I. Types of Sources

**Primary** – a source that was produced during the period we are studying (e.g. a history written during the time being studied, a work of fiction, a piece of art, a building, etc.)

**Secondary** – a scholarly study of a particular topic that is based upon the analysis of primary sources (e.g. a scholarly book, essay, or article)

**Tertiary** – a summary or synthesis of one or more secondary sources (e.g. a textbook, a book review, an encyclopedia entry, or a Wikipedia page)

II. How to Read a Primary Source

Reading a primary source is an active process that requires time, preparation, effort, and note-taking. Reading a primary source is very different from reading a textbook (textbooks offer a modern historian’s analysis and interpretation of multiple primary and secondary sources), or from reading a novel for pleasure. Primary sources do not speak for themselves – they have to be analyzed and interpreted. You do not passively read about the past in a primary source, you must actively investigate the past by asking questions.

You need to take notes on the sources as you read, and include page numbers for important information. Both of the papers for this course will focus on analyzing primary sources, and the exams will include primary source analysis sections, so taking detailed notes the first time you read a source will save you time in the long run. Including page numbers in your notes will enable you to find relevant passages quickly when you are writing your papers and studying for exams, and you will be required to include page numbers in the footnotes for your papers.

II A. Preparing to Read

Before you begin reading any primary source, you need to establish the basic facts regarding its production (the who, what, where, when, and how of the source).

- Who was the author?
- Why were they writing?
- Where was the text produced?
- When was the text or document written?
- What purpose(s) did the text serve?
- What is the text about?
- How does it serve the purpose for which it was written?
- How does it fit in to the period during which it was written?

Most of this information can be found in the editor’s preface (the introductory material written by the modern editor of the work). An editor’s preface is different from a preface written by the original author. The editor’s preface attempts to explain who wrote the text, why it was written, when it was written, etc. You should always skim the editor’s preface and take notes on this material before you begin reading. Some of our readings (such as Tacitus’ *Germania* and Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*) include both an editor’s preface and an author’s preface.
**Since the editor’s preface is not a primary source** (that is, it was not written by the original author but by a modern editor), you can use it for guidance on the text, but **you should never use it as a main source for your papers**. It is, however, perfectly acceptable to use an original preface written by the original author in your papers.

Likewise, some of our sources are collections of documents put together by a modern editor who has included their own analysis of those sources. Brian Tierney’s *Crisis of Church and State* is one such collection of primary sources that includes analysis by the editor. You should use the primary source documents in Tierney’s book for your papers, but you should avoid relying on his analysis of those documents in your papers. One of the main goals of this course is to teach you how to analyze primary sources for yourselves, and this means getting you to think critically about those documents rather than borrowing someone else’s analysis.

Most of the books for the course also include helpful materials such as glossaries, timelines, genealogies, maps, and indexes. Take a minute or two to look through the book before you begin reading to see what kinds of reading aids have been included.

**Summaries** of some of these sources are available online, and it may be helpful for you to review such a summary **in addition to reading the source for yourself**. Just be aware that **reading a summary of a source on the internet is not a substitute for reading the source itself**. If all you read is a summary, you will lack anything approaching a detailed understanding of the source, and you will not do well on the papers or the exams. I know those summaries are out there, I know what they cover, and I intentionally craft paper topics and exam questions that require more than just the superficial knowledge they offer.

**II B. Reading the Source**

After you have skimmed the preface and established the who, what, when, why, and how of the text, you are ready to begin reading. As you read, keep the following questions in mind.

**Argument**
- Does the author have an argument or thesis? What is that thesis?
- What is the text trying to do? What is its strategy for accomplishing its goal? How does it carry out this strategy?
- Who is the intended audience of the text? How might this influence the author’s rhetorical strategy?
- What arguments or concerns does the author respond to that are not clearly stated? Are there any points at which the author seems to be rebutting a position that is never clearly stated? Explain what you think this position might be, and why you think it.

**Presuppositions**
- How do the ideas and values in the source differ from our ideas and values?
- What presumptions and preconceptions do we as readers bring to bear on this text? For instance, are there portions of the text that we might find objectionable, but which contemporaries might have found perfectly acceptable. Identify the values we hold on that subject, and the values expressed in the text.
How might the difference between our values and author’s values influence the way we understand the text? Think about how this difference in values might lead us to misinterpret the text, or understand it in a way contemporaries would not have. (Remember, we want to understand the people of the past, not impose our values upon them.)

