

Learning objectives

- Understand how historians select evidence to construct a convincing narrative.
- Compare contemporary sources with a historian's narrative, and with each other, to make a judgement on the most probable sequences of events.

Task 1: Retrieval practice

1. What kinds of people usually wrote narratives of what was going on during the Middle Ages? Think about which groups of people could read and write.
2. What top tips for reading contemporary sources have you already worked on in history?

Task 2: Historians and evidence

Match the thinking that historians need to do when working with evidence, on the left, with the questions they might ask, on the right.

1. content	a. What do other sources say about this? How much do they agree or disagree with each other? Why might this be?
2. date	b. From their background or personal situation, are there any reasons why they might not be accurate about this event?
3. purpose	c. When was the author writing? If very soon after the event, could they be personally affected, which could affect their purpose? Or was it long after when they would have had to rely on second-hand information, but they could be more neutral? Might they have had time to compare their account with that of other people?
4. comparison	d. What does the source actually tell me about the event I want to know about?
5. author	e. Are there any words or phrases used which suggest the author might not be neutral, that they see one 'side' as the enemy?
6. tone	f. Why was the author writing this? What did they want their audience to think about this event? Are they trying to be as accurate as possible, or do they have other motives?

Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect or 'golden' source of evidence from the past. Historians will look at as much evidence as they possibly can before they can make any judgements.

We also need to be careful about **reliability**. We might think that an author's personal views in a contemporary source and their reasons for writing make their version of events **unreliable**, but that doesn't mean we (metaphorically) throw that source in the bin. It can still be very **useful**.

Task 3: What sources do we have and where do they come from?

Each source describes a particular moment from 15 June 1381, when Tyler was killed. Complete the grid to help you evaluate the origin and purpose of each of the sources. Remember that this is only a small selection of the available evidence from close to the Peasants' Revolt itself. Historians spend a long time in the archives trying to find and evaluate more!

Source A

Sir Jean Froissart, writing in 1395. He once worked for the royal family. He did not witness the events himself.

Tyler still kept up the conversation with the Mayor. The Mayor replied, 'I will not live a day unless you pay for your insolence.' Upon saying which, he drew his sword and struck Tyler such a blow on the head as he felled him. As soon as the rebel was down, he was surrounded on all sides so his own men might not see him.

Author:**Date:****Tone:****Purpose:**

Source B

From 'The Anonimale Chronicle of St Mary's', written by monks in York in 1399.

Wat Tyler, in the presence of the king, rinsed out his mouth in a very rude manner. One of the king's guards said aloud that Tyler was the greatest thief and robber in all of Kent. For these words Tyler would have killed him in the king's presence, but because he tried to do so, the Mayor of London, William of Walworth, arrested him. Tyler stabbed the mayor with his dagger but, as it pleased God, the mayor was wearing armour and took no harm. He struck back at Tyler, giving him a deep cut in the neck.

Author:

The Church supported the 'natural order' of people in England and stood by the monarchy. News of such a worrying revolt would have worried the monks greatly. Remember that John Ball did not represent the official Church's views.

Date:**Tone:****Purpose:**

Source C

Henry Knighton, writing c1390. He worked within the Church. In his other writings he made it clear how much he hated Lollards like John Ball.

Tyler stayed close to the king and spoke on behalf of the other rebels. He had drawn his dagger and kept throwing it from hand to hand. It was believed that he would take the opportunity to stab the king suddenly if the latter refused what he demanded. When the king paused to consider these demands, Tyler approached the king and spoke threateningly to him. When John Walworth, Mayor of London, noticed this, he feared the king was about to be killed and knocked Wat Tyler into the gutter with his sword.

Author:**Date:****Tone:****Purpose:**

Source D

Thomas Walsingham, writing c1420. He was a monk who, like Knighton, hated John Ball.

Sir John Newton came up to Tyler on a horse to hear what he proposed to say. Tyler grew angry because the knight had approached him on horseback and not on foot, and furiously declared that it was more fitting to approach his presence on foot than by riding on a horse. At this the ruffian brought out his knife and threatened to strike the knight and called him a traitor.

The king, although a boy and of tender age, took courage and ordered the Mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The Mayor, a man of spirit and bravery, arrested Tyler and struck him a blow on the head which hurt him badly. Tyler was soon surrounded by the other servants of the king and pierced by sword thrusts in several parts of his body.

Author:**Date:****Tone:****Purpose:**

Task 4: What do the sources say?

