

HIST101H: Interpreting the Asian Past

Primary Source Analysis Paper Instructions, Guidelines, and Suggestions

Instructions and Guidelines: Select one of the two primary source documents, “The Azamgarh Proclamation” or Lin Zexu, “Letter to Queen Victoria.” Read the selected document carefully and review the portions of the textbook and notes from relevant lectures mentioned in the “Introduction to the Document” section of the primary source text. Then, write a paper of **at least 1000 words and six distinct paragraphs of roughly equal length** on the primary source document as follows:

- Paragraph 1 should summarize the main points or ideas of the document.
- Paragraph 2 should—using **only** the document itself and the corresponding textbook readings and class lectures—describe the relevant historical context of the document. That is, when and where was the document written or composed, and what was happening (socially, culturally, politically, economically, etc.) in that time and place that is relevant to the document and its contents.
- Paragraphs 3 through 5 should each list a quotation from the document that you find revealing about the relevant historical context of the document, and then explain what that quotation reveals about the context and how.
- Paragraph 6 should explain something about the relevant historical context that the document does **NOT** reveal or leaves ambiguous or uncertain.

Each paragraph should be **numbered** appropriately, and Paragraphs 3–5 should first give the relevant quotation from the document followed by the explanation, like so:

1. This is the paragraph summarizing the document. The document starts with A. Then it talks about B. And then it talks about C.
2. This is the paragraph explaining the historical context. The document was composed by so-and-so at such-and-such time and place. At the time the document was composed, P was going on. So was Q. And R was also important.
3. “This is a quotation from the document.”¹ This first quotation shows X about the historical context. It does so because when it says “...”, it demonstrates that X...
4. “This is a second quotation from the document.” This second quotation shows Y about the historical context. It does so because when it says “...”, it demonstrates that Y...
5. “This is a third quotation from the document.” This second quotation shows Z about the historical context. It does so because when it says “...”, it demonstrates that Z...
6. This is the paragraph explaining what the document leaves unknown or uncertain.

¹ You may use longer quotations of several sentences. However, you should place an ellipsis between the first and last sentences. Don’t pad the length of your essay with excessive quotation.

Note: You may write more than 1000 words and 6 paragraphs, but you must have all the required components for full credit. Failure to follow **ALL** formatting guidelines will result in a reduced grade.

Complete and proofread your paper, then save it as a MS Word (.doc/.docx) file and upload it to Canvas. To save as a Word file from Google Docs, click “File,” select “Download,” and then choose “Microsoft Word (.docx).”

Suggestions for Approaching and Completing this Assignment

Although the primary source documents themselves are quite short, they can be challenging to read and understand, and this assignment asks you to do a lot of thinking with them, so make sure to give yourself plenty of time to complete it.

The suggestions that follow refer to the attached primary source document, “The Great Learning.” **Please read it first**, along with the sections of the textbook referred to in the “Introduction to the Document” section of the text.

Finished? Now let’s get to work.

For the first paragraph, you need to summarize the document. To do this, you want ask yourself some of the following questions:

- By the time I finished reading the document, what main impression did the document leave on me?
- Did it seem like the author or authors were trying to make a central point or points?
- Were there recurring themes or ideas that kept coming up?
- Was there an obvious structure to the text, maybe indicated by subheadings or some other internal markers?

Returning to this particular document, it does not appear that there is a definite structure, and the text seems to meander from point to point. (Not uncommon, especially in very old texts like this one!) But the author does introduce a set of propositions in the beginning of the text that he then explains in more detail over the text. And, more importantly, he also highlights several key themes and points again and again, like: the meaning and process of “learning” and its relationship to individual virtue; the relationships between individuals and families; the relationship between families and society; and the role of rulers in society.

