is a no-brainer. Could it have occurred before the Revolution ended? Content might give you that.

Of course, if the document gives you the date, you are home free and none of this matters. But sometimes it does not.

# 3.  Has the document been translated? Only include this if the original document was not in English, or if the English has been modernized.

Unbelievably, much of the world’s literature is not written in English. I know what you are thinking – this is really inconvenient. [Not studying a foreign language? You really should start now.] Fortunately we have translators on whom we can rely, and rely on them we do. I have a great deal of admiration for good translators, and this is why: translation is really, really hard. I know, because I have done many translations. Sometimes the language into which a document is being translated simply lacks the word or concept of the original document. Then what? The translator does the best s/he can.

Other problems that crop up with historical translations: words, ideas, entire paragraphs disappear. Sometimes this is intentional, sometimes an accident, but never good for future readers. Sometimes we end up with more than one version of a translation. Then what? Who do we trust? How do we trust them?

Sometimes a document will simply tell you if a translation has occurred. Sometimes you have to figure it out for yourself. At the end of a document, you might simply find someone’s name followed by a comma, then the abbreviation *trans.* There you go, the answer is yes, and you even have a translator’s name. That is not the end, though.

What was the original language?  This information is rarely offered, but we can usually figure it out, or at least make a pretty good guess. If a Chinese official is writing to an American official, is he writing in classical Chinese [usually Mandarin] to show the power and superiority of his language, relying on the American official to come up with his own translator? Or is he writing in English to show the American official how well-educated he is, and to make sure that his words are not misinterpreted by an interpreter? Good question, and one we may or may not be able to answer. You should probably offer both possibilities in your answer.

If you are pretty sure that the document has not been translated (or modernized), you are still not allowed to simply answer, yes. You need to explain why it is that you are pretty sure that the document has not been translated. If Queen Elizabeth has published an edict to her subjects, you might be safe in assuming that Queen Elizabeth would be writing in English to her English-speaking subjects, and you need to state that when you answer this question.

However, the English language has dramatically changed from the fifteenth century to today. Slang and informal English from one hundred years ago is different from today’s. Has the document been “modernized”? Who did that? Has anything been “lost in translation”?

# Question 4:  In summary, what does the work say?

A summary is harder than you might think; usually people say too much or too little. Usually about two or three sentences will do it. For example: “This document by Julius Caesar was written to give instructions to the Equestrian class. It tells them where and how to stable their horses, and when the new season of battle training will begin. It also informs them about a raise in pay they will receive.” [There is no such document!]

# Question 5:  Who is the intended audience for the work?

As I stated, it is not you. Even if a ruler is recording his or her own feats of strength and skill for posterity, s/he is probably still not aiming it at you. More likely the audience is her or his own people. However, there is often not just one audience.

A document often has a primary audience, and then one or more secondary audiences. When a woman uses this address: “My fellow suffragists” we might rightly conclude that her primary audience is the other women in the suffrage movement. However, dependent upon content, she might have a secondary audience of the men of her country as well, or even a more specific target of the lawmakers of her country.

Include all potential audiences, label them primary or secondary, and include why you think these are the audiences for the work. This is not the place to include why the author is writing, just to whom s/he is writing.

# 6.  What is the author trying to accomplish with this document?

Nobody writes without a reason. Sometimes it is simple self-aggrandizement. Sometimes it is to give orders, or change minds, express emotion, or change the world. Whatever it is, content will usually give us our best clue as to what the author was after. The tricky part about this is that this answer has to line up with question 7, which essentially asks if the author accomplished what s/he set out to do. So, if your answer is that the author is trying to change public opinion, how will you go about assessing if, in fact, that particular document was instrumental in changing public opinion?

If a document is designed to found a political movement, and that political movement does not take off until ten years after the author's death, was the document a success? The answer is, not initially, but it seems to have had some impact on a future movement. So the answer is both yes and no, and you have to explain why. Sometimes the author is executed, the movement is squashed, and nothing ever comes of it. A big, resounding NO. But to answer this question, you only need to state the author's intent as you see it.

# 7.  Does this work accomplish the author's intent?

See the previous question for an explanation of this one. Remember that whether your answer is yes or no, you still need to explain why that is your answer.

# 8.  What additional cultural, social, or political information does this document reveal? How will you include the required form of analysis for the week? This is the most important part of the essay.

The fact is that a primary source document can provide all kinds of information above and beyond its original intent. For instance, suppose a letter written in 1910 from one individual to another contains this sentence: “I am relieved that you are finally getting married; you are, after all, 28 years old.” If we knew nothing else about 1910, from this phrase we might conclude that in 1910, 28 years old was considered pretty old in the marriage market.

Documents might provide some of the more mundane details of everyday life: what people ate, wore, made, traded. It may tell us something about how people traveled from point A to point B: on foot, horseback, ferry, sailboat, motorcycle, etc. It might also tell us to where people were traveling, and how common travel was. It could reveal possibilities, professions, promises. . . .

And now a final word. Pay attention, please, because it is important. Each week, you must include a particular form of analysis that is found in the learning objectives. I help you also with an explanation about each form of analysis. For the Virtual Field Trip, where we examine primary source documents, use your textbook to provide you with the necessary contextual information and other information that will allow you to engage in critical analysis. Remember, critical does not mean saying something negative. Here, it means grounding your analysis in the academic literature and in your textbook. By academic literature, that implies that you might have to research in the library in peer-reviewed and scholarly sources. How do you research in the library? See the video in Week 0 that the librarians made for you. You can also come to office hours and I can help you.