Use the focus questions to help you compare what the sources say about particular moments on 15 June 1381 when Wat Tyler was killed. Which sources seem to agree, and on which points? Colour-code parts of the sources that could help you answer the following questions:

Focus questions:

- What did Tyler do when he approached the king?
- What triggered Walworth to strike Tyler with his sword?
- What role did the king and his other guards nearby play?

<p>Source A</p> <p><i>Sir Jean Froissart, writing in 1395. He once worked for the royal family. He did not witness the events himself.</i></p> <p>Tyler still kept up the conversation with the Mayor. The Mayor replied, 'I will not live a day unless you pay for your insolence.' Upon saying which, he drew his sword and struck Tyler such a blow on the head as he felled him. As soon as the rebel was down, he was surrounded on all sides so his own men might not see him.</p>	<p>Source B</p> <p><i>From 'The Anonimalle Chronicle of St Mary's', written by monks in York in 1399.</i></p> <p>Wat Tyler, in the presence of the king, rinsed out his mouth in a very rude manner. One of the king's guards said aloud that Tyler was the greatest thief and robber in all of Kent. For these words Tyler would have killed him in the king's presence, but because he tried to do so, the Mayor of London, William of Walworth, arrested him. Tyler stabbed the mayor with his dagger but, as it pleased God, the mayor was wearing armour and took no harm. He struck back at Tyler, giving him a deep cut in the neck.</p>
<p>Source C</p> <p><i>Henry Knighton, writing c1390. He worked within the Church. In his other writings he made it clear how much he hated Lollards like John Ball.</i></p> <p>Tyler stayed close to the king and spoke on behalf of the other rebels. He had drawn his dagger and kept throwing it from hand to hand. It was believed that he would take the opportunity to stab the king suddenly if the latter refused what he demanded. When the king paused to consider these demands, Tyler approached the king and spoke threateningly to him. When John Walworth, Mayor of London, noticed this, he feared the king was about to be killed and knocked Wat Tyler into the gutter with his sword.</p>	<p>Source D</p> <p><i>Thomas Walsingham, writing c1420. He was a monk who, like Knighton, hated John Ball.</i></p> <p>Sir John Newton came up to Tyler on a horse to hear what he proposed to say. Tyler grew angry because the knight had approached him on horseback and not on foot, and furiously declared that it was more fitting to approach his presence on foot than by riding on a horse. At this the ruffian brought out his knife and threatened to strike the knight and called him a traitor.</p> <p>The king, although a boy and of tender age, took courage and ordered the Mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The Mayor, a man of spirit and bravery, arrested Tyler and struck him a blow on the head which hurt him badly. Tyler was soon surrounded by the other servants of the king and pierced by sword thrusts in several parts of his body.</p>

Task 5: A historian's narrative of the Peasants' Revolt - guided reading

This narrative was constructed by the medieval historian Robert Bartlett. He recounts it in his series The Plantagenets, available on YouTube: youtu.be/WsML7hiTnsY. It picks up on the moment after the rebels killed Archbishop Simon Sudbury.

1. Read through this narrative as a class and be ready to ask if there are any words or phrases you don't understand.
2. On the right-hand side, in 2-3 bullet points, summarise what happened in your own words.
3. On the left-hand side, create a subheading for each of the three paragraphs: a very quick summary of what is going on. Aim to keep this under five words for each one.

On the fourth day of the revolt, in a bid to end the riots, King Richard rode out to negotiate with the rebels. Some open ground just outside London's city walls was chosen for the meeting: a place called Smithfield, used for tournaments, fairs and festivals. The king was meeting the people on their own territory. This was a promising start, but with the royal forces vastly outnumbered by the rebels, Richard was placing himself in a perilous position.

The peasants' leader was called Wat Tyler. He approached the king and repeated his demands for freedom and equality. The king agreed, but then a scuffle broke out. Tyler lashed out with his dagger, and the Mayor of London plunged his sword into Tyler's neck. Tyler was seen to fall from his horse. The rebels drew their weapons to avenge him [take revenge for his injury]. At that moment, the future of the Plantagenet dynasty hung in the balance. But Richard took the initiative: he spurred his horse forward into the crowd, and shouted, 'I will be your king, your captain and your leader!'

The mood changed. With the added assurance of a charter granting the rebels pardons and freedom, they began to disperse. But any hopes for the future were dashed when the boy king later went back on his promises. The leaders of the rebellion were rounded up, and Richard proclaimed: 'You will remain in permanent bondage, not as before, but incomparably harsher. The Peasants' Revolt had failed.'

Task 6: Which sources might Bartlett have used?

