

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past.

To help you interpret primary sources, you should think about these questions as you examine the source:

### **A. Place the source in its historical context, and consider the following questions:**

1. Who wrote it? What do you know about the author? What are his or her biases?
2. Where, when, and why was it written?
3. To what audience is it addressed? What do you know about this audience?

### **B. Classify the source.**

1. What kind of work is it?
2. What was its purpose?

### **C. Understand the source.**

1. What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis and describe the evidence used to support the thesis.
3. What assumptions underlay the argument?
4. What values does the source reflect?
5. What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
6. What action does the author expect as a result of this work? Who is to take this action? How does the source motivate that action?

### **D. Evaluate the source as a source of historical information.**

1. How typical is this source for this period?
2. How widely was this source circulated?
3. What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
4. What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?

### ***5. Be Your Own Interpreter!***