Relation to other texts and arguments about the period
- Does this text support any of the arguments presented in lecture, in our textbook, or in any of the other primary or secondary sources we have read?
- What kinds of information does this text reveal that it does not seemed concerned with revealing? (In other words, what does it tell us without knowing that it is telling us?)
- Which parts of the text convey the author’s opinions and interpretations?
- What historical “facts” (things that are absolutely indisputable) can we learn from this text (this is not restricted to the author’s account of historical events, it also includes the cultural attitudes and presumptions the author reveals).
- What patterns or ideas are repeated throughout the readings?
- What major differences appear in them?

III. Some additional concepts to help you evaluate and write about primary sources

- **Texts and documents, authors and creators.** Texts are historical documents, authors are their creators, and vice versa. “Texts” and “authors” are often used when discussing literature, while “documents” and “creators” are more commonly used by historians.
- **Evaluating the veracity (truthfulness) of texts:** For the rest of this discussion, consider the example of a soldier who committed atrocities against non-combatants during wartime. Later in his life, he writes a memoir that neglects to mention his role in these atrocities, and may in fact blame them on someone else. Knowing the soldier’s possible motive, we would be right to question the veracity of his account.
- **The credible vs. the reliable text:**
  - Reliability refers to our ability to trust the consistency of the author’s account of the truth (his factual accuracy). A **reliable text is factually accurate**; it displays a pattern of verifiable truth-telling that tends to render the unverifiable parts of the text true. For instance, the soldier above may prove to be utterly reliable in detailing the campaigns he participated in during the war (his account can be confirmed by corroborating records). The only gap in his reliability may be the omission of details about the atrocities he committed.
  - Credibility refers to our willingness to believe or trust an author’s account of the truth on the basis of their tone, apparent neutrality, and access to information. A **credible text appears to be trustworthy**, and a credible author is someone we are disposed to believe because of the manner in which they present information. There are many ways that authors undermine their credibility. Most frequently, they convey in their tone that they are not neutral. For example, the soldier above may intersperse his reliable account of campaign details with racist attacks against his old enemy. Such attacks signal to readers that he may have an interest in misrepresenting the past, and hence may undermine his credibility, regardless of his reliability. An author who proves to be inconsistently truthful -- such as the
soldier in the example above -- loses credibility (we are less inclined to believe him, even if his account is largely accurate).

- **An author who seems quite credible can still be utterly unreliable.** The author who takes a measured, reasoned tone and anticipates counter-arguments may seem to be very credible, when in fact he presents us with complete balderdash. **Similarly, a reliable author may not always seem credible:** although he presents us with verifiable facts, he appears biased or prejudiced. It should also be clear that individual texts themselves can have portions that are more reliable (and/or more credible) than others.

- **The objective vs. the neutral text:** We often wonder if the author of a text has an “ax to grind” which might render her or his words unreliable.
  - *Neutrality* refers to the stake an author has in a text. In the example of the soldier who committed wartime atrocities, the author seems to have had a considerable stake in his memoir, which was to expunge his own guilt. In an utterly neutral document, the creator is not aware that she or he has any special stake in the construction and content of the document. **Very few texts are ever completely neutral.** People generally do not go to the trouble to record their thoughts unless they have a purpose or design that makes them invested in creating a text. Some historical documents, such as birth records, may appear to be more neutral than others, because their creators seem to have had less of a stake in creating them. (For instance, a county clerk who signs several thousand birth certificates a year probably has very little stake in creating any individual birth certificate, but a celebrity who is thinking about publishing a memoir and is keeping a diary for that purpose has a very large stake in the document he is creating.)
  - *Objectivity* refers to an author’s ability to convey the truth free of underlying values, cultural presuppositions, and biases. In this sense, **no text is or ever can be completely objective.** All texts are the products of the culture in which their authors lived, and many authors pretend to objectivity when they might better seek for neutrality. The author who claims to be free of bias and presupposition should be treated with suspicion: no one is free of their values. Credible authors generally acknowledge and express those values.

- **Epistemology:** a fancy word for a straight-forward concept. “Epistemology” is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge. How do you know what you know? What is the truth, and how is it determined? For historians who read primary sources, the question becomes: what can I know about the past based on this text, how sure can I be about it, and how do I know these things?
  - This can be an extremely difficult question. Ultimately, we cannot know anything with complete assurance, because even our senses may fail us. Yet we can conclude, with reasonable accuracy, that some things are more likely to be true than others (for instance, it is more likely that the sun will rise tomorrow than that a herd of unicorns will suddenly appear at your door). Your task as a historian is to make **and justify** decisions about the relative veracity of historical texts, and portions of them.