Source A: *Sir Jean Froissart*

Tyler still kept up the conversation with the Mayor. The Mayor replied, 'I will not live a day unless you pay for your insolence.' Upon saying which, he drew his sword and struck Tyler such a blow on the head as he felled him. As soon as the rebel was down, he was surrounded on all sides so his own men might not see him.

Source B: *'The Anonimale Chronicle of St Mary's'*

Wat Tyler, in the presence of the king, rinsed out his mouth in a very rude manner. One of the king's guards said aloud that Tyler was the greatest thief and robber in all of Kent. For these words Tyler would have killed him in the king's presence, but because he tried to do so, the Mayor of London, William of Walworth, arrested him. Tyler stabbed the mayor with his dagger but, as it pleased God, the mayor was wearing armour and took no harm. He struck back at Tyler, giving him a deep cut in the neck.

Colour code Bartlett's narrative to highlight where he explains:

- What Tyler did when he approached the king.
- What triggered Walworth to strike Tyler with his sword.
- What role the king and his other guards nearby played.

Wat Tyler approached the king and repeated his demands for freedom and equality. The king agreed, but then a scuffle broke out. Tyler lashed out with his dagger, and the Mayor of London plunged his sword into Tyler's neck. Tyler was seen to fall from his horse. The rebels drew their weapons to avenge him [take revenge for his injury]. At that moment, the future of the Plantagenet dynasty hung in the balance. But Richard took the initiative: he spurred his horse forward into the crowd, and shouted, 'I will be your king, your captain and your leader!'

Source C: *Henry Knighton*

Tyler stayed close to the king and spoke on behalf of the other rebels. He had drawn his dagger and kept throwing it from hand to hand. It was believed that he would take the opportunity to stab the king suddenly if the latter refused what he demanded. When the king paused to consider these demands, Tyler approached the king and spoke threateningly to him. When John Walworth, Mayor of London, noticed this, he feared the king was about to be killed and knocked Wat Tyler into the gutter with his sword.

Source D: *Thomas Walsingham*

Sir John Newton came up to Tyler on a horse to hear what he proposed to say. Tyler grew angry because the knight had approached him on horseback and not on foot, and furiously declared that it was more fitting to approach his presence on foot than by riding on a horse. At this the ruffian brought out his knife and threatened to strike the knight and called him a traitor.

The king, although a boy and of tender age, took courage and ordered the Mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The Mayor, a man of spirit and bravery, arrested Tyler and struck him a blow on the head which hurt him badly. Tyler was soon surrounded by the other servants of the king and pierced by sword thrusts in several parts of his body.

Challenge questions:

- Now think the other way around. The sources mention some moments that Bartlett didn't include in his narrative. Why do you think this is? Use your evaluation of the sources from Tasks 3 and 4 to make some suggestions.
- Bartlett describes some moments that aren't mentioned in the sources. Pick an example. How do you think he decided what happened?

Teaching notes

This lesson is the third part of a four-lesson scheme of work on the Peasants' Revolt (see resources 35366, 35367, and 35369). It is designed to help students understand how historians select evidence to create a convincing narrative and to enable them to assess contemporary sources for themselves in order to make a judgement on the most probable sequence of events.

For task 4, you may need to guide students in their thinking. Each source writer had a reason to support the status quo, describe the actions of the king and his men as heroic, and make Tyler sound like a common villain who deserved to be killed. Therefore, these sources are less likely to be accurate in regard to the first two focus questions.

For task 5, the same video can also be found here:

www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-gcse-the-peasant-revolt/zm676v4.

Answers

Task 1

1. The most common written narratives in the Middle Ages came from monks and other members of the Church - they were the most likely to be literate.
2. Students will have different prior knowledge and skills on source work depending on their contexts. A few key maxims which they may have covered include:
 - All sources have some use; no source is not useful.
 - It is important to read both the content and the provenance of every source.
 - We only know how fully useful a source is when we apply our own knowledge to consider how a source fits into its context.

Task 2

1. content	d	a. What do other sources say about this? How much do they agree or disagree with each other? Why might this be?
2. date	c	b. From their background or personal situation, are there any reasons why they might not be accurate about this event?
3. purpose	f	c. When was the author writing? If very soon after the event, could they be personally affected, which could affect their purpose? Or was it long after when they would have had to rely on second-hand information, but they could be more neutral? Might they have had time to compare their account with that of other people?
4. comparison	a	d. What does the source actually tell me about the event I want to know about?
5. author	b	e. Are there any words or phrases used which suggest the author might not be neutral, that they see one 'side' as the enemy?
6. tone	e	f. Why was this author writing this? What did they want their audience to think about this event? Are they trying to be as accurate as possible, or do they have other motives?