So, if I were summarizing this document, I might do so like this:

1. “The Great Learning” is part of the Confucian classics that were originally composed around in the 500s and 400s BCE and later standardized during the Han dynasty. The text discusses a number of different themes. One prominent theme is the meaning of “learning” and education. For the author, education consists principally of

investigating the root causes of things, cultivating one's inner virtue and learning how to conduct oneself properly in different relationships with others. Another notable theme is the importance of the family. The author describes the ideal family as one composed of virtuous individuals who act according to particular roles defined by gender and age. Moreover, the author sees healthy families as the building blocks of a healthy society. A final important theme is social stability and prosperity. The author argues that stable, prosperous societies are created not only from healthy, stable families but also by wise, virtuous rulers who lead by example and demonstrate to their subjects how to live proper, virtuous lives. (165 words)

There's certainly more in the document that you might include in your summary but make sure to focus on the main ideas and most important points rather than trying to include every detail.

Okay, **now we can turn to the relevant historical context.** Here, you want to describe the time and place the document was written or composed, and what all was going at the time. Now, of course there was quite a lot going on in any given time and place, so you want to make sure your discussion of historical context concentrates on what is most relevant to the document and its contents.

One way to do this is to look at any specific names or places mentioned in the document. In this case, we find mentioned kings from ancient Chinese mythology, the names of earlier Shang and Zhou dynasty rulers, older texts like the *Book of Odes*, and Confucius and some of his disciples. So, in some sense the context is both the ancient past (or, more specifically, how it was remembered later on), and the time in which Confucius and his students and disciples were living and writing (that is, the 500s and 400s BCE).

We also want to put those details together with information from the "Introduction to the Document" and the relevant textbook readings and lectures. From this, we learn a bit more about Confucius and the environment in which he and his followers were writing. But we also see how the works of Confucius and his disciples were compiled and standardized much later during the Han dynasty and that those works of what we can now call Confucianism became the primary ideology of Chinese imperial government and the subject matter for the imperial civil service exam in later centuries.

So, putting this all together, the relevant context here is: the remembered or imagined ancient past of the Shang and early Zhou dynasties to which the text refers + the immediate time and place Confucius and the author of this text were living and writing (that is, the end of the Zhou dynasty and the Warring States Period) + the standardization and later use of the text from the Han dynasty onwards.

That's obviously a lot to describe in a single paragraph, so we really have to focus on those aspects that are most relevant to the document and its content. I might do so like this:

2. The Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1027 BCE) was overthrown by their former vassals, who established the Zhou dynasty in 1027 BCE. The early Zhou rulers established a stable

system of government, and the early centuries of the dynasty were remembered, especially by Confucius and his disciples, as a time of order and prosperity. However, from the eighth century BCE onwards, the Zhou dynasty experienced increasing political division and social turmoil, and by the fifth century BCE, their empire had become divided into a number of warring kingdoms. During this Warring States Period, wandering scholars promoted competing philosophies to rival kings looking to build strong economies and effective administrations. Among these were Confucius and his students and disciples. Confucian philosophy did not achieve great influence during this period. Under the later Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), however, the works of Confucius and his disciples were compiled and standardized. Afterwards, Confucianism became the official ideology of the Han and later Chinese imperial governments and the main subject on which would-be officials were tested by the imperial civil service exam. (179 words)

Now that we have the context established, **we can turn back to the text itself to see what about that context we can learn from the document.** Here, it might be most helpful to go back to your summary and to find excerpts from the text that clearly reflect what you thought were the main points and then think about what those main points tell us about the context.

As a work by one of Confucius's students and disciples, this text primarily tells us about the some of the main ideas of Confucius and his followers (as well as of later Chinese imperial officials who studied their works), and what they believed in and promoted during the period in which they were writing.

We noted above that one of the main ideas or themes of the text is the relationship between rulers, virtue, and social stability. We get a clear sense of that on page 4: "What is meant by the saying that peace of the world depends on the order of the state is this: When the ruler treats the elders with respect, then the people will be aroused towards filial piety...Therefore the ruler has a principle with which, as a measuring square, he may regulate his conduct." However, this quote also tells us a lot about how, in this context of social turmoil and conflict, Confucius and his followers understood the proper role of rulers in society.

