

## Lesson 1 — Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

### Exercise 1

#### Primary Sources: How Trustworthy or Reliable?

Primary sources are records from the past. But this does NOT mean they can always tell you exactly how “it really was” in the past. You need to evaluate such sources carefully to be able to learn things from them. For example, one important question you need to ask of every primary source is this:

**How trustworthy or reliable is this source?** In other words, can you depend on it to give you information that you can use to answer the specific DBQ or essay question you have been given? Keep in mind that a reliable source need not be accurate or truthful. An inaccurate report, for example, may still be reliable as evidence of what people believed at the time.

This exercise will help you think about source reliability. Four of the lesson’s documents are listed here. Next to each are three statements about the document’s trustworthiness or reliability. For each document, choose the one statement you agree with most. Mark your choice in the space provided. Discuss your choices in class.

- Doc. 1**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of what happened at the Last Supper.
  - B. The document is reliable evidence of what people all over the world believed about the Last Supper.
  - C. The document is reliable evidence of Byzantine views of the Last Supper during the Middle Ages.

**Your Choice** \_\_\_\_\_

- Doc. 5**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of how most princes ruled in Europe in the 1500s.
  - B. The document is reliable evidence of changing views about political power held by at least some people during the Renaissance.
  - C. The document is reliable evidence that it was in fact easier to rule through fear than through love in Renaissance Europe.

**Your Choice** \_\_\_\_\_

- Doc. 7**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of Luther’s views about Papal authority versus the authority of the written word of God.
  - B. The document is reliable evidence of Luther’s famous statement ending with, “Here I stand ...,” which he gave at the Diet of Worms.
  - C. The document is reliable evidence of the way Catholic Popes and Church councils often contradicted one another.

**Your Choice** \_\_\_\_\_

- Doc. 8**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of what Luther looked like when he was hiding out in Wartburg castle translating the Bible.
  - B. The document is reliable evidence of what some people later imagined Luther might look like hiding out in Wartburg castle.
  - C. The document is reliable evidence of the importance to Luther of the Bible as the only guide to religious practice.

**Your Choice** \_\_\_\_\_

## Lesson 1 — Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

### Exercise 2 Primary Sources: How Biased?

Diary entries, letters, newspaper articles, paintings, cartoons, ads, photos and other primary sources are often created by people with specific goals and strong personal opinions. **This can make a source one-sided, or “biased.”** Sometimes this bias is easy to notice — as when an author states a point of view strongly. But more often, the bias is harder to detect. It can be found as much in what is left out as in what is included. Bias can be expressed simply by including some facts while leaving others out. Or it can be shown by exaggerated or emotional language and images. To detect bias, think about emphasis, specific selection of facts, emotional language, etc.

You can also get important clues as to bias by noting the **author or creator** of the source, his or her **purpose in creating that source** and the **audience** for the source. To help you think about this, choose two documents from those for this lesson. Choose one that is clearly and strongly biased and one that seems biased but in a much less noticeable way. Then answer the questions below.

#### 1. Clearly Biased: Document \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think this document is biased? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**A.** How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

**B.** Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

**C.** For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Bias Harder to Detect: Document \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think this document is biased? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**A.** How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

**B.** Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

**C.** For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias?

\_\_\_\_\_

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### Exercise 3

#### Interpreting Primary Sources: Using Your Background Knowledge

Sometimes, you can understand a primary source even if you know nothing about its time period. But this is rare. Usually, **you must use your background knowledge of the historical period to help you make sense of the source.** Keep this in mind when answering a DBQ. The primary sources won't make much sense if you do not already know something about the time in which they were produced. In other words, the documents do not "speak for themselves," and it is not enough just to mention them in laundry-list fashion. You need to use your background knowledge to interpret the documents and explain how they help answer the DBQ.

You often won't even notice how much your own background knowledge affects your understanding of a source. This exercise may help you see this better. Study each document for this lesson and think about what you need to know to understand that document fully. In the space provided below, write down two facts or broad trends from the time of the Renaissance and Reformation that help explain each document. As a class, share your lists to see how much background knowledge it takes to properly interpret these primary source documents.

Doc. 1 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 2 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 3 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 4 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 5 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 6 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 7 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 8 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Doc. 9 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_

## Lesson 1 — Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

### Exercise 4

#### Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences — 1

You often need to make inferences about primary sources. An **“inference”** is a belief you come to **accept based on other facts**. For example, suppose you find milk spilled on the kitchen floor. You may “infer” that your brother spilled it — even though you didn’t actually see him do this. This inference is logical and reasonable, yet it still may not be true. For example, the cat may have knocked over a glass of milk, not your brother. You can usually make many reasonable inferences from a primary source. But as this “spilled milk” example shows, you need to be careful about this. Be sure of all your facts and of what the primary source shows. **Use your background knowledge, and keep in mind what knowing about the source’s “author, audience and purpose” tells you.** If the inference still seems logical, you may be able to use it in your essay or answer.

Below are five statements about **Document 5** (A passage from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*). Some of the statements are reasonable inferences; others are not — that is, they are not supported by **Document 5**. In the spaces provided, write “yes” or “no” for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about **Document 5**.

1. Machiavelli clearly believed that men were basically good and able to settle political arguments using reason and trust in one another.

A reasonable Inference? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Machiavelli must have seen fairly ruthless rulers in his day who were able to use force and fear effectively to maintain their power.

A reasonable Inference? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Machiavelli lived at a time when the leaders of governments probably faced constant threats from enemies both outside and within their states.

A reasonable Inference? \_\_\_\_\_

4. During the Renaissance, most rulers no longer felt any need to follow the Bible’s moral laws or principles in making their own political decisions.

A reasonable Inference? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Machiavelli did not care how just or unjust his ideal ruler was, only how successful he was in keeping power.

A reasonable Inference? \_\_\_\_\_

## Lesson 1 — Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

### Exercise 5

#### Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences — 2

Making inferences is easily one of the most important skills needed to write effective essays answering DBQs. Often the best ideas you can get from a source are those you infer from it. Therefore, you need to interpret your sources. That is, you need to look at them closely and think about the clues they may contain on the topic of the DBQ. Since making inferences about sources is so important, here is another exercise asking you to do it.

Again, be sure of all your facts and of what the primary source shows. **Use your background knowledge, and keep in mind what knowing about the source’s “author, audience and purpose” tells you.** If the inference seems logical, you may be able to use it in your essay or answer.

Below are five statements about **Document 4** (One panel from Michelangelo’s Sistene Chapel painting). Some of the statements are reasonable inferences; others are not — that is, they are not supported by **Document 4**. In the spaces provided, write “yes” or “no” for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about **Document 4**.

1. The Catholic Popes of the 1500s clearly disapproved of the new innovations in Renaissance art.

**A reasonable Inference?** \_\_\_\_\_

2. Renaissance art glorified the individual and saw life in this world as more important than God, man’s spiritual nature, or life in the world to come.

**A reasonable Inference?** \_\_\_\_\_

3. Renaissance art glorified the individual and human existence, but saw these as further proof of God’s power and glory as well.

**A reasonable Inference?** \_\_\_\_\_

4. The artists of the Italian Renaissance were seen as very important individuals.

**A reasonable Inference?** \_\_\_\_\_

5. Art was seen as a key way to aid the Christian faith in the Renaissance era just as it had been in the Middle Ages.

**A reasonable Inference?** \_\_\_\_\_

## Lesson 1 — Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

### Exercise 6

#### Interpreting Primary Sources: When Sources Conflict

**Many primary sources conflict with one another. That is, they offer views or evidence that lead to different or even opposing conclusions about a time period.** This can be a problem when answering a DBQ based on several primary sources. It is a problem every historian faces. Sources rarely all agree with one another. This means that you need to make some decisions — about which source is more reliable, more useful or more typical of the time period. It also means you must be cautious in making sweeping statements about what the sources prove. (That’s why historians usually say things such as, “For the most part, we know that ...,” instead of, “We know for certain that ...”)

From the documents for this lesson, choose two to four that you think conflict with one another. In the space below, write a paragraph or two describing the documents you have chosen. Explain how these documents conflict with one another. Then write another paragraph in which you try to explain how such conflicting sources could have come from the same historical time period.