I might analyze it like this:

3. "What is meant by the saying that peace of the world depends on the order of the state is this: When the ruler treats the elders with respect, then the people will be aroused towards filial piety...Therefore the ruler has a principle with which, as a measuring square, he may regulate his conduct." This quotation reveals how Confucian scholars in the Warring States Period thought about the ideal role of the ruler in society. In particular, it shows that they did not favor powerful or authoritarian rulers. Instead, they thought the best rulers were those that acted virtuously within their own families and private lives and served as an example for the people as a whole. Earlier in the text, the author argues that social order and prosperity comes from "well-regulated" individuals and families. Here, the author says that ordinary people imitate the

behavior of the ruler. Therefore, if the ruler demonstrates proper familial virtues like filial piety and a respect for elders, ordinary people will do the same. As a result, their families, and society as a whole, will be “well-regulated” and put into order. Thus, this excerpt reveals how, for Confucius and his disciples, the disorder of the late Zhou period clearly necessitated rulers who would primarily act as moral examples and thus help reunify a fragmented society. (219 words)

There is so much more in this text about the ideas of Confucius and his followers during this period that you might highlight, including but not limited to: ideas about gender and relationships between men and women; how to manage the economy; the structure of society; and human nature.

You might also push yourself to generalize even further about the context in which Confucius and his disciples were writing. For example, based on the recurring themes of social order, economic prosperity, and wealth, what might have been some of the major concerns or anxieties of not just Confucians but of the wandering scholars more broadly and of the governments they served during this period? How might we read between the lines of what the author is saying *should* be done and draw conclusions about how things might *actually* have been?

After finding another couple of revealing quotations and explaining what they show about the context and how in two more paragraphs, **we’re now ready to finish up the assignment by discussing what the document *can’t* necessarily tell us about the context or what might remain unclear or uncertain about the context** even after we have carefully read the document.

There are a lot of potential directions you can go here, and I want you to be imaginative, but here’s one way you might approach this portion of the paper. Oftentimes, many of the oldest surviving written records are what we might call “normative” texts, or texts that lay out social norms, values, ethical principles and the like. Or, in other words, they explain how people *should* act. Reading between the lines, we can sometimes see the problems that authors of normative texts were trying to diagnose and solve in their own times. For example, we can reason that, for the author of this text and other Confucians, they saw the main ills of their own times as social disorder, immoral rulers, economic decline, and political strife, since these are what these scholars are actively trying to prevent in their work. However, from this text alone, we don’t really know how people initially responded to these ideas or how they might have put them into practice. Or, in other words, we have an idea of how Confucians thought people—and especially rulers and individuals in positions of power—*should* act, but we don’t actually know how those powerful individuals *actually* acted.

So, to capture those ideas, I might write up my final paragraph like this:

6. This document gives us a lot of insights into what Confucians and his followers thought were the main problems of their times and how they thought rulers and individuals in positions of power might go about fixing them. It also tells us a great deal about how

they thought an ideal society should look and function. However, the text doesn't really tell us how people at the time responded to Confucian ideas. We know from the textbook that rulers like Qin Shi Huangdi did not approve of Confucianism and supposedly persecuted Confucian scholars, but this text by itself doesn't give tell us how these ideas were received by the people to whom Confucians were trying to promote them. Similarly, the text doesn't tell us really how Confucian philosophy might have actually been put into practice. We know from the textbook that the rulers of the Han dynasty and later Chinese imperial dynasties made Confucianism the primary ideology of government. On its own, however, the text only tells some of the main Confucian ideas, not what was done with them. (180 words)

So, now we've worked through how to approach the primary source analysis essay. I hope this guide has been helpful, but if you are still unsure what exactly to do with this assignment, or if you start with a primary source document and find analyzing it challenging, **please come talk to me**. I'm happy to help you.